

The EU as a Promoter of Democracy in Eastern Partnership Countries

Yaryna Turchyn, Olha Ivasechko and Oleh Tsebenko¹

Abstract: *This article examines the European Union's role as a promoter of democracy in the countries participating in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. Particular attention is paid to those tools used by the EU to promote democracy in the specified countries, namely: political and diplomatic actions, election observation, international cooperation, EU development assistance for effective governance and civil society, sanctions, various platforms and democracy support funds, and financial support. In order to assess the state of democracy in the countries of the EaP, a number of indices were considered, namely: the Freedom House Democracy Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index and the Eastern Partnership Integration Index to clarify the correlation between the integration processes of Eastern Partnership countries and the effectiveness of reforms. In addition, the authors used the data of the Normandy Index for 2019-2023, which captures, among others, the state of democratic processes. The research hypothesis states that EU's influence on the countries of the Eastern Partnership in terms of democratisation is not always effective, due to both exogenous and endogenous factors. The mechanisms applied by the EU should complement/intensify the internal transformations of the EaP countries that foster democratisation.*

Keywords: *European Union, Eastern Partnership (EaP), democratic transformation, Democracy index, democratisation.*

Introduction

Nowadays, one of the key priorities of the EU's foreign policy is the development of democracy in its neighbouring countries, and mainly in the beneficiary states of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, namely, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus (which has suspended its participation in the EaP as of June 2021). The actions conducted through the EaP framework mirror

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the strategic interests of the European Union, especially in the context of the autocratic influences exerted, for instance, by the Russian Federation. Consequently, strengthening cooperation with the Eastern partners represents a priority on EU's agenda, while the support for democracy remains at the top of the Union's interests. This is confirmed by the statement of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, who noted that "the EU cannot be an island of democracy in a world of autocracies" (European Union, 2021). It is important to emphasise that in the *EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024*, the EU defines more concretely its priorities and those of its member states in relation to third countries. It aims at promoting human rights and democracy, consistently and coherently, in all areas of EU external action (e.g., trade, environment, development). In operational terms, the Action Plan draws five lines of action to be implemented in partner countries: protecting and empowering individuals; building resilient, inclusive, and democratic societies; promoting a global system for human rights and democracy; developing new technologies that harness opportunities and address challenges; delivering results by working together (Wahl, 2020). In addition, there is to mention that, on September 15, 2022, the EU launched another tool for promoting democracy – *EU4democracy*.

So far, the EU has not achieved the goal of turning neighbouring countries into stable democracies with real, rather than sham, democratic institutions, albeit the prospect of the EU and/or NATO membership is deemed an effective driver of democratisation. In fact, the transformative power of the EU varies considerably in the EaP countries. In some its influence is wider (and stronger) than in others: for instance, in the countries of the "Associated Trio" (Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia). As a result, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova have already been granted EU candidate status. Moreover, on November 8, 2023, the European Commission (EC) recommended to start the negotiations in view of their accession to the EU. In Georgia, at the level of the pro-Russian government, the EU's influence and its transformative power have lately decreased to some extent. Nevertheless, on November 8, 2023, the EC recommended granting EU candidate status to Georgia, if the latter fulfils the necessary conditions to join the EU. In the other three EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus), which do not aspire to join the EU, and especially in Belarus (a state that is largely under the wing of the Russian Federation), the influence of this transformative power is weaker. In other words, the full-fledged democratic transition in these countries of the Eastern Partnership is mainly hampered by the destructive influence of the Russian Federation. Thus, the expediency shown in establishing the Eastern Partnership can be explained not only by the desire to stimulate the democratisation of the post-Soviet countries in this region, but also by the endeavour to counterbalance the propensity of their domestic politics for corruption and authoritarianism (Turchyn, 2016, pg. 64).

As noted by the modern Ukrainian researcher Mykola Doroshko (2013, pg. 37), "In most countries of the former Soviet Union, the predictions of Max Weber are coming true: these countries have become states of "crony capitalism". The proper functioning of the state machinery is impeded by nepotism, and clientelism, as the relatives and friends of some civil servants consider that public service means, first and foremost, the care for their private property and personal interests. For the bureaucrats of the corporate statism, who carry on the traditions of the Soviet *nomenklatura* (the ruling, bureaucratic elite of the former Soviet Union, made up of members of the Communist Party placed in

positions of leadership in government and industry), the main source of income is not their salaries, but the bribes they take in exchange for the services they render (Doroshko, 2013, pg. 161). In poor countries, democracy and universal suffrage are incompatible with radical economic and state reforms. To put it differently, a society that sees its leader as a chieftain cannot build a transparent democratic state (Doroshko, 2013, pg. 36). The state of the Belarusian democracy is far from being stable, and the EU faces a political dilemma: should it continue to support the development of democracy in Belarus and, if so, what political tools are best suited to improve the level of democratisation in this state (Rudnik, 2023). Belarus has chosen to withdraw from the Eastern Partnership, and this decision has a detrimental effect on its democratisation: it practically curtails it.

The effectiveness of the positive external factors, that encourage the reform process in countries undergoing transition, depends on the social, economic and political realities, as well as on the configuration of interests in those states and in the EU (Sydoruk, 2010, pg. 166). Political realities in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood (namely, the destabilisation caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the economic crisis, and the differing views regarding the future development of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) are illustrative of the low capacity of the public administration in these countries and of its limited potential to capitalise on the EU processes.

This article aims to analyse the EU's influence on the democratisation processes in the beneficiary countries of the Eastern Partnership. To this end, the authors have used theoretical and methodological fundamentals of research, and thus provide an assessment of the state of democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries, taking into account the exogenous and endogenous factors, EU instruments for the promotion of democracy in the EaP, challenges, and democratisation scenarios. The first part of this article showcases the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research. In the second part, a comparative method is employed to assess the state of democracy in the countries of the EaP. The indices used clarify the correlation between the integration processes and the effectiveness of reforms. The third part presents the key linkages between the EU and the countries of the EaP region. These linkages were examined by means of the structural-functional method. In the last part, the empirical method helped us identify the main challenges for the Eastern Partnership programme. Additionally, we applied a foresight method for depicting possible scenarios regarding the evolution of democratisation in the EaP countries.

