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Parliaments in the EU enlargement process: strengthening capacities of accession country parliaments under the evolving enlargement methodology

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Parliaments in the EU enlargement process:

Strengthening capacities of
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the evolving enlargement
methodology



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STUDY

Parliaments in the EU enlargement process: Strengthening capacities of accession country parliaments under the evolving enlargement methodology

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role and enhancement of parliamentary capacities in the European Union (EU) enlargement process, focusing on the EU's evolving accession methodology and its emphasis on the 'fundamentals' approach. It examines the European Commission's criteria for 'functioning democratic institutions' in accession countries and evaluates the effectiveness of support measures from EU institutions, Member States, and international organisations. Based on desk research, mapping, and over 90 expert and stakeholder interviews, the study analyses EU democracy support initiatives for parliaments in 10 enlargement countries, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine, and Kosovo.

The study highlights best practices and identifies challenges that require increased attention from the European Parliament and the core actors involved in parliamentary capacity-building. While past efforts by the European Parliament, Member States, and international organisations have strengthened parliaments in these countries, ongoing democratic backsliding calls for more coherent and concerted action. The European Parliament and its Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) play a crucial role in addressing these challenges.

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List of abbreviations

AFET	European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs
AK	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, Türkiye)
BiEPAG	Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group
CEPPS	Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening
CPA	Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly
CPLR	Center of Policy and Legal Reform
CSB	Civil Service Bureau (of Georgia)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DEVE	Committee on Development
DEG	Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group
DG	Directorate-General
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG JUST	Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DRG	Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EC	European Community / European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EU4Georgia	European Union support for Georgia programme
EU4Democracy	European Union support for democracy programme
FY	Fiscal Year
GGI	Global Governance Institute
GIZ	German Development Cooperation
GNAT	Grand National Assembly of Türkiye
GRECO	Group of States Against Corruption
HDP	House Democracy Partnership
HICD	Human and Institutional Capacity Development
HR	Human Resources
IDEA	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems

IPEX	Inter-parliamentary EU information exchange database
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IRI	International Republican Institute
IT	Information Technology
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and more
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MIPPP	Moldova Inclusive and Participatory Political Processes
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
NAM	Needs Assessment Mission
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PA	Parliamentary Assembly
PMO	Parliamentary Monitoring Organisation
PMCG	Policy and Management Consulting Group
PROLoG	Promoting Rule of Law in Georgia Activity
RANG	Rada Next Generation
SIGMA	Support for Improvement in Governance and Management
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SPPG	Supporting Political Pluralism and Good Government Processes
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument of the European Commission
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development

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Executive summary

This study provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of parliamentary democracy support initiatives towards the national parliaments of 10 enlargement countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine) to gain insights into activities, best practices and further challenges that should be addressed by the European Parliament (EP)'s bodies and actors involved in parliamentary support and capacity-building activities. The study is closely connected to discussions related to the role national parliaments play in candidate countries, within the broader context of the European Union (EU) enlargement process and the 'revised methodology' with its emphasis on the 'fundamentals'. These fundamentals include the core objectives of promoting 'the rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform - and the economic criteria'¹ in the candidate countries. Crucially, the revised enlargement methodology, introduced in 2020, entails a fundamental first approach. This should place the rule of law and 'functioning democratic institutions' at the heart of the accession negotiations.

Yet, as this study argues, in Commission-led enlargement discussions and approaches, the role of accession countries' national parliaments and their effective, democratic functioning have often been under-prioritised, despite the crucial role these institutions play in the democratisation and accession processes. The study finds that despite its widespread use, the term 'functioning democratic institutions' has not been fully defined. The fact that no official EU definition of the term exists has also given rise to ambiguities and limitations in the context of parliamentary support activities and their evaluations. Even though EU Member States, EU institutions and a wide range of regional and international organisations have been active in parliamentary capacity-building activities during the last two decades, there is a lack of a systematic and comprehensive overview and mapping of how these activities relate to each other or are carried out. Since the EP and its Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) have built up important expertise and initiatives in this area, it is even more essential to examine the past, present and future role that the DEG and the relevant administrative units could and should play, particularly in relation to the various existing activities by other actors and within the wider context of enlargement.

Against this background, the study seeks to:

- clarify the past and present criteria set out by the Commission for national parliaments in accession countries regarding the 'fundamental' enlargement requirement of 'functioning democratic institutions';
- map and analyse the effectiveness of the Commission's requirements and various support measures by EU institutions and bodies, and their successes, failures, limitations and further potential in terms of actual impact on the functioning of parliaments of accession countries;
- map and analyse the support of selected individual EU Member States' parliaments to the parliaments in accession countries, identify lessons learned, and outline best practices and success stories;
- map and analyse the support activities of other core international organisations and initiatives and identify and outline policy 'overlaps, potential synergies, as well as strengths and weaknesses' in the EP's ongoing democracy support activities, with a particular emphasis on increasing coherence.

Based on a comprehensive mapping exercise and 92 interviews with experts and core stakeholders as well as representatives from EU institutions, EU Member State parliaments, staff and Members of Parliament from the enlargement countries involved in parliamentary capacity-building, this study provides the EP (both the DEG and the administrative units within the EP's Directorate for Democracy Support) with

¹ European Commission (2023) Annexes to the Communication from the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions '2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy', 8.11.2023, p. 28.

actionable advice on future policies and initiatives for strengthening the capacities of candidate countries' parliaments.

The study is structured as follows: Section 1 provides an overview of the main objectives, research questions and methodology of this study. Section 2 places the current issue of the role of national parliaments as 'functioning democratic institutions' in the revised enlargement methodology into the wider historical context of the process of European enlargement and its democratisation dimensions. Section 3 closely examines the concept and operationalisation of 'functioning democratic institutions' in the context of the European Commission (EC)'s revised enlargement methodology. As no official, EU-wide definition of parliaments as functioning democratic institutions exists, the section systematically reviews and identifies some recurrent and common criteria and dimensions, based on desk research of core EU documents as well as on extensive interviews with EU officials and external experts. The section concludes with a brief outline of some advances made by international organisations active in the strengthening of parliaments in defining and agreeing on transparent and systematically applied benchmarks. Reflections on the adoption of 'Indicators for Democratic Parliaments', co-developed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and international organisations active in the field of parliamentary capacity-building, could also be beneficial for the EU and their institutions' approaches to supporting candidate countries' parliaments. Section 4 comprises the main part of this study. It provides an overview and analysis of the main approaches of the EC, EU Member State parliaments, international organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Council of Europe, the UN Development Programme, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the IPU, as well as other institutions active in the field of parliamentary strengthening and capacity-building. Based on a wide range of interviews with supporting institutions and EU Member State parliaments, as well as officials and (former) MPs from candidate country parliaments, Section 4 identifies both opportunities and challenges in the realm of parliamentary capacity-building. In addition, it explores duplication, overlap, and potential for synergies between different actors in the field. It also identifies core lessons and opportunities for the EP and its future role in strengthening the role of parliaments as functioning democratic institutions. Section 5 provides a reflection on a more coherent and impactful approach, then Section 6 provides the study's main conclusions, which include 15 concrete policy recommendations for the EP and DEG.

Overall, the study highlights that the EP is well placed to reinforce its activities and initiatives in parliamentary capacity-building and that it should enhance its role in directly and indirectly facilitating a stronger EU prioritisation of the importance of national parliaments in candidate countries – not only for the sake of the European enlargement and integration process, but also for crucial democratic strengthening at a time of growing internal and external challenges.

Résumé exécutif

Cette étude fournit une vue d'ensemble et une analyse complète des initiatives de soutien à la démocratie parlementaire en faveur des parlements nationaux de dix pays de l'élargissement (Albanie, Bosnie-Herzégovine, Géorgie, Kosovo, Moldavie, Monténégro, Macédoine du Nord, Serbie, Turquie et Ukraine) afin de mieux comprendre les activités, les meilleures pratiques et les nouveaux défis qui devraient être abordés par le Parlement européen et les acteurs impliqués dans les activités de soutien et de renforcement des capacités des parlements. L'étude est étroitement liée aux discussions sur le rôle que jouent les parlements nationaux dans les pays candidats dans le contexte plus large du processus d'élargissement de l'UE et de la « méthodologie révisée » qui met l'accent sur ce que l'on appelle les « fondamentaux ». Ces « fondamentaux » comprennent les objectifs essentiels de promotion de l'État de droit, des droits fondamentaux, du fonctionnement des institutions démocratiques et de la réforme de l'administration publique, ainsi que les critères économiques² dans les pays candidats. La méthodologie de l'élargissement, introduite en 2020, implique une approche fondée sur les fondamentaux, ce qui signifie que l'État de droit et le fonctionnement des institutions démocratiques seront au cœur des négociations d'adhésion. Pourtant, comme l'affirme cette étude, dans les discussions et les approches de l'élargissement menées par la Commission, le rôle des parlements nationaux des pays candidats et leur fonctionnement efficace et démocratique ont souvent été sous-estimés, malgré le rôle crucial que ces institutions jouent dans les processus de démocratisation et d'adhésion. Plus précisément, l'étude constate qu'en dépit de son utilisation répandue, l'expression « institutions démocratiques fonctionnelles » n'a pas été pleinement définie. Le fait qu'il n'existe pas de définition officielle de l'UE a également donné lieu à des ambiguïtés et à des limitations dans le contexte des activités de soutien parlementaire et de leurs évaluations. En outre, malgré le fait que les États membres de l'UE, les institutions de l'UE et un large éventail d'organisations régionales et internationales ont été actifs au cours des deux dernières décennies dans les activités de renforcement des capacités parlementaires, il manque une vue d'ensemble et une représentation systématiques et complètes de la façon dont ces activités sont liées les unes aux autres ou sont menées. Étant donné que le Parlement européen et le Groupe de coordination des élections et du soutien à la démocratie (DEG) ont acquis une expertise et des initiatives importantes dans ce domaine, il est d'autant plus essentiel d'examiner le rôle passé, présent et futur que le DEG et les unités administratives concernées pourraient et devraient jouer, en particulier par rapport aux diverses activités existantes menées par d'autres acteurs et dans le contexte plus large de l'élargissement.

