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## The Changing Nature of EU Support to Civil Society

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Until the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the European Union (EU) was neither a visible player in the external democracy promotion arena, nor a known supporter of civil society groups in post-Soviet countries. The European Commission focused primarily on technical assistance to economic transformation and social and humanitarian projects rather than political reform. The US and some EU member states had a much higher profile and greater clout when it came to promoting democracy in the former Soviet republics. With the development of the ENP – and especially since the creation of the Eastern Partnership – the EU has gradually become a more proactive, unified actor in democracy promotion in the Eastern neighborhood. Several external events (including Ukraine's Orange Revolution, in which the EU got involved) played a role in this transformation. But there was also a greater push within the EU, coming mainly from new member states, for more genuine support of democratic agents in the Eastern neighborhood.

Echoing the experience of Eastern enlargement, the ENP originally put most emphasis on top-down Europeanization. This approach struggled to gain traction. With little or no previous experience of democratic rule, East European and South Caucasus post-Soviet states were less advanced in democratic transformation than most of the EU's post-socialist new entrants. In the absence of an accession carrot, EU promises of a stake in the internal market and visa facilitation were weak incentives for undemocratic rulers to reform.

Since 2009, the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) has tried to address these drawbacks, introducing new tools to enhance the involvement of non-governmental actors. The motif has been one of more bottom-up and locally driven democracy support. One of the main novelties of the

EaP was the EU's attempt to reach out beyond state institutions and tighten modes of engagement with non-state actors. In 2011 the EU unveiled a new concept of 'partnership with society', offering enhanced assistance to non-state actors in the neighborhood. Under the EaP, the EU has gradually become a more engaged and unified actor in democracy promotion in the Eastern neighborhood.

Existing academic studies have tended to pay less attention to overtly political European civil society support than the export of – and compliance with – EU governance rules (Forsberg, 2011; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009, 2011; Schimmelfennig, 2011; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmaier, 2004; Smith & Weber, 2011). Attention has also been paid to the extensive array of formal instruments of democracy promotion (Kotzian et al., 2011). There is a slight risk that such academic concerns underplay the weakness of the more political dimensions of EU democracy support (Youngs, 2009, 2010). With an aim to complement and correct these biases in recent academic concerns, this chapter examines EU support to civil society in the Eastern neighborhood from a long-term perspective, outlining the main stages of its evolution. It concludes that the EU has genuinely turned over a new leaf in its support to democracy through civil society development. However, it argues that the EU still needs more fundamentally to review the way it implements civil society support in the Eastern neighborhood if its new initiatives are to contribute effectively to demand-driven, bottom-up reform. Our aim here is to offer a rich empirical canvas as foundation for the conceptual points drawn elsewhere in this volume.

## **5.1 The EU's record in the Eastern neighborhood**

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the EU was the largest multilateral donor to Eastern European and South Caucasus post-Soviet countries. At the time, it paid greatest attention to stability and market reforms. Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) signed with the post-Soviet countries during the 1990s were concerned primarily with trade and economic cooperation. The main instrument for financial assistance to post-Soviet states (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States – TACIS), was not tailored to democratization but focused on trade and investment promotion and government capacity building. In Ukraine only a small amount of TACIS funds went to civil society development, independent media, and democracy: only €10 million out of a total €212 million Commission aid allocation for 2004 to 2006 (European Commission, 2003).