The theoretical and methodological fundamentals of the research

The research methodology is based on empirical quantitative data collected, cross-referenced, and interpreted in this article. The authors have used the Freedom House Democracy Score, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, the Eastern Partnership Integration Index, and the spreadsheet methodology to clarify the correlation between the integration processes of EU's Eastern partners, and the effectiveness of reforms aimed at democratisation in these countries. For the years analysed, the authors used in their research the data of the Normandy Index for 2019-2023, the Freedom House Democracy Index 2009-2023, the Eastern Partnership Integration Index 2015-2021, the Economist Intelligence Unit 2011-2019.

The analysis of statistics was employed to study expert opinion on experts' attitude to the democratisation process in the Eastern Partnership region, along with views of specialists on the soft and hard power of the European Union and of the Russian

Federation, respectively. The comparative analysis allowed for a detailed analysis of the level of democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries. The method of analysis made it possible to highlight the features of key approaches to the study of the process of democratisation in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. A foresight method was applied for highlighting the possible development trajectories of the states participating in the EU Eastern Partnership initiative.

To fulfil the objectives and the aim of the present article a description / explanation of the concept of democratisation was deemed necessary. Democratisation can be understood as a process of political transformation that involves the initiation and deepening of democracy in a previously authoritarian state. This process is often evolutionary, requiring a country to become a fully liberal democracy, which implies the existence of certain qualitative elements: first and foremost, free elections, as well as the functioning of civil liberties, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, an open and pluralistic civil society and mass media, civil-military control, etc. (Barburska, 2020).

In 2011, the EU put forward three main elements aimed at promoting the development of democracy: **1) democratic transformation and institution-building**, with a particular focus on fundamental freedoms, constitutional reforms, reform of the judiciary, and the fight against corruption; **2) a stronger partnership with the people**, giving prominence to the support for the civil society and to enhanced opportunities for exchanges and people-to-people contacts, with a particular focus on the young; **3) sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development**, that entails, especially, support to Small and Medium Enterprises, vocational and educational training, improving health and education systems, and development of the poorer regions (European Commission, 2011a). The EU's support for democracy has traditionally focused on four areas: 1) inclusive, transparent and credible electoral processes; 2) constitutional reform and democratic institutions; 3) political and civil society, and 4) promotion of fundamental freedoms (European Commission, 2011b).

The events of 2022 were a turning point for the EU. They raised concerns over its capacity to support and carry out measures aimed at preserving and improving the level of democracy in countries that aspire to join the Union. In the study of Elena Lazarou and Ionel Zamfir (2022), the issue of security was showcased as one of the priority areas prior to EU accession. Developing a mechanism for building strong democracies enhances the candidate states' ability to withstand external and internal security threats. The EU has provided a wide range of instruments created for supporting democracy in the non-EU countries. These include: political and human rights dialogue, support for civil society and human rights defenders, development assistance for good governance and the rule of law, as well as conditions enshrined in bilateral trade and cooperation agreements and unilateral trade preferences, etc.

Scientific studies that explore the European Union's contribution to the promotion of democracy can be divided into three main groups. The first group includes studies that aim to identify the challenges the EU is facing in promoting democracy, and their solutions: strengthening civil society, setting conditions, ensuring compliance, and resolving regional conflicts (Gromadzki, 2011). The theory of democratic peace (Doyle, 2011) suggests that democratic states conduct peaceful internal and external politics and do not wish to wage wars against non-democratic states (Reiter, 2017; Lazarou – Zamfir, 2022). Therefore, it is natural that the support of democracy is the main priority of the EU's external actions, which strive to preserve and promote peace in the world. The EU

sometimes acts as mediator in its endeavour to prevent conflicts and foster sustainable peace and security.

The second group of studies focuses on the role of the EU in promoting democracy in specific states or groups of states. To this end, they focus on measurements (Wetzel – Orbie – Bossuyt, 2017), elements of support (European Commission, 2011) and spheres of action (European Commission, 2011a) in support of democracy provided by the European Union. The EU pays attention to the content of **the concepts of “democracy”** (European Council, 2011) and **“democratisation”** (Barburska, 2020). Some authors are convinced that the European Union has a huge impact on the promotion and advancement of democracy (Özkurt, 2017; Pridham, 1999; Schimmelfennig – Scholtz, 2007). Specialised literature related to the assessment of the state of democracy in the EaP states also belongs to this category (Zelenko, 2018; European Parliament, 2021; Pinzari, 2015; Kaca, 2021).

The third group of studies aims to identify specific tools, which do not only focus on the process of democratisation, but also on the responsabilisation of political elites, the consolidation of national/local institutions (ministries, agencies, media) and the strengthening of the civil society. The EU has focused on these issues to promote democracy in the *Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)* (Özkurt, 2017, Zamfir, 2021; Lazarou – Zamfir, 2022; Bosse, 2019). Among the most frequently used tools, researchers have single out the following: the political and diplomatic actions of the EU (Zamfir, 2021; Gençtürk – Temizer, 2023; Radio Svoboda, 2023; Council of the EU and the European Council, 2022; European Commission, 2023), election observation (Zamfir 2021; Council of Europe, 2023), international cooperation, and EU development assistance for effective governance and civil society (Zamfir, 2021; European Commission, 2023), sanctions (Zamfir, 2021; Gray – Irish, 2023; Council of the EU and the European Council, 2022), various platforms (Gogolashvili, 2022; Eastern Partnership Index, 2018-2019, 2020), and democracy support funds (European Endowment for Democracy; About EED), financial support (Cooperation within the framework of the EU initiative ‘Eastern Partnership’, 2018). Finally, the last group covers the challenges that the Eastern Partnership programme is dealing with (Gromadzki, 2011; Gerasymchuk – Drapak, 2023; Crombois, 2023; Slunkin – Valodskaitė, 2023; Reuters, 2023; Ivasechko – Tsebenko – Turchyn – Vezdenko, 2022). Various scenarios regarding the development of democratisation in the Eastern Partnership region are also considered (Bega, 2022).

Assessment of the state of democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries: exogenous and endogenous factors

The Eastern Partnership programme was launched in 2009. Its purpose is to strengthen and deepen political and economic relations between the European Union and six countries: Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. The EaP programme is centred on the implementation of the following goals: sustainable and integrated economy; accountability of institutions, rule of law and security; ecological and climatic stability; sustainable digital transformation and sustainable, gender equal, just, and inclusive societies (European Commission, 2023).