Dans ce contexte, l'étude cherche à :

- clarifier les critères passés et présents définis par la Commission pour les parlements nationaux des pays en voie d'adhésion en ce qui concerne l'exigence « fondamentale » de l'élargissement, à savoir des « institutions démocratiques qui fonctionnent »;
- cartographier et analyser l'efficacité des exigences de la Commission européenne et des diverses mesures de soutien prises par les institutions de l'UE, ainsi que leurs succès, leurs échecs, leurs limites et leur potentiel en termes d'impact réel sur le fonctionnement des parlements des pays en voie d'adhésion;
- cartographier et analyser le soutien apporté par certains parlements d'États membres de l'UE aux parlements des pays en voie d'adhésion, identifier les enseignements tirés et mettre en évidence les meilleures pratiques et les exemples de réussite ;
- cartographier et analyser les activités de soutien d'autres grandes organisations internationales et identifier et décrire les « chevauchements, les synergies potentielles, ainsi que les forces et les

² European Commission (2023) Annexes to the Communication from the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions '2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy', 8.11.2023, p. 28.

faiblesses » des activités de soutien à la démocratie du Parlement européen, en mettant l'accent sur la cohérence.

Basée sur un exercice de recensement détaillé 92 entretiens avec des experts et des parties prenantes clés ainsi que des représentants des institutions de l'UE, des parlements des États membres de l'UE, du personnel et des députés des pays de l'élargissement impliqués dans le renforcement des capacités parlementaires, cette étude fournit au Parlement européen (à la fois le groupe de soutien à la démocratie et de coordination des élections ainsi que les unités administratives au sein de la direction du soutien à la démocratie du PE) des conseils opérationnels sur les politiques et initiatives futures liées au renforcement des capacités des parlements des pays candidats.

L'étude est structurée comme suit. La section 1 donne un aperçu des principaux objectifs, des questions de recherche et de la méthodologie de cette étude. La section 2 place la question actuelle du rôle des parlements nationaux en tant qu'« institutions démocratiques fonctionnelles » dans la méthodologie révisée de l'élargissement dans le contexte historique plus large du processus d'élargissement de l'Europe et de ses dimensions de démocratisation. La section 3 examine de près le concept et l'opérationnalisation des « institutions démocratiques fonctionnelles » dans le contexte de la méthodologie révisée de l'élargissement de la Commission européenne. Étant donné qu'il n'existe pas de définition officielle à l'échelle de l'UE des parlements en tant qu'institutions démocratiques fonctionnelles, cette section passe systématiquement en revue et identifie certains critères et dimensions récurrents et communs, sur la base d'une recherche documentaire des principaux documents de l'UE ainsi que d'entretiens approfondis avec des fonctionnaires de l'UE et des experts externes. La section se termine par un bref aperçu des progrès réalisés par les organisations internationales actives dans le domaine du renforcement des parlements en matière de définition et d'accord sur des critères de référence transparents et systématiquement appliqués. Des réflexions sur l'adoption des « Indicateurs pour les parlements démocratiques », élaborés conjointement par l'Union interparlementaire (UIP) et des organisations internationales actives dans le domaine du renforcement des capacités parlementaires, pourraient également être bénéfiques pour les approches de l'Union européenne et de ses institutions en matière de soutien aux parlements des pays candidats. La section 4 constitue la partie principale de cette étude. Elle fournit une vue d'ensemble et une analyse des principales approches de la Commission européenne, des parlements des États membres de l'UE, des organisations internationales telles que l'OSCE, le Conseil de l'Europe, le Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement, l'Assemblée parlementaire de l'OTAN et l'Union interparlementaire, ainsi que d'autres institutions actives dans le domaine du renforcement des parlements et du développement des capacités. Sur la base d'un large éventail d'entretiens avec des institutions de soutien et des parlements des États membres de l'UE, d'une part, et des fonctionnaires et (anciens) députés des parlements des pays candidats, d'autre part, la section 4 identifie à la fois les opportunités et les défis dans le domaine du renforcement des capacités parlementaires. En outre, elle examine les doubles emplois, les chevauchements et les synergies potentielles entre les différents acteurs dans ce domaine et identifie les principaux enseignements et opportunités pour le Parlement européen et son rôle futur dans le renforcement du rôle des parlements en tant qu'institutions démocratiques fonctionnelles. La section 5 propose une réflexion sur une approche plus cohérente et plus efficace et la section 6 présente les principales conclusions de l'étude et 15 recommandations politiques concrètes pour le Parlement européen et la DEG en particulier.

Dans l'ensemble, l'étude souligne que le Parlement européen est bien placé pour renforcer ses activités et ses initiatives dans le domaine du renforcement des capacités parlementaires et qu'il devrait jouer un rôle plus important en facilitant directement et indirectement une plus forte priorisation par l'UE de l'importance des parlements nationaux dans les pays candidats - non seulement dans l'intérêt du processus d'élargissement et d'intégration de l'Europe, mais aussi pour un renforcement démocratique crucial à un moment où les défis internes et externes sont de plus en plus nombreux.

1 Introduction

This study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview and analysis of European Union (EU) democracy support initiatives towards the national parliaments of the 10 enlargement countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine) to gain insights into activities, best practices and further challenges that should be addressed by the European Parliament (EP)'s bodies and actors involved in democracy support activities. The study is placed in the broader discussion on the role that national parliaments play in candidate countries within the broader context of the EU's enlargement process and the 'revised methodology', with its emphasis on the 'fundamentals'. These fundamentals include the core objectives of promoting 'the rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform and the economic criteria' in the candidate countries³. Crucially, the revised enlargement methodology, introduced in 2020, entails a 'fundamentals first' approach, meaning that emphasising the rule of law and functioning democratic institutions 'will be at the heart of the accession negotiations'⁴. The new approach also stresses that 'Cluster 1 – the Fundamentals' will be the first to be opened and the last to be closed, ensuring that there is continuous and prioritised monitoring and an expectation of success (i.e. credible and irreversible reforms on the fundamentals) in the candidate countries throughout the accession process and negotiations⁵.

The study focuses on the specific criterion and aspect of 'functioning democratic institutions', which has been identified by the European Commission (EC) as 'a central pillar of the EU accession process'⁶. While official EU documents put forward under the heading of 'functioning democratic institutions' aspects such as 'electoral process, the functioning of parliament and the role of civil society', there is an absence of a commonly agreed definition of what 'functioning democratic institutions' means in theory and practice⁷. It is, therefore, also one of the core objectives of this study to shed more light on the meaning of 'functioning democratic institutions' and provide clarity on the interpretation and operationalisation of this term with the help of desk research and in-depth, wide-ranging interviews with core stakeholders. The scope of the study focuses on the role of national parliaments in the candidate countries and the specific tasks and roles they are expected to fulfil to satisfy the EU's criteria and requirements within the accession process.

The study will clarify the meaning and EU expectations behind the term 'functioning democratic institutions' regarding the national parliaments of the enlargement countries. Additionally, it will map and assess the democracy support activities by EU institutions, EU Member State parliaments and international organisations towards those parliaments.

1.1 Purpose, objectives and main research questions of the study

The primary purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of how to promote effective and comprehensive policies, initiatives and best practices in support of the enlargement countries' national parliaments as 'functioning democratic institutions' – in the context of the revised enlargement methodology. In so doing, the study seeks to:

³ European Commission (2023) Annexes to the Communication from the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions '2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy', 8.11.2023, p. 28.

⁴ Branislav Stanicek (2020) A new approach to EU enlargement – European Parliamentary Research Service, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649332/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649332_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649332/EPRS_BRI(2020)649332_EN.pdf)

⁵ European Commission (2023) 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 8.11.2023, p. 8.

⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

⁷ Idem.

- clarify the past and present criteria set out by the Commission for national parliaments in accession countries regarding the ‘fundamental’ enlargement requirement of ‘functioning democratic institutions’;
- map and analyse the effectiveness of the EC’s requirements and various support measures by EU institutions (EC, Council, EP) and other bodies, such as the EU Delegations, and examine their successes, failures, limitations and further potential in terms of actual impact on the functioning of parliaments of enlargement countries;
- map and analyse the support of selected individual EU Member States’ parliaments to the parliaments in accession countries, identify lessons learned, outline best practices and success stories;
- map and analyse the support activities of other core international organisations and identify and outline policy ‘overlaps, potential synergies, and strengths and weaknesses’ in the EP’s ongoing democracy support activities with a particular emphasis on increasing coherence.

Following on from these objectives, the main research questions that guided this study are the following:

1. What are the specific criteria and requirements set by the EC for parliaments in accession countries to be considered ‘functioning democratic institutions’, and how are these criteria applied in practice?
2. How effective are the EC’s support measures in improving the functioning of parliaments in accession countries, and what impact have these measures had on their legislative and oversight capacities?
3. How do individual EU Member States support the parliaments in enlargement countries, and what best practices and success stories can be identified from their initiatives?
4. How effective are the support measures and activities by other major international organisations or institutions? What best practices can be learned? What are their perceptions of EU measures and their coherence?
5. What are the overlaps, potential synergies, and strengths and weaknesses of the EP’s ongoing democracy support activities within the broader context of EU democracy support in the enlargement process?

