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Tailoring democracy support in EU Enlargement countries

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Democracy ◆ Retreat

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has thrust Europe into a new geopolitical era marked by instability and heightened security concerns. In response, **EU enlargement has risen to the top of the political agenda**. Yet, the accession process faces **significant institutional and security challenges**: EU decision-making rules are hard to reform, involving many veto players and diverging interests, and the feasibility of the process closely depends on the EU's ability to strengthen its defence – as well as the security of the candidate countries – vis-à-vis military and hybrid attacks.

As external authoritarian inroads become stronger, actively supporting democracy in the Neighbourhood is crucial, and **at the core of democracy support lies the support for local civil society and independent media**. However, civil society faces different challenges across the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. In **Ukraine**, the war poses legitimate constraints to the transparency and democracy agenda, but many civil society groups continue to successfully monitor government actions, push for transparency, and advocate for reforms even under martial law. Conversely, **Georgia** and (to a lesser extent) **Serbia** continue backsliding, despite civil society activism and strong pro-European and pro-democratic popular movements. **Moldova** has, for now, succeeded in overcoming major disinformation challenges to its elections, but will continue to face headwinds in its effort to anchor itself in the EU.

Thus, faced with a spectrum of volatile situations, **the EU should tailor its approach to the specific political contexts of candidate countries**, aligning it better with the needs on the ground as well as its own democracy and security objectives. This concept of **'differentiated democratic enlargement'**, coined by prof. Richard Youngs, could **reinvigorate the EU's Enlargement policy** and once again bring it to the forefront of the EU's democracy promotion toolbox, while at the same time **addressing the Union's compelling geopolitical and security challenges.** Thorough and in-depth action before accession will increase the assimilation and durability of reforms.

Democracy ⬥ Retreat

To explore avenues and declinations of country-specific strategies of democracy support in EU candidate countries with unique security concerns, the event will bring together policymakers, practitioners, researchers and civil society representatives in an interactive exchange of views, striving to answer the following guiding questions:

Democracy support:
- What are the democratic challenges in the EU's Neighbourhood?
- What tools does the EU have to support civil society in enlargement countries?
- Does the EU sufficiently differentiate between pluralistic democracies and candidate countries with authoritarian tendencies?
- How can the EU support civil society in states with authoritarian tendencies (Serbia, Georgia), in states with reformist agendas but limited capacity (Moldova), and in Ukraine, which is still under martial law?

Democratisation and security:
- Can the EU realistically expect democratic institutions in its Neighbourhood to be resilient while Russia continuously seeks to undermine them?
- Is it possible for countries facing continuous pressure from external hybrid interference or for countries suffering full-fledged war or internal conflicts to be building a 'perfect' democracy, according to the EU's guidelines?

The event is co-organised by TEPSA and The Egmont Institute in the context of the Horizon Europe Project Networks for Democracy (Nets4Dem).

Meet the   Speakers

Paul Zoubkov, Programme Manager Europe, Democracy Reporting International

Giulio Venneri, Deputy Head of Unit, DG ENEST, European Commission

Richard Youngs, Senior Fellow, Carnagie Europe

Alexandra Kirby, Senior Programme Manager, European Endowment for Democracy

Elene Panchulidze, Research Coordinator, European Partnership for Democracy

Natalia Hadei, Country Advisor for Moldova, European Partnership for Democracy

Uroš Jovanović, Public Policy Program Manager, Građanske Inicijative

Lesya Tymoshenko, Senior Project Coordinator, Eurocities

MODERATED BY

Mariam Khotenashvili, Executive Director, TEPSA

CONCLUDING REMARKS BY

Jean-Louis de Brouwer, Director, European Affairs, Egmont Institute