Clusters of the Eastern Partnership countries

The post-Cold War development in former communist states has taken fundamentally different trajectories. Though the democratic transitions have begun almost simultaneously in these countries, they have led (three decades later) to the formation of different political systems, ranging from consolidated democracies in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Baltics to overtly autocratic political regimes in Asia, Belarus and Russia. Modern researchers often distinguish between three groups of states in the former socialist bloc, where completely different political regimes have been formed. In particular, they mention the following clusters (Zelenko, 2018, pg. 45):

- The **“included countries”**. To this category belong the states where democracy is more or less consolidated. It is worth noting that, unlike Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria, which became part of this group in 2000, Georgia joined it only in 2015;
- The **“countries in transition”**. This cluster includes three former republics of the USSR, namely Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Armenia. The democratic countries from this group hold elections, but their political regimes are more hybrid, albeit with clear signs of democracy.
- The so-called **“excluded countries”** (the states where there are autocratic political regimes, consolidated to varying degrees). Belarus and Azerbaijan belong to this cluster.

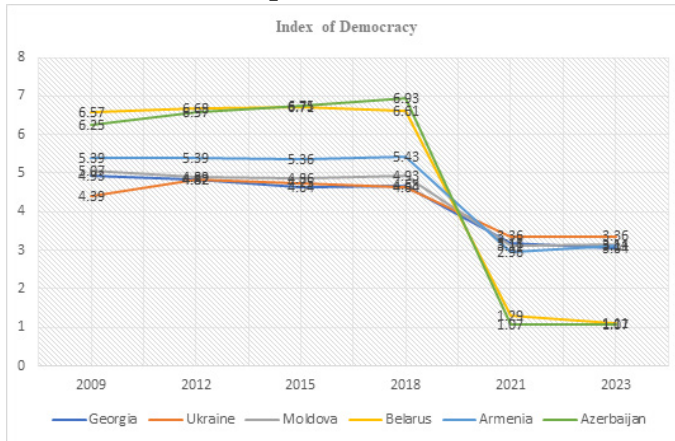
The level of democratic development and the degree of openness of these states varies significantly. The opinion expressed by a team of researchers led by V. Moravsky, according to which **“the distance to Brussels” determines the level of democracy in post-communist countries** is rather appropriate here (Zelenko, 2018, pg. 45). To better visualise the results of the comparison of the dynamics of democratic transformations in the post-Soviet countries participating in the Eastern Partnership, we present it in the form of *Figure 1*.

Summarising, we can state that at the time the EU initiative “Eastern Partnership” was launched, in its beneficiary countries the circumstances were uneven and therefore the starting point for the democratisation process was not the same. As of 2020, these countries already show different dynamics of democratic transformations. According to the survey, the highest levels of democracy have been observed in Ukraine and Moldova, while those in Armenia and Georgia are slightly lower. Authoritarian tendencies are on the rise in Azerbaijan and Belarus, and this trend – combined with their geopolitical orientations (Azerbaijan towards Turkey, and Belarus towards Russia) – gives grounds to question the European integration prospects of these countries at least in the short and medium term.

Analysing the dynamics of democracy, according to the indicators provided by *Freedom House*, from 2009 to 2023, it should be noted that in 2009, after the emergence of the Eastern Partnership initiative, among the beneficiary countries of the Eastern Partnership, the highest integrated index of democracy was in Belarus – 6.57, and the lowest in Ukraine, 4.39, respectively. Based on this criterion, the rest of the EaP states were in the following order: Azerbaijan – 6.25, Armenia – 5.39, Moldova – 5.07, and Georgia – 4.93 (*Figure 1*). The situation with the Integrated Democracy Index is completely different in the EaP countries in 2023, if we take into account the estimates of *Freedom House*. For example, among the beneficiaries of the EaP initiative, Ukraine shows the highest index

of democracy – 3.36, while Azerbaijan has the lowest – 1.07, and Belarus – 1.11. Georgia has lower indicators of democracy than Ukraine, namely, 3.04, followed by Armenia 3.11, and Moldova 3.14.

Figure 1. Dynamics of changes in the integrated index of democracy of the Eastern Partnership countries (2009-2023)



Source: Authors' representation based on data retrieved from Freedom House.

As it can be observed, in 2009, the rating of the EaP countries, according to the integrated Index of Democracy presented by *Freedom House*, places these countries as follows: 1 – Belarus, 2 – Azerbaijan, 3 – Armenia, 4 – Moldova, 5 – Georgia, 6 – Ukraine. On the other hand, the data presented in 2023 show that the positions of the countries in this ranking have shifted, since the 1st place is associated with Ukraine, the 2nd to Moldova, the 3rd to Armenia, the 4th to Georgia, the 5th to Belarus and the 6th to Azerbaijan.

Thus, if we compare the data from the years 2009 and 2023, we can observe a positive dynamic of the integrated democracy index in Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova, albeit the value of individual sub-indices has significantly decreased since 2009. On the other hand, in Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, we can notice a negative dynamic of the integrated index of democracy from 2009 to 2023; Similarly, we have also summarised the negative dynamics in these countries by sub-indices. In contrast with the situation in other countries of the EaP, in Armenia the trends did not change.

Additionally, the indicators of the Normandy Index have been taken into account. The Normandy Index was first presented in the European Parliament in June 2019. It aims to measure the level of threats to peace, security and democracy around the world. Thus, it measures the following threats: terrorism, hybrid threats, economic crises, climate change, energy security, violent conflicts, cyber security, disinformation, cross-border crime, weapons of mass destruction, fragility of states. According to the Normandy Index, in 2023, the major threats to peace and security, at the worldscale, are ranked as follows in the EaP countries: 1st place – the state of the democratic processes (with a score of 3.77 out of 10); 2nd place – disinformation (with a score 3.97 out of 10); 3rd place – state fragility in the countries of the Eastern Partnership region (4.67 out of 10).