The study seeks to answer these research questions with a view to providing the EP (both the DEG and the administrative units within the EP’s Directorate for Democracy Support) with actionable advice on future policies and initiatives related to strengthening the capacities of enlargement countries’ parliaments. Particular emphasis is placed on the activities of the EU institutions (specifically the EP and the EC), as well as on activities by the national parliaments of EU Member States. In addition, the study examines the activities of other core international organisations that advance relevant activities related to parliamentary capacity-building and support in the 10 enlargement countries (such as the OSCE, Council of Europe, the UN Development Programme, NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the IPU). This provides further insights into successes, challenges and opportunities for synergies and cooperation between approaches. Finally, the study also examines the work of non-state actors and foundations active in democracy support towards the candidate countries. Emphasis is placed here on opportunities for inter-organisational cooperation and knowledge transfer, as well as the avoidance of duplication and the facilitation of mutual reinforcement.

1.2 Methodological approach

The study is based on a thorough review of primary and secondary sources, including EU documents and review reports (country reports and rule of law reports), policy documents, academic literature, and think tank reports. In addition, the study relies on an analysis of annual reports, working programmes and documents provided by national parliaments and international organisations active in the field of democracy support. This also includes internal reviews and independent evaluations of various activities and actions by EU Member States and international organisations in the realm of parliamentary

strengthening. In addition, 92 semi-structured interviews were held with the help of a questionnaire (see Appendix 2) with representatives from EU institutions, staff and MPs of the parliaments of the enlargement countries, representatives from international organisations, NGOs and staff members as well as MPs from EU national parliaments. The report also underwent an external peer-review. Interview requests were sent out to all 27 EU Member State parliaments, all 10 beneficiary parliaments, and relevant officials dealing with parliamentary strengthening in various organisations applicable and relevant to this study. In addition, the report is based on an extensive mapping exercise of more than 80 parliamentary capacity-building projects carried out by the EP, EU Member State parliaments, NGOs and international organisations during the last decade⁸.

2 A brief history of EU enlargement and the promotion of democracy and fundamental freedoms

This section provides a brief historical overview of EU enlargement and the promotion of democracy and fundamental freedoms in accession countries since the 1960s. Particular emphasis is placed on highlighting the evolution, continuity and change of core policies and providing a wider historical context to the EU's current and more recent approaches to policies related to 'functioning democratic institutions'.

The EU's enlargement process has been referred to as 'one of the EU's most effective foreign policy instruments', which in various previous cases also contributed to advancing and facilitating far-reaching reforms with a view to irreversible, long-term institutional and even societal transformations within the applicant countries⁹. Yet, since the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004, various scholars and policymakers have also pointed out the limitations and weaknesses of the accession process on the opportunities and limits of deep democratisation (see below). With each round of enlargement (1973, 1981 and 1986, 1995, 2004, 2007 and 2013), EU Member States and institutions have refined the criteria for accession countries concerning democratic institutions, the rule of law and good governance – of which the 2020 'new enlargement methodology' is the most recent example. Historically, some of the earliest references to the importance of democratic standards and values as a precondition for being admitted to or even associated with the (then) European Economic Community were made in the Birkelbach Report of 1961, which the European Parliamentary Assembly (as it was called at the time) unanimously adopted in December of the same year¹⁰. The report's conclusion and insistence on the requirements of democratic standards of any applicant state also influenced the approaches of the European Communities' institutions to the accession processes of Greece, Spain and Portugal, reinforced by the EC's 'European Declaration on Democracy' of 1978, which stresses that 'respect for and maintenance of representative democracy and human rights in each Member State are essential elements of membership of the European Communities'¹¹. An early

⁸ The full overview table of the mapping exercise is available on the project website of the Global Governance Institute (GGI) at <https://www.globalgovernance.eu/project/enhancing-democracy-through-parliamentary-capacity-building-in-eu-accession-countries>.

⁹ See, for example, Heather Grabbe (2014) 'Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU's Transformative Power' in *Retrospect and Prospect, Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 52, issue 51.

European Parliament (2022) Recommendation of 23 November 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the new EU strategy for enlargement (2022/2064(INI)), available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0406_EN.html.

¹⁰ See Report by Willi Birkelbach on the political and institutional aspects of accession to or association with the Community (19 December 1961), available at:

https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/report_by_willi_birkelbach_on_the_political_and_institutional_aspects_of_accession_to_or_association_with_the_community_19_december_1961-en-2d53201e-09db-43ee-9f80-552812d39c03.html.

¹¹ See European Council (1978) European Declaration on Democracy, Copenhagen, 7 April – available (German version) at https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/declaration_on_democracy_at_the_copenhagen_european_council_7_and_8_april_1978-en-c054acb7-0d62-466b-81ed-30c40f097567.html#:~:text=Register-Declaration%20on%20democracy%20at%20the%20Copenhagen%20European,7%20and%208%20April%201978.

defining moment was the decision to freeze accession talks with Greece in the wake of the military coup of 1967. The intense discussions between the Council, Commission and the EP during this period led to the first explicitly documented principles of democracy and the rule of law for enlargement and influenced Greece's eventual accession in 1981 as well as that of Spain and Portugal in 1986¹². The 'Mediterranean Enlargement' was seen both in the applicant countries and by the EC's institutions as an important example of how the accession process can help as a stabilising and anchoring factor for the transition from authoritarian regimes to democracy¹³. At the same time, it also highlighted the ever-present tensions between the long-term investments, reforms and political commitment it takes to advance with the promotion of democracy, on the one hand, and the often pressing and urgent political (and geostrategic) imperatives on the other hand. This tension has been a persistent issue in the current enlargement discussions and requires measured, balanced and effective approaches in, admittedly, increasingly difficult circumstances.

It was not until the Copenhagen Summit of 1993 that the criteria for democracy and the rule of law were formulated more explicitly as a precondition for accession. The 'Copenhagen Criteria' (which were further reinforced by the Madrid European Council in 1995) include:

- stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU;
- the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (hereafter the '*acquis*'), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union¹⁴.

The Copenhagen Criteria, formulated originally with the accession process of Central and Eastern European states in mind, still inform the thinking of many EU officials interviewed for this report and the current EU membership accession process itself. These criteria have also been updated in the 'fundamentals first' approach of the current enlargement methodology. The political and value-based requirements for enlargement have also been enshrined in Articles 49 and 2 of the Treaty on the European Union. Article 49 provides the legal basis for any European state to join the Union, which in turn refers to the requirement of any state to fully respect and commit to the EU's values, outlined in Article 2. These values include 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail'¹⁵. Much ink has been spilt during the last three decades by EU legal and political scholars on the question of how effective and successful existing Member States and applicant countries have been in following and implementing these treaty provisions in the past. Many of the current discussions on 'functioning democratic institutions' relate not only to the stalling of democratic reforms in the

¹² Emma De Angelis and Eirini Karamouzi (2016) 'Enlargement and the Historical Origins of the European Community's Democratic Identity, 1961-1978.' *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 3, pp. 439–458.

¹³ See, for example, Loukas Tsoukalis (1981) 'The European Community and its Mediterranean Enlargement' (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), 122.

¹⁴ See EUR-LEX 'Accession Criteria' (Copenhagen Criteria) available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accesion-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

¹⁵ European Union (2016) 'Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union,' available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12016M002>.

enlargement countries but also to democratic backsliding of existing Member States in an ever more volatile domestic and geopolitical context (see below)¹⁶.

After the accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995, the EU embarked on its biggest-ever enlargement in its history. The 'big bang enlargement' that accompanied the post-Cold War democratic transition of Central and Eastern Europe extended membership to 12 new Member States, arguably catalysing one of the most far-reaching politico-economic and societal transformation processes in European integration history¹⁷. After the accession of Czechia, Estonia, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania followed in 2007. The accession process leading to the big bang enlargement was also an intense learning and adaptation curve for the national parliaments of the accession countries¹⁸. Parliaments had to fulfil a double task of getting up to speed and familiar with the wide-ranging demands of the *acquis Communautaire* and monitoring the governments' implementation, while undergoing institutional and political transformations of the functioning of parliaments themselves.

Interviews with representatives and staff members from, *inter alia*, the parliaments of Czechia, Slovakia and Lithuania highlight how the experiences of their own reform processes during the 1990s have shaped their current and recent approaches to their partnerships and capacity-building programmes with parliaments in the 10 enlargement countries¹⁹. This includes both the difference between long-term engagement and strengthening of administrative capacities as well as peer-to-peer exchanges between parliaments, but also an acknowledgement that the functioning of parliaments is highly dependent on the entire democracy eco-system and can be easily disrupted if 'personalities are more powerful than institutions'²⁰. Nine years after the 'big bang' enlargement and after a considerably complex process, Croatia eventually joined in 2013. While the successes of the transformations in the context of the EU enlargement process are well-documented, developments and political discussions during the last two decades also point towards the fragility of democratic progress and underline the painful fact that the enlargement-induced gains of democratisation are not irreversible. Instead, democratisation requires constant and comprehensive reinforcement and solid institutional guardrails. As one interviewee, who held a senior position in Croatia's negotiation team for EU accession stressed: 'Comprehensively advancing reforms together with all opposition parties to invest in strong legislations that protect democratic freedoms has been a game changer for Croatia. Many of the laws introduced before 2013 in the enlargement process still protect the democratic functioning of Croatia today – despite a variety of internal and external challenges. This highlights the long-term benefit of taking enlargement reforms seriously at all levels'²¹.

2.1 From 'big bang' and 'enlargement fatigue' to the new enlargement methodology

After the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004 and 2007 and the financial crisis in 2008, an inevitable 'enlargement fatigue' set in, and the enlargement momentum slowed down²². Even though countries in

¹⁶ See most recently the response by the European Parliament: European Parliament (2024) 'Parliament to sound the alarm on democratic backsliding in the EU', available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2024-02-26/17/parliament-to-sound-the-alarm-on-democratic-backsliding-in-the-eu>.

¹⁷ Heather Grabbe (2014) op. cit.

¹⁸ Particularly interviews with parliamentary staff from Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia highlighted the transformations taking place in the context of their accession processes and the knowledge and capacities this led to, placing them into a good position for sharing best practices with the parliaments of the current accession countries.

¹⁹ See interviews Slo, CZ1 & CZ2, Lith.

²⁰ See CZ2 and UNDP.

²¹ See Interview with former senior Croatian official, 18 October 2024.

²² Anna Szolucha (2010) 'The EU and Enlargement Fatigue: Why has the European Union not been able

the Western Balkans had submitted their applications for EU membership as early as 2004 (North Macedonia), internal and external challenges meant that EU Member States and EU institutions took a more hesitant approach to enlargement. In the case of Türkiye (which submitted its application to join the EU in 1987), the accession process has stalled in recent years due to its backtracking on the rule of law and democracy. Due to the hiatus and limited progress, the effectiveness of the EU enlargement policy was questioned and faced numerous internal and external challenges, also as a result of the impacts of the 2008 global financial crisis, internal delays and vetoes in the EU Council as well as ‘democratic backsliding’ or lack of reforms in several candidate countries, especially in the Western Balkans²³. Several politically charged disputes related to Kosovo and North Macedonia posed further tensions and setbacks. The accession of Croatia in 2013 proved an exception to the rule, but persistent concerns remained about the significant political and societal challenges for candidate countries to implement strong provisions related to the rule of law and stable democracy requirements. While lauding Croatia’s sizeable progress and achievements on the path towards EU membership, scholars pointed out that ‘complying with the accession conditions implies a kind of civil revolution’²⁴. Enlargement transformations – particularly in the realm of ‘fundamentals’ – require not only an ‘all-society’ effort in candidate countries but also effective and collective support efforts by EU institutions and EU Member States. In this vein, the EP decided in 2012 to create the DEG to provide ‘political leadership for EP’s democracy support activities’²⁵. In addition, to anchor democracy support activities more systematically in the EP’s administration, the Directorate for Democracy Support was established in 2014²⁶. While the EP’s initial democracy support policies covered various regions in the world, in recent years, it has also focused more strategically on democracy support initiatives towards the candidate countries, underlining the importance of parliamentary support initiatives to the accession and transformation process (see Section 4 below).

However, successful EU enlargement processes depend not only on far-reaching reform processes in candidate countries and external assistance, but also on the quality of democracy, effective processes, good governance, and the absorption capacity of EU institutions and the EU Member States themselves. Indeed, the lack of ambitious deepening of EU integration and reform, as well as the rise of far-right populism and anti-immigration sentiments, the erosion of civil liberties in some EU Member States, and the inconsistent application of (arguably insufficient) rule of law safeguards and conditionalities, has also given rise to concerns about the strength of the EU’s enlargement process²⁷.

In this context and citing some of the internal and external challenges described above as reasons, in 2019, France, Denmark and the Netherlands blocked the decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, despite positive recommendations from the EC, backed by the EP – thereby effectively putting the EU enlargement process on hold²⁸. The official arguments put forward by the leaders of these three EU Member States ranged from concerns about immigration rules, corruption, and issues related to the rule of law to the fear that enlargement to countries that were not ready could ‘weaken the

to counter enlargement fatigue?’, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. Volume 6, Issue 1.

²³ Bargiacchi, P. (2020) The Revised Enlargement Methodology for the Western Balkans. *Regional L. Rev.*, 47.

²⁴ Paul L. Vandoren (2023) ‘Croatia and the European Union: Retrospective and Perspective, Brussels: Friends of Europe,’ available at <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-croatia-and-the-european-union-retrospective-and-prospective/>.

²⁵ Holly Ruthrauff, Sarah Crozier and Hannah Roberts (2019) ‘EP Democracy support activities and their follow-up, and prospects for the future’, Brussels: Directorate-General for External Policies, p. 11.

²⁶ Its predecessor, the Office for Promotion of Parliamentary Democracy (OPPD), was established in 2007/started work in 2008. info:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/deve/dv/oppd_overview_2008_20/oppd_overview_2008_2009.pdf

²⁷ In this context, see also the recent Resolution by the European Parliament on ‘Deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement’ of 29 February 2024, particularly paragraphs H, K, U and Y – available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0120_EN.html.

²⁸ Branislav Stanicek (2020) ‘A new Approach to EU Enlargement, Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service,’ available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649332/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649332_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649332/EPRS_BRI(2020)649332_EN.pdf).

entire Union'²⁹. Concerns over enlargement also emerged in the context of fears over democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland and Croatia at the time, as well as the rise of far-right and anti-immigration populist movements across the EU, which were openly hostile to further EU enlargement. At the same time, EU leaders acknowledged the danger of 'losing' countries in the Western Balkans to Russian and Chinese geopolitical influence and that the EU would risk losing all credibility related to enlargement. In reaction to the European Council's postponement of a decision on opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the EP adopted with a considerable majority a resolution that 'expressed deep disappointment over the failure to agree on opening EU accession talks' and referred to the EU's 'non-decision' as a 'strategic mistake, which damages the EU's credibility and sends a negative message to other possible candidate countries'³⁰. Furthermore, the 2019 resolution called for the EP to

'further step up its democracy support activities (Jean Monnet Dialogues and capacity building) in the region in order to ensure that parliaments play their full role as engines for democratic reform and that they deliver on the European aspirations of the citizens of the region'³¹.

Thus, the EP not only expressed its disagreement with the decision of the Council but also underlined its support for the EU enlargement process, the importance of national parliaments for advancing further democratic progress and the importance of the EP's democracy support activities in the context of enlargement.

As a result of the delays and growing awareness of the geopolitical implications of stalling the enlargement process, the EC announced in February 2020 a revised methodology for enlargement³². The document addresses head-on that there 'was a common understanding of the usefulness of examining the effectiveness of the accession negotiation process' at the Council of November 2019. Thus, the Commission seeks to make concrete proposals for 'strengthening the whole accession process' to 'enhance credibility and trust on both sides and yield better results on the ground'³³. The document calls for a stronger emphasis on addressing 'structural weaknesses' in the candidate countries related to the fundamentals of the rule of law and democracy. It reiterates that enlargement is a 'geostrategic investment' and remains a 'key tool to promote democracy, the rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights'³⁴. The Commission's response to the criticism of the lack of adequate and effective progress in candidate countries has thus placed more emphasis on the fundamentals and allowed for 'stronger political steering' from EU Member States. The fundamentals are divided into three categories and will be guided by 'a roadmap for the rule of law', 'a roadmap on the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform' and 'a stronger link with the economic reform programme'.

As the document states, 'credibility should be reinforced through an ever-stronger focus on the fundamental reforms essential for success on the EU path. These fundamentals will become even more

²⁹ See for example Shaun Walker (2018) 'No time soon: EU Dashed membership hopes of Balkan States,' The Guardian, 18 May, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/18/no-time-soon-eu-dashes-membership-hopes-of-balkan-states-enlargement-sofia-summit>.

³⁰ European Parliament (2019) 'Failure to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia is a mistake,' 24 October, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191021IPR64717/failure-to-open-accession-talks-with-albania-and-north-macedonia-is-a-mistake>.

³¹ European Parliament (2019) 'European Parliament resolution of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania (2019/2883(RSP))', para 15; available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0050_EN.pdf.

³² European Commission (2020) 'Enhancing the Accession Process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans. Communication from the Commission,' 5 February 2020, available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ef0547a9-c063-4225-b1b4-93ff9027d0c0_en?filename=enlargement-methodology_en.pdf.

³³ Ibid, p. 1.

³⁴ Idem.

central in the accession negotiations'³⁵. Thus, 'functioning democratic institutions' emerged as a core pillar of the new enlargement methodology – yet this term's precise scope and meaning were still left deliberately ambiguous (see Section 3 below). In March 2020, the Council of the European Union and the European Council officially endorsed the new enlargement methodology and agreed to apply it to the accession process for Albania and North Macedonia³⁶. In October 2020, the Commission published a more detailed Communication on Enlargement³⁷.

The main idea behind the revised methodology has been to strengthen the process and emphasise that candidate countries should not only adapt legal norms 'but also align effectively and in an irreversible way with EU values and principles'³⁸. This was a direct response to criticism among some Member States that the previous accession process had not fully consolidated democracy in the candidate countries, which had also led to problems down the road, such as the rise of 'illiberal democracies' and democratic backsliding within the EU more generally.

In the wake of increasing international tensions – particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – the EU enlargement has more recently been viewed as 'a strategic geopolitical investment in peace, security, stability, cooperation, shared values and prosperity across the European continent'³⁹. In the post-2022 geopolitical climate, three EaP/ENP (Eastern Partnership/European Neighbourhood Policy) countries, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, submitted their applications for EU membership. In this context, the EU enlargement agenda gained new and decidedly geopolitical momentum in June 2022, when the European Council endorsed the Commission's positive opinions and recommendations, recognising the European perspective of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and granting Ukraine and Moldova candidate country status⁴⁰. Most recently, the Council decided to start accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. It also granted candidate status to Georgia in 2024, but put this on hold after the government's passing of the controversial foreign agent and family values law as well as a contested parliamentary election in October 2024. Despite the importance of enlargement as a geopolitical tool, the emphasis on enlargement as a 'democratising stabiliser' and the emphasis on functioning democratic institutions and the rule of law has become as necessary and significant as never before in EU integration history. Faced with multidimensional, democratic challenges, EU enlargement continues to be a principal tool for transformational change and progress, if managed effectively.