To sum up, in 2023, according to the Normandy Index, the deterioration of democratic processes (perceived as a threat to peace and security) in the beneficiaries of the EaP is observed in Azerbaijan (0.63 points), and Belarus (0.63 points). The second group of EaP countries, where this problem was noticed, consists of Armenia (4.88 points), Georgia (4.96 points), and Ukraine (3.26 points). The third group includes Moldova (6.35) (European Parliament 2023). Thus, we may conclude that, in 2023, the state of democratisation appears to be unsatisfactory for the entire EaP region, and for each EaP country in particular. Moreover, the degeneration of democratic processes is among the three key threats in 2023. Compared to 2019, in 2023 the indicators of the Normandy Index, mapping threats to peace and security in the EaP countries, show that the situation has significantly changed. Thus, in five states of the Eastern Partnership, with the exception of the Republic of Moldova, the curtailment of democratic processes represents the key threat to peace and security. The other threats (namely, the spread of misinformation, the state fragility, violent conflicts, and economic crises) are identical in five EaP countries, fact which demonstrates that processes fostering peace and security generally take more than one year.

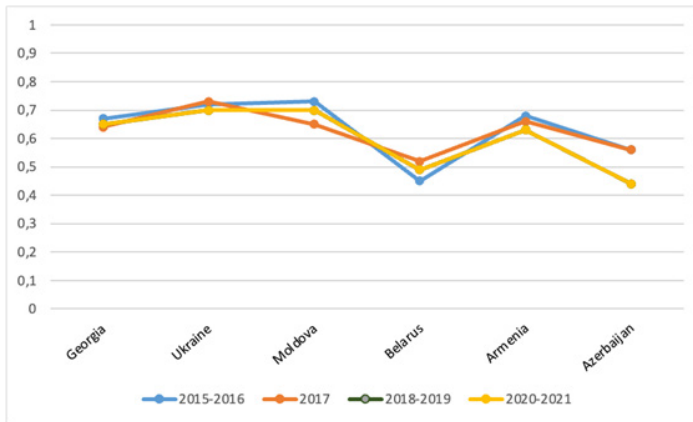
It is also important to analyse the indicators of the Eastern Partnership Index (*Figure 2*), which shows the progress made by the six Eastern Partnership countries in achieving a sustainable democratic development and European integration. The EaP Index, which reflects and compares the achievements of each of the partner countries, is based on two criteria that measure the degree of closeness to the EU: the implementation of standards, and the relations with the EU.

Between 2015 and 2016, the Republic of Moldova was the leader in both dimensions of the *EaP Index*, although with a slight advantage over Georgia (as regard the relations with the EU), and Ukraine (in terms of convergence). There was a clear divide between the three signatories of the Association Agreements (AAs) with the EU (the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine) and the other three Eastern Partnership countries (namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus) as far as their relationship with the EU was concerned. However, in the case of rapprochement with the EU, there was an obvious gap between four EaP countries (*the three signatories of the AAs, and Armenia, which came in third place, while Georgia was slightly ahead*) and the two weakest performers of the EaP (*Azerbaijan, and Belarus*), mainly due to the latter's ongoing problems in the fields of democracy and human rights. Armenia's assessment confirms its unremitting progress prior to its decision to abandon a planned Association Agreement with the EU (*Eastern Partnership Index, 2015-2016, 2017*).

In 2017, there was still a clear divide between the three signatories and the other three Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus) in terms of their relations with the EU (*Eastern Partnership Index 2017, 2018*).

However, regarding the issue of rapprochement, Ukraine stood out as a clear leader, as it surpassed the achievements of both the Republic of Moldova, and Armenia, and remained slightly ahead of Georgia. Azerbaijan and Belarus continued to be the two weakest countries, as they both avoid dealing with their shortcomings in the fields of democracy and human rights. Armenia's assessment reflects the strides it made before its decision to join a Russian-led customs union, although the indicators of the aforementioned Index precede the democratic reforms of the *Armenian Velvet Revolution* of May 2018 (*Eastern Partnership Index 2017, 2018*).

Figure 2. Dynamics of strengthening the relations between the EaP countries and the EU



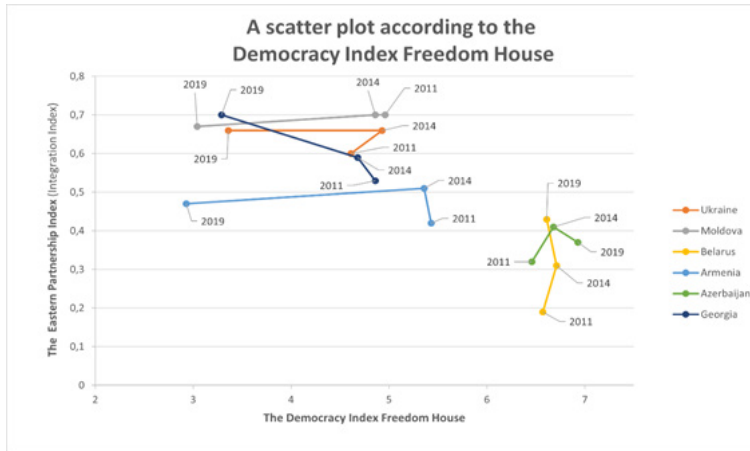
Source: *Eastern Partnership Index (2015-2021)*.

In 2018-2019, the dynamics of improving and strengthening relations between the EU and all Eastern Partnership countries was noteworthy. This means that things were going in the right direction, but more should be done. Although the results showed stronger ties between all EaP countries and the European Union, they also pointed to a steady gap between the three signatories of the Association Agreements and the other three EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus), which have a poor performance in terms of political transformations and communication with the citizens. These countries have participated in fewer political forums and cooperation programmes (*Eastern Partnership Index, 2018-2019, 2020*).

According to the *Eastern Partnership Index* for 2020–2021, which gauges approximation in two spheres: Democracy and Good Governance, Policy Convergence with the EU, the top three countries were Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova with a score of 0.7, and Georgia with a score of 0.65. From the results of the EaP Index, the worst situation was observed in Azerbaijan, whose score - was 0.44. Likewise, the situation appeared to be difficult in Belarus -- with a score of 0.45. The *Eastern Partnership Index* in Armenia was significantly better – 0.63 (*Eastern Partnership Index, 2020-2021, 2021*).