Table 1. Key dates of the 10 enlargement countries' paths towards EU accession

Country	EU application	Candidate status	Accession negotiations
Albania	2009	2014	2020
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	2022	2024
Georgia ⁴¹	2022	2023	-
Moldova	2022	2022	2024
Montenegro	2008	2010	2011
North Macedonia	2004	2005	2020

³⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

³⁶ Council of the European Union (2020) 'Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process,' 25 March, available <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf>.

³⁷ European Commission (2020) '2020 Communication on EU enlargement Policy,' Brussels 6 October 2020, available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1715e9dc-f967-4343-924e-71a284ef67cd_en?filename=20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf.

³⁸ Idem.

³⁹ European Commission (2023) '2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy,' available at [cc71d42b-6c07-4deb-9069-5ca2082d166d_en \(europa.eu\)](https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf).

⁴⁰ Idem.

⁴¹ Georgia's accession process is currently on hold following the passing of the controversial foreign agent and family values law as well as a contested parliamentary election in October 2024.

Serbia	2009	2012	2014
Türkiye	1987	1999	2004
Ukraine	2022	2022	2024
Kosovo	2022	-	-

Source: Own elaboration.

Yet, efforts to strengthen the parliaments in the candidate countries and potential candidates as part of the new enlargement methodology must also be placed in the broader context of persistent challenges. While a detailed analysis of each country is beyond the scope of this study, the following section nevertheless provides a concise outline of the current challenges faced by the nine candidate countries to provide the context in which capacity-building activities must operate.

2.2 The current state of democracy in the enlargement countries: Persistent challenges to be tackled by democracy support measures in the context of EU enlargement

Even though Russia's invasion of Ukraine gave a new sense of urgency and impetus to the EU enlargement process and raised alarm bells in Brussels and national capitals, the EU enlargement countries face significant challenges in terms of democratic backsliding and the functioning of their parliaments.

Türkiye – the 'forever candidate' has seen considerable deterioration of democratic standards and the role of its parliament, particularly since 2016. In response to the attempted coup (July 2016), President Erdogan has tightened his grip on the state and has turned the political system into a presidential system with almost absolute power. As several interviewed experts and parliament officials confirmed: 'In practice, we no longer have a functioning parliament'⁴². Bills can no longer be introduced by MPs but are instead prepared by the executive, meaningful debates or amendments on government proposals are no longer possible in practice, and the parliament's supervisory powers are no longer in existence. In short, the parliament's autonomy has been entirely curtailed, and this symbolises the current dire state of democracy in Türkiye. That said, interviews with officials from the EP and civil society still see a glimmer of hope in an otherwise relatively sobering picture: the fact that the opposition won large majorities in the 2024 local elections in Ankara and Istanbul ('the first time in 21 years that the AKP⁴³ was defeated across the country at the ballot box')⁴⁴ should be a reason for continuing to push hard for democracy support measures – particularly at the local and civil society levels – despite the overall challenging political context⁴⁵. The EP can play an important role in this respect, particularly through senior and experienced Standing Rapporteurs and Lead Members. Nacho Sánchez Amor MEP has been cited by various respondents as a relevant example of an effective and impactful interlocutor and the EP's joint parliamentary committee has carried out useful work, despite continuing challenges in the EU-Türkiye Inter-parliamentary dialogue. However, the uphill battle for democracy remains daunting, particularly as the parliamentary decline is also linked to the general trend of judiciary decline and the systematic undermining of the rule of law⁴⁶.

In the case of **Georgia**, the hopes for democratisation, spurred by the promising developments of the 'Rose revolution' of 2003 and a successful pro-EU trajectory, have faded into autocratic turns and tendencies

⁴² Interview, administrator in Turkish Parliament, 13 August 2024.

⁴³ Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, Türkiye).

⁴⁴ See Paul Kirby & Cagil Kasapoglu (2024) 'Turkish local elections: opposition stuns Erdogan with historic victory,' 1 April 2024, BBC available <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68704375>.

⁴⁵ Interviews with EP officials (29 August 2024 and 16 September 2024) and representative from Turkish civil society, 9 September 2024.

⁴⁶ Interview with Turkish representatives of civil society, 9 September 2024.

since 2008 and recently descended into severe democratic backsliding⁴⁷. Despite being granted candidate status in December 2023 under a reinvigorated and geopolitically driven enlargement agenda, the EU decided to halt accession negotiations in October 2024 due to accusations of election fraud, which proved to be ‘another nail in the coffin of Georgia’s aspirations to join the European Union’⁴⁸. The marred election represented but the latest democratic failure in a long series of controversial policies advanced by the ruling party and the parliament. In May 2024, the parliament voted to uphold a controversial, Russian-style ‘transparency of foreign influence’ law and approved the government’s anti-LGBTQIA+ ‘family values and protection of minors law’ law unanimously in September 2024⁴⁹. Both votes passed with near and full unanimity, respectively, due to a boycott by the opposition. The foreign agent law, which effectively bans international NGOs from operating in the country, led to widespread protests and violent crackdowns by security forces. In its resolution of 9 October 2024 on ‘the democratic backsliding and threats to political pluralism in Georgia’, the EP condemned the ‘significant attacks on democracy’ and the ‘attacks on civil society and independent media and the subsequent violent suppression of those peaceful protests, and deep political and societal tensions and polarisation’⁵⁰. The EP noted the government’s attack not only on democratic and rule of law principles and the independence of the parliament but also on a previously vibrant civil society. The parliamentary elections – won by the increasingly anti-Western and pro-Russian Georgian Dream party – were accompanied by reports of fraud, irregularities and widespread voter intimidation⁵¹. Coupled with the far-reaching influence of Russia, Georgia faces severe challenges. Cooperation between EU democracy support actors and Georgian counterparts is all but suspended. On 28 November 2024, the government announced that it would postpone any EU accession talks to 2028 and would not accept any EU budgetary grants, accusing the EU of using accession talks to ‘blackmail the country’ and to ‘organise a revolution in the country’⁵². Interviewed Georgian MPs and civil society actors dealing with parliamentary support projects underlined that ‘the situation looks bleak, with the parliament fully in the hands of the ruling party’⁵³.

Furthermore, the curtailing of the media and the effects of the foreign agents law have already led various NGOs that were interviewed for this report to cease their work with the Georgian parliament. Interviews with former MPs and high-ranking Georgian officials who had previously dealt with EU integration issues underline a sense of despair that ‘the country and its institutions are falling apart’⁵⁴. The space for democracy support work and political leverage, therefore, has shrunk dramatically for the EP and other actors. The case of Georgia underlines how difficult external democracy support (and in particular parliamentary capacity-building) processes are and also highlights that the incentive of EU enlargement reaches its limits when faced with severe democratic backsliding and pro-Russian political developments.

⁴⁷ For a good summary of the developments up to 2021, see Martin Russell (2021) ‘Georgia’s bumpy road to democracy: on track for a European future?’, Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690626/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)690626_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690626/EPRS_BRI(2021)690626_EN.pdf).

⁴⁸ Dato Parulava (2024) ‘Georgia’s EU accession halted as country ‘has gone backwards’’, *Politico*, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-eu-accession-pause-reform-election-2024/>.

⁴⁹ Online at <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-foreign-agent-bill-becomes-law-international-outcry-european-union/>.

⁵⁰ European Parliament (2024) Resolution on ‘The democratic backsliding and threats to political pluralism in Georgia,’ 9 October 2024, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0017_EN.html, para A.

⁵¹ Shota Kincha (2024) Local observers outline scheme of ‘mass election fraud’ in Georgia’s parliamentary vote, *Open Caucasus Media*, 28 October, available at <https://oc-media.org/local-observers-outline-scheme-of-mass-election-fraud-in-georgias-parliamentary-vote/>.

⁵² Felix Light (2024) Protesters clash with Georgian police over government’s EU application delay, *Reuters*, 29 November 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgia-says-it-will-not-enter-eu-membership-talks-until-2028-snob-brussels-2024-11-28/>.

⁵³ See Interviews GEORG1 and GEORG2.

⁵⁴ Interview GEORG3.

Concerning the Western Balkans, the picture is mixed. Significant structural problems in terms of democratic and political progress persist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. However, various assessments of Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia have been more encouraging, but certainly not without persisting challenges⁵⁵.