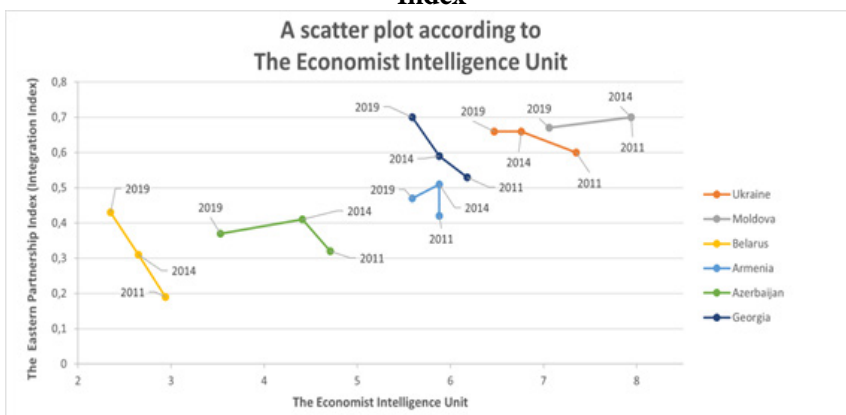
Based on the analysis of the data from the ***Integrated Index of Democracy***, and the ***European Integration Index*** for the EaP target countries, within a specific time frame, and using a scatter plot, we can conclude that that the growth indicators of the *Integration Index* partially differ from the realities of democratic development in the countries of the Eastern Partnership; on the contrary, the diagram shows the collapse of democratic transformations in these states. Therefore, no positive correlation was observed (*Figures 3, 4*).

Figure 3. A scatter plot according to the Democracy Index Freedom House



Source: Democracy Index Freedom House (2011-2019)

Figure 4. A scatter plot according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index



Source: Eastern Partnership Index, The Economist Intelligence Unit (2011-2019).

Despite the fact that the Eastern Partnership countries permanently received financial aid from the EU and signed a number of regulations, this did not bear a direct influence upon the state of democracy, because all depends on the political will of the state leadership to make real - and not bogus - reforms, and on the readiness of the citizens to change the country.

Exogenous and endogenous influences on the process of democratisation of the EaP countries. An important external factor is the relationship with the EU, which is defined as the strength of the country's ties to the West. However, in the opinion of political scientists, the member states of the Eastern Partnership fall into the category of countries with "low ties to the West". Another external influence exerted by the EU is through socialisation. As a result, in this networking process, the European Union stimulates democratisation using methods similar to the communication ones. It is worth noting that EU's financial support also helps to improve the democratisation process of

the EaP states, as mentioned above (Pinzari, 2015, pp. 16–17) (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Exogenous and endogenous factors of democratisation of the Eastern Partnership countries

Factor	External influence on the democratisation of the EaP countries
Reform Factor	<p><i>Frozen conflicts:</i> Ukraine, Georgia, Republic of Moldova.</p> <p><i>Economic and energy dependence as a factor of influence:</i> Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Belarus, Armenia.</p> <p><i>Soft power:</i> Ukraine, Belarus, Republic of Moldova, Armenia.</p> <p><i>Hard power:</i> Ukraine, Georgia, Republic of Moldova.</p> <p><i>Strong ties:</i> Belarus, Armenia.</p> <p><i>Military presence:</i> Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Belarus.</p> <p><i>Export ban:</i> Ukraine, Republic of Moldova.</p>
The EU factor	<p><i>Financial support:</i> Ukraine, Georgia.</p> <p><i>Association with the EU:</i> Ukraine, Georgia, Republic of Moldova.</p> <p><i>Visa-free regime with the EU:</i> Ukraine, Georgia, Republic of Moldova.</p> <p><i>Deep and comprehensive free trade area with the EU:</i> Ukraine, Georgia, Republic of Moldova.</p> <p><i>Negotiations on a comprehensive and extended partnership agreement with the EU:</i> Azerbaijan.</p>
The US factor	<p><i>Financial support:</i> Georgia, Republic of Moldova.</p>
Internal influence on the democratisation of the EaP	
Reform factor	Ukraine, Georgia.
Corruption factor	Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan.
Civil society factor	<p><i>Involvement in political life:</i> Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan.</p> <p><i>Active civil society:</i> Ukraine, Georgia.</p> <p><i>Developed Civil Society:</i> Georgia.</p>
Factor of trust in power	Georgia

Source: Authors' representation based on information gathered from: Gromadzki, 2011; Slunkin – Valodskaitė, 2023.

The EU's support for democratic change in the EaP region is efficient, if one of the following conditions is met:

- EU-supported reforms have already become a priority for the government.
- Good relations with the EU are important for the government for various reasons (for example, the difficult economic and geopolitical situation), and the latter is ready to make some concessions in its relations with the EU.
- A good awareness of realistic conditions.
- Reforms are backed by the EU Council and coordinated by international aid (Kaca, 2021).

The signing of visa facilitation and visa-free agreements, both crucial for the Eastern Partnership countries, are models of successful EU practices. The aforementioned agreements came with numerous conditions related to border management and migration reforms (signing of readmission agreements), as well as issues concerning minority rights (e.g., refugees and sexual minorities). For instance, Georgia has passed an anti-discrimination law, despite the prevailing conservative views in its society. Moreover, the EU had partial success in supporting reforms in Ukraine after 2014, by offering in close coordination with the IMF and EU member states a significant assistance package that incentivised progress in reforms. European partners have also set up a special support group for Ukraine to help it implement reforms. Although, many reforms can still be reversed and anti-corruption measures are blocked by oligarchs, the EU has successfully supported Ukraine's decentralisation process, the energy sector reform and the improvement of the public procurement law (by the introduction of the ProZorro online procurement system) (Kaca, 2021) (*Table 2*).

Table 2. The main EU agreements with the Eastern Partnership countries

	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine
Visa facilitation	2014	2014	Visa facilitation / readmission agreements signed in January 2020. Adopted by the Council following the consent of the European Parliament in May 2020, these agreements were expected to enter into force on July 1, 2020.	2011	2011	2014
Visa liberalisation	-	-	-	2017	2014	2017
Association Agreement	2018 The interim Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement entered into force	2017 The start of negotiations on a Comprehensive and Expanded Partnership Agreement	-	2016 Association Agreement	2016 Association Agreement	2017 Association Agreement
Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area	-	-	-	2016	2016	2017

Source: Bentzen – Przetacznik, 2020.