Montenegro (a candidate since 2010) has made relatively good progress in the accession negotiations (with all chapters opened and three chapters provisionally closed). Montenegro has until recently been regarded as a positive example of the enlargement negotiations process and democratic strengthening, but recent waves of polarisation⁵⁶ have also posed substantial challenges to the functioning of the parliament. Despite these challenges, Montenegro continues progressing toward EU accession with support from the EU⁵⁷. Twinning programmes (including peer-to-peer parliamentary capacity-building under the INTER PARES project – see Section 4 below) have strengthened parliamentary oversight, while financial and technical assistance from the EU has aimed to address the country's administrative weaknesses. Montenegro has been the recipient of or participant in various parliamentary capacity-building programmes and innovative tools and projects, including the creation of a 'citizens assembly', and has often been cited in interviews with domestic and international experts as a positive example of successful parliamentary strengthening⁵⁸. Nonetheless, economic vulnerabilities, poverty, unemployment, and a brain drain have caused young professionals to leave for opportunities abroad further reinforcing Montenegro's challenges⁵⁹.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a 'consociational democracy by default', where the mutual veto powers of the ethnic political elites within the post-Dayton Agreement provide a measure of pluralism and accountability but are not sufficient to enhance the quality of democracy. Instead, it continues to foster dysfunctionality and inflate public administration⁶⁰. The functioning of democratic institutions is undermined by persistent discriminatory elements in the constitutional structure and by the persistent breaching of the legal and constitutional order by the Republika Srpska entity⁶¹. The internal mechanisms of coordinating between various levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina have never been fully effective. The complex constitutional division, coupled with limited staff numbers, creates challenges for the legislative activity of the National Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This challenge becomes even more pressing as the country progresses through the accession track, since the quality and quantity of the current staff will not allow the country's parliament to transpose the legal provisions of the EU *acquis* effectively. The EC has repeatedly pointed out a lack of practical follow-ups to parliamentary investigations or reports by independent regulatory bodies. Even though formally, the relevant rules of procedure are adequate, the actual practice, i.e. the quality of discussions, widespread use of urgent procedure, and lack of sufficient coordination between the executive and legislative agendas, causes concern. Internal tensions, i.e. the disagreement of Republika Srpska's leadership with the provisions of the Reform Agenda related to the EU Growth Plan, imply that Bosnia and Herzegovina is unlikely to receive

⁵⁵ For a concise assessment overview, see Michael Emerson and Steven Blockmans (2023) 'The 2023 Enlargement Package – Major Political Proposals and Glimmers of a Staged Accession Process,' SCEEUS Guest Report No. 19, 2023: Stockholm: Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies.

⁵⁶ Wouter Zweers et al. (2023) 'Little substance, considerable impact Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro,' The Hague: Clingendael Institute, available at <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/little-substance-considerable-impact/russian-sources-of-influence-in-serbia-montenegro-and-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

⁵⁷ EC, *Montenegro Report 2023*, [Montenegro Report 2023 - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/451db011-6779-40ea-b34b-a0eeda451746_en?filename=Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202024.pdf).

⁵⁸ Interviews MNT1, MNT2 and EEAS4.

⁵⁹ EC, *Montenegro Report 2023*, [Montenegro Report 2023 - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/451db011-6779-40ea-b34b-a0eeda451746_en?filename=Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202024.pdf).

⁶⁰ See Lidia Bonifati (2023) Constitutional Design and the Seeds of Degradation in Divided Societies: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina. *European Constitutional Law Review*. 19(2), pp. 223-248.

⁶¹ See See European Commission (2024) Commission Staff Working Document, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024 Report, available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/451db011-6779-40ea-b34b-a0eeda451746_en?filename=Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20Report%202024.pdf.

additional support funds. Very little has been done on the outstanding reforms of party and electoral legislation, for example, in relation to harmonising party registration. The fact that OSCE/ODIHR profoundly influence electoral legislation provides a measure of transparency but does not guarantee comprehensive implementation of its provisions and *de facto* sustains concerns about excessive external interference in Bosnia and Herzegovina's policies. Since the times of the Dayton Agreement and up until now, there have been no incentives to transcend cross-party divisions, and there has never been an electoral coalition formed across ethnic party lines.

In **North Macedonia**, the landslide victory of the VMRO-DPMNE political party in the 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections allowed it to consolidate control over both the executive and legislative branches of power. Although the ruling majority may adopt more nationalistic rhetoric, the procedural democratic elements have been safeguarded: the transfer of power occurred, elections were not contested by the opposition and were largely peaceful. However, several long-term problems remain, including the quality of parliamentary debate and the widespread use of urgency procedures. Under the framework of the 'EU flag' procedure, various unrelated legislative drafts are often bundled together. This raises concerns about the quality of the prospective *acquis* transposition and the effective role of the parliament in terms of legislative oversight and holding the executive to account. Such practices are criticised not only by the EC but also by civil society representatives⁶². Polarisation among parties remains a persistent and growing issue, and various EU institutions have been involved in public and confidential mediation attempts.

Overall, North Macedonia has a solid legal framework in place for carrying out parliamentary scrutiny, yet its potential is not fully used. For example, the executive can submit incomplete supporting documentation for draft laws and does not regularly send its representatives to participate in parliamentary debates. Given that the current ruling majority has a stronger position than the previous government and 'has a greater partisan control over the parliament', there are concerns that a certain sidelining of the parliament may continue⁶³. At the same time, the adoption of new parliamentary rules of procedure in 2024 may put the executive-legislative dialogue on a more regular footing and improve the connections between MPs, civil society, and citizens. The latter is necessary, as, according to several interviewees, public trust in the parliament and citizens' perceptions about the parliament's openness and MPs' readiness to engage citizens directly is relatively low⁶⁴.

Serbia has continued to lose some of its democratic credentials and backtrack on its progress and can, according to interview partners, be 'at best described as a competitive authoritarian regime'⁶⁵. Opposition in the parliament is often sidelined, given the ruling party's dominance. While parliamentary rules of procedure can be formally complied with, they often prove to be devoid of any true oversight or representative impact in practice. Coordination and planning of executive and legislative agendas have remained a challenge. Despite some recent improvements in this regard – also as a result of external capacity-building support – the Serbian parliament's agenda remains firmly controlled by the executive. Various external reviews attest that the Serbian parliament has one of the lowest scores for parliamentary bodies in the region due to 'high polarisation, insufficient utilisation of control and oversight functions, [and] frequent breaches of procedural rules'⁶⁶. Although all countries in the region exhibit similar challenges, internal party democracy is a concern for Serbia. Urgency procedures are widely used to limit opportunities to publicly criticise the government's policies by the opposition. As one of the experts puts it: 'In spite of solid constitutional arrangement stipulating a strong legislature, the position and influence of the parliament have been hindered by an overwhelming centralisation of power at the hands of the

⁶² Interviews EEAS3, NMAC1-3.

⁶³ Interview NMAC4.

⁶⁴ Interviews NMAC2, NMAC3.

⁶⁵ Interviews SRB9, SRB11.

⁶⁶ Interview SRB12.

executive, making it in practice highly dependent on the decisions of the government, and particularly of the president. In addition, as a result of increased trends in misuse of mechanisms and obstruction within the parliament, it has degraded to a mere facade instead of a temple of democracy, aspired in the legislative framework.' Boycotts by the opposition have not been able to reverse the trend, and the lack of a level playing field during snap elections has only strengthened the position of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Interview partners have also expressed deep concern over the state capture and authoritarian tendencies of President Alexander Vučić, who knows how to deftly exploit the contradictions and incoherence in the EU and its Member States' approach to Serbia. Indeed, the open contradictions between the value-based democratisation approach and the interest-driven 'geopolitical' shift of the EU has been cited as an urgent challenge to be addressed in the context of strengthening functioning democratic institutions.

Albania's record is, according to interviews with domestic and international stakeholders, mixed at best⁶⁷. The EU opened accession negotiations on 15 October 2024, which was presented by the Albanian government as a significant milestone and achievement even though it had already applied for membership in 2009. The duration of this process points towards a relatively slow pace of reforms and some challenges that Albania and its democracy have continued to face since the fall of the communist regime in 1991. Despite considerable reforms that have been undertaken, state institutions remain weak and highly politicised, with corruption remaining a problematic issue⁶⁸. The political environment remains deeply divided and polarised, with comparatively weak opposition parties and a strong ruling party that has been in power since 2013 and is widely expected to win the next parliamentary elections in 2025. This trend is also accompanied by a disproportionately strong executive and a ruling majority in parliament that dominates most of the legislative decision-making⁶⁹. The Albanian parliament often remains weak, dominated by the influence of the ruling party and mired in controversies, including the most recent dispute between the parliament and the Constitutional Court, casting doubt on the effective separation of powers and rule of law⁷⁰. Interview partners have also singled out the 'rubber-stamping tendencies' of the parliament when it comes to waving through government initiatives without effective analysis, deliberation or debate⁷¹. Various parliamentary support programmes have targeted this issue and focused on strengthening both the capacities and oversight competencies of the parliament as well as inter-party dialogue. Interviewees pointed to the wider challenge of a drastic demographic shift, with significant parts of the population leaving the country due to a lack of opportunities – predominantly young and educated people who would be needed to build up a new generation of democratic, pro-EU young leaders⁷². Even if Albania moves forward in the negotiation process with the EU, the structural obstacles to genuine strengthening of the rule of law and democratic institutions, such as state capture, corruption and stalling progress on the true separation of powers, are still to be overcome for a genuine transformation of the country⁷³. That said, interviews also confirmed that in recent years, it has been noticeable that a more

⁶⁷ Interviews Alb1, Alb2, OSCE2, UNDP2.

⁶⁸ 'Albania ranks as one of the most corrupt states in Europe in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, and is also one of the five worst performing states in Europe, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine' – see Andi Hoxhaj (2023) Commentary: Albania -how one of the most corrupt countries in Europe is tackling crime, 19 September, available at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/sep/commentary-albania-how-one-most-corrupt-countries-europe-tackling-crime>.

⁶⁹ Interview, Alb1.

⁷⁰ See Fjori Sinorula (2024) 'Albania Ruling Party Blocks Review of Ex-Minister's Immunity from Prosecution,' *Balkan Insight*, 13 September 2024, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/13/albania-ruling-party-blocks-review-of-ex-ministers-immunity-from-prosecution/>.

⁷¹ Interviews OSCE2, UNDP2

⁷² Interview with OSCE2.