EU's instruments for the promotion of democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries

Specific EU instruments that can influence the process of democratic reform in the Eastern Partnership region include a comprehensive bilateral agreement with the EU, which sets "difficult" conditions, EU financial assistance and the level of communication between the recipient country and the European Union. The Union has signed various types of cooperation agreements with the states of the EaP region, ranging from basic partnerships and cooperation agreements to complex and comprehensive joint agreements, which established also deep and comprehensive free trade areas. It can be assumed that the more complex the agreement and the conditions for democracy are, the more likely it is that the agreement will have a positive impact on the course of democratic reforms (Bosse, 2019, pg. 224).

Although the EU did not offer initially membership prospects to the EaP countries, it supports reforms due to the significant financial investments employed. It is often concluded that stepping up financial aid to the Eastern Partnership countries increases the likelihood of producing a greater impact on the course of democratic reforms (Bosse, 2019, pg. 225).

Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia have higher democracy indicators in comparison with the other EaP countries, and closer ties with the European Union, while Armenia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan show a lower level of cooperation with the EU. Nevertheless, Armenia holds a better position than Azerbaijan and Belarus in the overall ranking of the *Democracy Index*, despite a similarity in their low level of ties to the EU. Since 2014, Ukraine has managed to maintain its progress in democratic reforms, regardless of its lower level of relations with the EU. At the same time, closer ties with the European Union have not impeded the decline of democracy in Moldova since 2014 (Bosse, 2019, p. 226). Following the outbreak of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine's application for EU membership and the granting of the candidate status, a new stage in the Ukraine-EU cooperation has begun. Brussels' demands regarding the implementation of a number of reforms were fulfilled immediately, thereby contributing to the democratisation of this country. However, the hypothesis that the relationship with the EU yields certain results is just partially confirmed by these developments, because it does not have an equal impact on all Eastern Partnership countries.

It is noteworthy that the mechanisms of transformation in the post-Soviet space are losing their effectiveness due to the lack of guarantees that someday the EaP countries might join the European Union. During the period 2009 - 2022, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova have stated their intention to join the EU, but they have received only vague proposals, which neither represent a strong incentive for structural reforms, nor enhance the effectiveness of the conditionality mechanism. For example, in many post-Soviet integration projects, Belarus and Armenia are partners of the Russian Federation, while Azerbaijan is cooperating with and is geopolitically closer to Turkey. These states do not aspire to integrate with the European Union. Compared to the process of EU enlargement, considered the most effective way used by external actors to promote democracy, the *European Neighbourhood Policy* is a feeble mechanism for the promotion of democracy (Raik, 2006, pg. 38). Since its inception, the Eastern Partnership did not offer the prospect of EU membership, and therefore was a weak incentive for the democratisation of the participating countries. The principle of differentiation

applied within this initiative, and the “more for more” approach have prompted the implementation of democratic reforms in the EaP countries. However, since the armed aggression of Russia against Ukraine, things have changed. Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are now candidates for EU membership, and the so-called enlargement package, includes Georgia too, despite its pro-Russian government. Of course, the revision of the Eastern Partnership will only serve as a catalyst for the implementation of democratic transformations. Nevertheless, a series of factors prevent the EU from pushing too hard for its reform agenda, through transnational channels, as its endeavours encounter resistance. For instance, up to the present, the Azerbaijani government has successfully counteracted any attempts of the EU to establish strong direct relations with non-state actors that could undermine its power (Börzel, 2009, pg. 38).

The main tools that the EU uses to promote democracy include (Zamfir, 2021): **Political and diplomatic actions.** These focus mainly on dialogue and are at the forefront of EU’s activity. During high-level bilateral meetings and high-level summits, organised by the EU with the participation of countries grouped geographically, political aspects are considered, democratic priorities are set out, and policy guidelines and strategies are developed. Following Azerbaijan’s military operation to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh, relations with the EU have become tenser. Yet, Brussels pursued its communication efforts and insisted on a meeting of the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia to settle the situation diplomatically (Gençtürk – Temizer, 2023). In turn, speaking at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, said that Armenia is ready to sign a peace treaty and normalise relations with Azerbaijan by the end of the year (Radio Svoboda, 2023).

Since October 2020, the EU has gradually introduced restrictive measures in response to the events in Belarus and the fraudulent presidential election. Starting from June 2021, Belarus has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership, so direct political communication in this framework ceased (Council of the EU and the European Council, 2022). From the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the European Union has improved the level of communication with Ukraine and Moldova. As far as Georgia is concerned, its potential accession to the EU is slowed down due to its pro-Russian government.

Election observation. In the field of election observation, the EU is one of the leading international organisations. Since 2000, the EU has sent *Election Observation Missions* (EU EOMs) and provided electoral support to partner countries, observing more than 160 elections, most of them in fragile countries. For example, with the support of the EU, the Republic of Georgia presented the reform of its Central Election Commission, and the Republic of Moldova shared the progress it has made in establishing an electronic voting system, already tested during the parliamentary elections (Council of Europe, 2023).

EU international cooperation and development aid for good governance and civil society. A key priority of the EU’s international cooperation is the support for democracy and effective governance. Cooperation in the field of democracy and human rights is confirmed in numerous partnership and cooperation agreements. The EU continues to stress the importance of the protection of human rights, civil society, media freedom, freedom of speech and assembly, in Azerbaijan. It supports Azerbaijan’s civil society, in spite of difficulties, and remains the largest foreign donor of aid. Agreements

between the EU and Armenia on visa facilitation and readmission entered into force in 2014, making visa applications easier, faster and cheaper for Armenians. Additionally, the EU is the main promoter of e-government in Armenia. To date, it has supported the implementation of the electronic document management system in the state institutions of Armenia. By 2021, more than 2,300 young people and youth workers from Belarus had been involved in joint exchanges, volunteering and capacity-building projects. However, the EU-Belarus dialogue on human rights was interrupted by Belarus' decision to withdraw from the initiative.

The EU's support to Georgia aims at improving the Georgians' standards of living in a visible and tangible way. To this end, about 85 million euros of annual aid are provided to Georgia in the form of grants. In the Republic of Moldova, the EU contributes to countering foreign interference and information manipulation, including disinformation. It strengthens strategic communication, by offering technical support to the Government of Chişinău, and builds the capacity of the independent media, civil society, and youth to combat disinformation and communicate the benefits of the EU integration. The European Union pays special attention to the Ukrainian society. It provides support for internally displaced persons and host communities, rebuilds critical infrastructure (including energy equipment), and supports digital and cyber security, as well as independent media, and civil society (European Commission, 2023).