⁷³ Interview, Alb1.

vibrant civil society culture has been emerging, giving some interviewees enough reason for hope for further progress in Albania's democratic consolidation process⁷⁴.

In the case of **Ukraine**, the parliament and democratic system displayed resilience in the face of Russia's ongoing invasion and the far-reaching effects of war. The EC has acknowledged Ukraine's efforts in continuing reform despite Russia's full-scale invasion by granting candidate status in 2022 and recommending the initiation of accession talks in 2023. Most interviewees also recognised the efforts made by Ukrainian institutions in terms of tackling corruption and strengthening democratic processes and underlined the extensive amount of external assistance programmes received (mainly from the United States Agency for International Development, IRI and NDI). However, many respondents and MPs emphasised that the parliament has suffered several setbacks in the context of martial law and the suspension of elections. These include the problematic situation of a mono-majority in parliament making vital decisions, the over-dominant role of the presidential office, and the lack of opposition engagement, which some interviewees viewed as resulting in a decline in parliament's functioning as a democratic institution. War-related challenges and the inability to hold elections add complexity to the work of parliament, creating additional pressure on MPs and necessitating a reshaping of EU support measures. That said, respondents underlined the importance and usefulness of the different external actors' support activities towards the parliament, particularly the EP's Jean Monnet Dialogues.

Finally, **Moldova** has received numerous parliamentary assistance projects from international organisations (particularly the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and OSCE) as well as TAIEX and Twinning projects. Yet, deep-seated polarisation and a constitutional crisis in 2019 still mark some of the deeper-rooted structural challenges. The EC's decision to grant Moldova EU candidate status in 2022, then start the accession negotiations, was a significant recognition of the country's commitment to aligning with EU standards. This milestone was achieved despite rising geopolitical pressures from Russia and the challenges posed by weak institutions. The EU's ongoing support will continue to be essential for Moldova to make further progress in building functioning democratic institutions and economic growth. Moving forward, Moldova's ability to fully align with EU standards will depend on its success in reducing Russian influence, addressing administrative inefficiencies and tackling economic weaknesses⁷⁵. Given the razor-thin pro-EU majority of the 20 October 2024 referendum on enshrining the objective of EU membership in the constitution and the evidence of extensive Russian interference, President Maia Sandu and the parliament face intense challenges in reinforcing democratisation and a pro-EU orientation in the context of external interference and internal political and institutional challenges. In this context, the most recent EU Twinning project on 'Strengthening the Capacities of the Moldovan Parliament and its role in the EU Accession Process' has the objective to reinforce the parliament's capacities but also strengthen its democratic and transparent dialogue with citizens in the next phase of Moldova's path towards EU accession⁷⁶. Yet, it becomes increasingly clear that future Twinning projects and funding (in this case EUR 1.4 million) geared towards parliamentary capacity-building also need to increasingly focus on institutional and democratic resilience in the face of internal and external interference.

Taken together, despite the renewed impetus provided by the revamped enlargement methodology and the urgency created by new geopolitical realities, the enlargement and democratisation process will not

⁷⁴ For a more optimistic recent review on the scholarship of the state of democracy in Albania, see also Ekman, J., & Hoxha, G. (2024) 'Research on political participation in contemporary Albania – an overview,' *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 1–18.

⁷⁵ Interviews EEAS2, UNDP3.

⁷⁶ See European Commission (2024) Project Fiche – 'Twinning: Strengthening the Capacities of the Moldovan Parliament and its role in the EU Accession Process'. The project will be implemented by a consortium led by the Greek Parliament in close cooperation with the parliaments of Romania, Italy, Hungary and Austria as well as the Netherlands in support function.

be easy or easily accomplishable in a short timeframe. This needs to be kept in mind as the broader context when assessing various forms of parliamentary capacity-building. The internal and external challenges of the EU and the accession countries are enormous. This means that the need for effective democratic support measures has never been as high – but also that expectations about the potential successes of any support measures and the speed of their implementation should be tempered by a sense of realism. This is not to say that future EU parliamentary strengthening programmes should lack ambition – quite to the contrary. Programming and implementation must, however, be backed by adequate funding, take into consideration best practices, and truly leverage synergies and complementary impact with other active organisations and initiatives.

3 The EU's revised enlargement methodology and the role of national parliaments as 'functioning democratic institutions': Concepts, criteria and clarifications

This section addresses the study's first objective and research question, related to clarifying the past and present criteria set out by the Commission for national parliaments in accession countries on the 'fundamental' enlargement requirement of 'functioning democratic institutions'. To this end, primary documents were analysed, and extensive interviews were held with officials from the EC dealing with enlargement (as well as the rule of law and democracy issues) as well as wider interviews with officials from national parliaments of the candidate countries and officials from the EP. The main takeaway is that neither the EC nor the European Council has a formal and officially adopted definition of 'functioning democratic institutions' (or 'democracy' for that matter). This also means that there is no official definition or outline of definite criteria or benchmarks of what constitutes a 'functioning democratic parliament' in the context of EU enlargement. Interviewee respondents from the EC itself have underlined that this poses various problems in terms of a consistent and coherent approach to evaluating progress in the functioning of the candidate countries' parliaments⁷⁷. Similarly, interviews with representatives from NGOs and international organisations supporting parliaments in the region, as well as representatives from candidate country parliaments themselves, have pointed out that the lack of clear and transparent criteria and guidelines makes the evaluation and consistent assessment of progress in the area of parliamentary development and capacity-building challenging. Interviews have also pointed to the fact that the very nature of the EC's approach to the accession process is focused on relations with governments and ministries rather than with the national parliaments. As a result, government-focused policies and relations dominate the EC's policies and processes and aspects related to parliaments are, comparatively speaking, less prioritised⁷⁸.

That said, even though there is no official definition of 'functioning democratic institutions', it would be misleading to infer that the EC has not developed any criteria or general principles that are reviewed in the accession process – particularly by DG JUST (on the rule of law issues) and DG NEAR (which has the mandate of overall coordination of progress reporting). The Commission's criteria can be inferred from primary documents, such as 2023 and 2024 Communications on enlargement⁷⁹, as well as from the items discussed in various recent Screening Reports. In addition, 'soft' references to several criteria of functioning parliaments can be found in many earlier documents. These include tender calls for parliamentary capacity-building measures under the various iterations of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) or the more recent Global Europe – The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), with its objective to 'strengthen democratic, accountable and transparent institutions,

⁷⁷ Interviews EUCOM 1, EUCOM2 and EUCOM 5.

⁷⁸ This was a near-unanimous view in interviews with various stakeholders.

⁷⁹ European Commission (2024) 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2024-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en.

including enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of Parliaments, improving the integrity of electoral processes’⁸⁰.

While Section 4.1 will explore in more detail how the EC implements policies towards strengthening parliaments in the accession process, this section will provide an overview of the different existing Commission documents that contain references to criteria of functioning parliaments. Together with insights from interviews, it is, therefore, possible to shed some light on how the EC uses some general criteria for defining and assessing core functions of democratic parliaments in the context of the accession process. In addition, this section will also point to some of the core parliamentary criteria identified and deemed as necessary by other interviewed experts (from NGOs, international organisations and parliaments in the EU and in the enlargement countries) to provide a comprehensive view on key aspects of functioning democratic institutions. To some extent, variation and differing opinions are inevitable – which is also reflected in the interview responses. Yet, the section concludes with references to broader international efforts by, *inter alia*, the IPU to provide objective and ‘user-friendly’ standard criteria and benchmarks for defining and measuring core functions of parliaments⁸¹. Given the fact that a wide range of international organisations, including the EU-funded INTER PARES project, were involved in the development (and application) of the ‘Indicators for Democratic Parliaments’, the section provides a brief explanation of this set of indicators developed in October 2023⁸².

3.1 The European Commission’s criteria for ‘functioning democratic parliaments’: Inferences from documents and interviews

The Commission’s 2023 Communication on Enlargement stresses that ‘stable and consolidated democratic institutions and processes are a central pillar of the EU accession process’ and that the ‘Commission has begun implementing strengthened and streamlined engagement with the enlargement countries on the general framework for democracy, whether this concerns the electoral process, the functioning of Parliament [...] or the role of civil society’⁸³. Furthermore, the 2024 Communication stresses that ‘consolidated democratic institutions are essential in ensuring stability and a central pillar of the accession process’⁸⁴. Thus, the functioning of parliament is explicitly mentioned as part of the ‘fundamentals of the EU accession process’ and placed into the wider context of the other fundamentals of ‘the rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration and economic criteria’.

Annex 1 to the 2023 Communication on Enlargement provides additional, albeit brief, information on the role of parliaments in candidate countries in the accession process. It primarily refers to a parliament’s ‘oversight role in government performance and policymaking’⁸⁵. Other aspects can be inferred from the challenges that are listed in the Annex to the 2023 Communication, namely ‘the still-excessive reliance on accelerated procedures in policymaking’ and several challenges related to ‘parliamentary work’. These include ‘polarisation’ and ‘lack of effective cross-party dialogue’, which ‘resulted in prolonged political impasse and stagnation of reforms’ (as observed in Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia and Georgia).

⁸⁰ European Commission (2021) ‘Global Europe – The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument,’ available at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/0996d6c5-01b6-4fc4-a237-84f2d9fb9fb1_en?filename=factsheet-global-europe-ndici-june-2021_en.pdf.

⁸¹ See <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/about/about-indicators>.

⁸² See <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/case-studies/using-indicators-democratic-parliaments-context-parliamentary-development-project>.

⁸³ European Commission (2023a) ‘2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy,’ 8.11.2023, p. 9.