Sanctions. The EU continues to introduce a range of targeted sanctions, e.g., travel bans, and asset freezes. These sanctions are imposed on individuals and organisations responsible for serious human rights violations, or for undermining democracy or the rule of law. Nevertheless, the EU's reaction to Azerbaijan's military actions in Nagorno-Karabakh is still unclearly defined. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, and many of the 27 leaders of the EU bloc have condemned this military operation. It was noted that the EU may review its relations with Azerbaijan "on the basis of a gradual approach" (Gray – Irish, 2023). The EU has equally condemned the involvement of Belarus in Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. Since 2022, in response to Belarus' actions, the EU has adopted individual economic sanctions, trade restrictions, a SWIFT ban against five Belarusian banks, etc. (Council of the EU and the European Council, 2022).

Platform. Within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, thematic platforms have been created, namely: 1. Institution building and proper governance. 2. Economic development and market opportunities. 3. Interconnections, energy efficiency, environment and climate change. 4. Mobility and interpersonal contacts. Most of them enable information exchange and experience sharing of partner countries in terms of the implementation of reforms and institutional transformations.

On June 23, 2022, the European Council decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status for membership to the European Union. At the same time, these two countries remained participating states in the Eastern Partnership program, as the latter was not designed with the enlargement process in mind. The future of the Eastern Partnership will not be clearly defined until Ukraine wins the war. However, at this stage, it is possible to anticipate some features of the EU's future policy towards its Eastern neighbours. It would be appropriate to organise a separate multilateral platform for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova – this would enable them to remain in the Eastern Partnership, while pursuing their goal to join the EU. Moreover, some authors

consider that it is advisable to exclude other EaP states from this type of dialogue, until they also develop ambitions for EU membership (Gogolashvili, 2022, pg. 1). Georgia, for instance, was denied the candidate status because, in EU's opinion, it does not yet meet the requirements for such a role, due to the current state of its democracy.

European Peace Facility (EPF)

On July 1, 2021, the European Peace Fund (EPF), which is an extra-budgetary instrument of the EU, began its activities. The Fund allocates financial resources for the implementation of operational actions with military and defence implications (within the framework of the CFSP), which cannot be financed under the terms of the EU Treaties. Thereby it facilitates the provision of necessary assistance to foreign partners. Such support is delivered through training, logistics, and lethal military equipment. All this is aimed at increasing the Union's ability to prevent conflicts, build peace and strengthen international security (Lazarou – Zamfir, 2022, pg. 22).

In the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood, the largest share of EPF funding is directed to the Ukrainian armed forces. Two billion euros have been allocated, mainly for the acquisition of military equipment to help Ukraine protect its territorial sovereignty and population from the Russian aggression; the following funds, namely 31 million euros, were committed to field hospitals and medical equipment, demining equipment and engineering equipment, land mobility, logistics, and cyber defence. Financing for medical equipment is also provided to the defence forces of Georgia (12.75 million euros), and the armed forces of the Republic of Moldova (7 billion euros) (Lazarou – Zamfir, 2022, pg. 22).

We should also mention the two international aid instruments: the *Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance* (IPA) III for EU candidate countries, and the *European Neighbourhood Instrument* (ENI) for neighbouring countries, including the Eastern Partnership.

Challenges and democratisation scenarios for the EaP Challenges for the Eastern Partnership

The first challenge is the promotion of democracy. Without laying the foundations of democracy (especially in Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Armenia), or strengthening them in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia, even a partial integration with the EU will be impossible. This poses a huge problem for the ruling elites, who hold high positions in national and local institutions in the partner countries. They are often reluctant or even hostile to democratisation. Some partner countries do not even have a functional tripartite division of powers, which supposes, for instance, judicial independence (Gromadzki, 2011, pg. 21).

The second challenge relates to the consolidation of the civil society. Closer cooperation and partial integration of partner countries with the EU are possible only if such demarches benefit from the broad support of the citizens of these countries (Gromadzki, 2011, pg. 21). The Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the need for powerful and effective states, and stable societies, resilient to the growing global instability. Moreover, in the EaP region, the citizens need to develop trusting relations with the state, and it is essential to have stable and reliable institutions (Gerasymchuk – Drapak, 2023).

The third challenge concerns the setting of conditions. The EU is facing and needs to resolve an urgent political dilemma: whether to continue the integration of partner countries, despite the lack of progress in democratisation, or to suspend cooperation in this direction. It is also unclear whether the EU will be able to apply the conditionality principle (which has yielded positive results in the case of candidate countries), as partner countries are not offered, as an incentive, the prospect to join the EU (Gromadzki, 2011, pg. 22). The granting of EU candidate status to some of the Eastern partners has a limited impact on the Eastern Partnership. The June 2022 decision of the European Council had primarily a symbolic value, since it is highly unlikely that those countries will actually become EU members in the near future (Crombois, 2023).

The fourth challenge consists in ensuring compliance. One of the serious problems the EU has to cope with is the willingness of partner countries to reap the benefits of the proposal contained in the Eastern Partnership. To a large extent, this depends on the current political situation, and therefore no major changes should be expected in the future (Gromadzki, 2011, pg. 23). The economic repercussions of the war in Ukraine also pose a major challenge, especially for those EaP countries whose economy is heavily dependent on the Russian Federation. Their internal situation is increasingly destabilised by the disruptions in the supply of food, energy, and other vital goods. The leaders of these countries have to strike a balance between the need for internal reforms (required for deeper integration with the EU), and the resistance to the pressure exerted by Russia (Slunkin – Valodskaitė, 2023).

The fifth challenge is about resolving regional conflicts. We must not forget the “tough” security. Frozen conflicts are (to a greater or lesser extent) one of its manifestations. The EU faces the task of correlating its involvement in these issues with its actions in the framework of the Eastern Partnership (Gromadzki, 2011, pg. 24). Since 2014, there is a military conflict in Ukraine, and it has significantly escalated and turned into a full-scale war in 2022. The Republic of Moldova is dealing with a frozen conflict, as part of its territory (namely, Transnistria) has been under Russian control since 1992. However, even multi-year conflicts, going through different stages, eventually come to an end, and Nagorno-Karabakh is an illustrative example. In 2020, after decades of intermittent skirmishes, Azerbaijan launched a military operation (the Second Karabakh War) and won a resounding victory in this 44-day war against Armenia. Then Russia acted as a mediator, and offered to deploy 1,960 Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh (Reuters, 2023). Therefore, we can infer that the EU had a weak reaction to those developments, for a number of reasons related to the nature of the EU’s policy:

1. The EU relied too much on the “soft” diplomacy, which poorly contributed to the security and stability of the region.
2. All the EU actions focused on statements emphasising the need to stop active hostilities, and settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict peacefully, under the auspices of the OSCE MG.
3. *De facto*, only France assumed the role of mediator, and its diplomatic efforts proved insufficient.
4. None of the so-called reasonable sanctions have been applied to Azerbaijan.
5. Stressing the importance of democracy, without undertaking efforts for its full implementation, is not enough. The EU’s main approach was based on the principle “less for less” (which allowed for the imposition of sanctions),

instead of the principle “*more for more*”.

6. Energy security prevailed over conflict resolution.

These shortcomings of the EU’s policy have enabled geopolitical, security, and strategic changes. Consequently, the Russian Federation and Turkey have extended their influence in the EaP region, whereas the influence of the EU diminished (Ivasechko, Tsebenko, Turchyn, Vezdenko, 2022, pg. 642). Therefore, in order to improve the level of democratisation in the EaP countries, the EU should focus on the resolution of all regional conflicts, because the latter bring destabilisation and slow down the process of state development.

Scenarios for democratisation of the Eastern Partnership

The methodology chosen for developing scenarios for the Eastern Partnership is based on the trends and data collected and analysed in the present study. By looking at the past and present trends and patterns of democratisation in this region, we aim to provide insights into potential future scenarios.

Scenario №1. The Eastern Partnership ceases to exist in its current form. Such a scenario is possible against the background of the current developments in Europe. High-ranking officials, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, and the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Ukraine’s Integration into the European Union, Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, have repeatedly stated that the Eastern Partnership has ceased to exist as an effective tool for promoting the development of democracy and, consequently, requires significant modernisation (Bega, 2022).

Scenario №2. All regional conflicts have finally been resolved, and the countries of the Eastern Partnership remain on the right path of democratic development. Shortly after the victory over the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova become members of the EU. Georgia manages to stabilise its internal political situation, by fulfilling all EU requirements, and changing its pro-Russian government with one who fully supports the European values. Armenia leaves the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and enhances its cooperation with the EU. Leaders of the younger generation play a crucial role in the support for democracy and they gradually replace the “older generation” at all the levels of government. Following Russia’s defeat in the war with Ukraine, the dictatorial regime in Belarus collapses, the opposition returns and begins (with support from the European Union) to restore the democratic regime. Moreover, it files suit against the previous government for the crimes committed. Azerbaijan continues to conduct its internal politics as before, and shows less interest and ambition to implement any significant programme of integration with the EU.

Scenario №3. All EaP countries nurture intentions of European integration. In the short term, this is unlikely. Yet, in the long term, with the gradual elimination of the Russian Federation’s influence, and the advancement of democratisation in these countries, the region may look quite differently.

Scenario №4. Following its defeat in the unprovoked war against Ukraine, the Russian Federation continues to build up its military power in secret. Thus, it creates internal instability, and economic, social, and political vulnerabilities in the Eastern Partnership countries. The latter states are fully prepared for eventual iterative attempts of the Russian Federation to expand (by military means) its influence in the region, with

a view to occupying a significant part of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia. This is a long-term scenario that foresees the complete defeat of Russia by Ukraine, and the rapprochement of Georgia, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova with the European Union through the EU enlargement negotiations.

All of the above confirm a certain interdependence with the theory of democratic peace. Democratic states do not wish to initiate or be involved in hostilities, but they are not completely immune to unprovoked aggression by non-democratic states driven by imperialist and bellicose goals. The internal challenges faced by the EaP countries put a brake on their development and European integration. These include: the existence of undemocratic regimes in a number of EaP countries; oligarchy; corruption in all spheres; presence of “fifth columns”; low political culture; low level of economic development.

Conclusions

The European Union plays an important role in advancing democracy in the countries that joined the Eastern Partnership. However, we can conclude that, despite its endeavours, the EU’s influence in terms of democratising these countries does not yield the expected results. This can be explained by the fact that the EaP countries are exposed to various factors of influence, both internal and external. It should also be noted that the European Union uses mechanisms meant to complement and intensify the internal changes of the Eastern Partnership countries. As a rule, they are aimed at democratisation and they take into account the specifics of each individual initiative. Nevertheless, sometimes the EU’s efforts do not suffice. The influence of the European Union does not always generate positive feedback from the countries participating in the Eastern Partnership programme.

Nowadays, most leaders across the globe claim that the war in Ukraine is a war between two worlds: the democratic world, and the authoritarian one. Therefore, there is a clear interdependence between democracy and peace. The representatives of the EU have pointed out the necessity of providing unquestionable support to Ukraine in its fight against putinism. They are aware that, in case Brussels or other players of world politics suspend aid to Kyiv, it is highly probable that the Russian troops will march against the Republic of Moldova or another country.

According to the Normandy Index in 2023, negative trends regarding the collapse of democratic processes in the countries of the Eastern Partnership have been observed. In almost all EaP countries, except for Armenia, the decline of democratic processes represents the main threat to peace and security in the region.

While evaluating the role of the EU, as a promoter of democracy in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, it is worth emphasising the following: the democratisation process should be assessed through the prism of the influence of exogenous and endogenous factors. At the same time, one should differentiate between the CIS countries, as some of them are incentivised to join the EU (namely, the countries of the “Associated Trio”), while others are not (namely, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and yet do not refuse Brussels’ tools for the promotion of democracy, whereas others have chosen the path of authoritarianism and are completely under the influence of Russia (Belarus).

Naturally, the external tools of the EU alone are not enough for the promotion of democracy in the CIS countries. It is important that this direction of development is clearly understood and promoted by both the political elites of the EaP countries

and the civil society. Only the synergy will foster the promotion of democracy in the CIS countries. Currently, there are two options. The first one displays a scenario where tyranny is the main winner. The second and the only advisable one is to protect Ukraine from Putin's authoritarianism, and with it, the entire free world.

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