⁸⁴ See European Commission (2024) Communication on Enlargement Policy, 30 October 2024, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0690>.

⁸⁵ European Commission (2023b) Annexes 1 to 5 to the European Commission (2023) 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 8.11.2023, p. 29.

The Annex also notes that in the cases of Georgia and Kosovo, ‘plenary debates were marked by tensions, offensive language and occasional violent incidents’⁸⁶. Lastly, concerning Ukraine, the Annexes underline that ‘despite the extraordinary circumstances, Parliament has demonstrated resilience and strong political will, particularly in the areas vital for Ukraine’s integration with the EU. Legislative tasks were carried out systematically, ensuring an uninterrupted democratic decision-making process’⁸⁷. In addition, the Commission refers to election reform, political party financing, and tackling corruption, which aligns with recommendations and standards of the OSCE/ODIHR and the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO)⁸⁸.

Thus, in terms of Commission criteria for national parliaments as a functioning democratic institution inferred from the Annexes, parliaments must:

- perform an effective oversight function of government performance and policymaking;
- avoid excessive accelerated procedures;
- be free from political polarisation;
- ensure effective cross-party dialogues;
- avoid prolonged political impasse and stagnation of reforms;
- advance a respectful culture of political debate;
- exhibit resilience and solid political will towards areas related to EU integration;
- be embedded in an election system with integrity;
- be embedded within a competitive political party system with transparent financing;
- be embedded with a transparent system free from corruption.

While these are helpful points of departure, they are not a complete and comprehensive definition of a functioning parliament, nor do interviewed EC officials claim to provide such a definition⁸⁹. In the EC’s country-specific Screening Reports, the standard adopted language for ‘functioning democratic institutions’ includes a disclaimer that there is no ‘single agreed definition’ or ‘specific model of democracy’ and that it is up to EU Member States to ‘establish their respective internal arrangements’⁹⁰. Yet, the Commission’s language in the reports also stresses that there are principles that pertain to the functioning of democratic institutions, which are common to the Member States and need to be complied with negotiating countries. These common principles are then defined in terms of the general values outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union⁹¹. In addition, the obligation of any state wishing to join the EU to abide by these values is enshrined in Article 49. Beyond the reference to the general democratic

⁸⁶ Idem.

⁸⁷ Idem.

⁸⁸ European Commission (2023a) 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 8.11.2023.

⁸⁹ Interviews, EUCOM1, EUCOM3, EUCOM4.

⁹⁰ See for example European Commission (2023) Screening Report Albania, p. 5 - available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/b83313ef-48c5-4bef-9f00-f5d66509572e_en?filename=AL%20Cluster_1%20Draft%20screening%20report_external%20version.pdf.

⁹¹ Article 2 states: ‘The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.’ Article 49 states: ‘Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union.’ – see Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

values of Article 2, the way the Commission monitors progress in relation to parliaments of accession countries can be inferred from the Screening Reports.

Indeed, the Commission's Screening Reports can be seen as primary documents in which the EC elaborates more explicitly on the notion of functioning democratic institutions. Specifically, it states that functioning democratic institutions are the basis for ensuring that 'power derives from the people through a representative system with free and fair elections at its core'⁹². The Screening Reports also explain that 'the fundamentals' should not be treated in isolation, emphasising that adherence to EU standards, coupled with necessary reforms, is the path towards building 'a stable, democratic, modern, and well-functioning state'⁹³. Accordingly, developing a functioning democratic parliament is inextricably linked with enhancing other core state institutions and implementing democratic reforms across various levels. For instance, public administration reform and the creation of an effective judicial system that ensures the rule of law and combats corruption, along with other measures, are part of the process of building functioning democratic institutions that mutually reinforce each other. Furthermore, reforms and efforts targeting adherence to EU economic criteria also generate a shared understanding and 'social consensus around democracy and the rule of law and bring resources for the good functioning of public institutions'⁹⁴.

The Screening Reports also underline that the functioning of parliaments is to be evaluated in the context of two aspects related to elections and the role of civil society. As the recent Screening Report of Albania outlines, functioning democratic institutions depend on the following:

- 'The electoral process, including the functioning of the electoral administration, media in the election campaign, and the financing of political parties and election campaigns.
- The functioning of parliaments in a democratic system.
- The role of civil society, including the legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks for civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as the wider context for an enabling environment'⁹⁵.

Hence, the functions of the parliament itself must be viewed in the broader context of the electoral process (including the financing of political parties), the role of civil society, and the broader political context.

Zooming in on the functioning of parliaments themselves, the EC's Screening Reports and Rule of Law reports follow four broad categories against which EU candidate countries must self-evaluate the degree of the functioning of their national parliaments. These are:

- general democratic provisions;
- transparency and accountability;
- integrity;
- effectiveness of parliament.

However, the reports do not provide further detail, definitions or guidance on how these categories are operationalised. Interviews with EC officials underline that this is a deliberate choice to allow for maximum flexibility and to ensure that the review process can be tailored to the specific circumstances of each country under review⁹⁶. This means that further application of these broad categories also depends on how the national governments under review choose to address and discuss the four categories. While this is indeed a pragmatic and flexible approach, it also risks inconsistencies and leaves quite some room for a

⁹² See, European Commission (2023) Screening Report on Albania https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/AL%20Cluster%20Draft%20screening%20report_external%20version.pdf.

⁹³ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁹⁶ Interviews with EUCOM1-EUCOM4.

‘pick and mix’ approach by the enlargement countries. Based on the documentation available (both government self-assessments and the Commission’s evaluation remarks), the following sub-categories can be identified under the four categories presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Information extracted from European Commission Screening Reports for inferring the Commission’s understanding of the core dimension of ‘functioning of parliament’

General functions Parliamentary oversight (over government and other independent institutions); clear rules of procedures; forum for constructive debate Integrity Ethical standards of MPs and legislative processes; constructive political dialogue between majority and opposition parties (avoidance of polarisation); fight against corruption and undue influence	Transparency and accountability Rules of procedures and legislative powers enshrined in constitution; transparency of decision-making and procedures, code of conduct of MPs; contributions from civil society in legislative process Effectiveness of parliament Effective law-making and follow-up (also with respect to primacy of EU law); professional administration to support evidence-based policymaking; effective speaker; relations with civil society
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Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2. Definitions of functioning democratic institutions related to parliaments contained in EU Commission rule of law documents

Core functions	Dimensions of parliaments as functioning democratic institutions
Legislative effectiveness	Efficient policymaking procedures
	Effective management of political polarisation ⁹⁷
	Timely adherence to deadlines and minimisation of delays in parliamentary work ⁹⁸
	Judicious and limited use of accelerated legislative procedures ⁹⁹
	Inclusive, evidence-based policymaking ¹⁰⁰
Effectiveness of oversight	Effective scrutiny of the executive to ensure accountability ¹⁰¹
	Oversight of independent institutions to monitor performance ¹⁰²

⁹⁷ EC, 2024 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in North Macedonia [e7197a43-7f00-4eac-b02d-818ac71345f0_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/0154dce1-5026-45de-8b37-e3d56eff7925_en?filename=59_1_58088_coun_chap_albania_al.pdf).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ European Commission (2024) 2024 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Albania https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/0154dce1-5026-45de-8b37-e3d56eff7925_en?filename=59_1_58088_coun_chap_albania_al.pdf.

¹⁰² EC, Screening Report North Macedonia, 2023, [Microsoft Word - MK Cluster 1 Draft screening report external version](#).

	Effective parliamentary oversight of intelligence services ¹⁰³
	Implementation of 'Jean Monnet Dialogue' commitments ¹⁰⁴
	Improvement of the rules of procedure for better parliamentary processes by: - streamlining procedures for the constitutive session; - enhancing mechanisms for governmental oversight; - consolidating practices for public hearings; - establishing a clear parliamentary calendar; - streamlining procedures for adopting the EU <i>acquis</i>.¹⁰⁵
Forum for constructive debate	Role of serving as a forum for constructive political debate ¹⁰⁶
	Facilitation of healthy and respectful discussions on core public policy issues
	Avoidance of the misuse of the forum for point-scoring or personal attacks ¹⁰⁷
	Promotion of collaboration between the governing coalition and opposition within parliament ¹⁰⁸
	Focus on concrete steps in the negotiation process, especially for advancing EU-related reforms ¹⁰⁹
Parliamentary inquiries	Assurance of parliamentary minorities' rights to establish committees of inquiry, guaranteeing effective oversight by minority groups ¹¹⁰
Parliamentary appointments	Election of heads of key independent institutions in a timely manner, including: - the Ombudsperson and their deputies - judges of the Constitutional Court - members of the Council of Public Prosecutors - members of the Anti-Discrimination Commission¹¹¹

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ European Commission (2024) 2024 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Albania https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/0154dce1-5026-45de-8b37-e3d56eff7925_en?filename=59_1_58088_coun_chap_albania_al.pdf.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Georgian NGO representative, 29 August 2024.

¹⁰⁸ European Commission (2023) Screening Report North Macedonia, 2023, Microsoft Word - MK Cluster_1 Draft screening report_external version.

¹⁰⁹ Idem.

¹¹⁰ European Commission (2024) Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Albania [0154dce1-5026-45de-8b37-e3d56eff7925_en \(europa.eu\)](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/0154dce1-5026-45de-8b37-e3d56eff7925_en?filename=59_1_58088_coun_chap_albania_al.pdf).

¹¹¹ EC, Screening Report North Macedonia, 2023, Microsoft Word - MK Cluster_1 Draft screening report_external version.

Transparency and accountability ¹¹²	Limitation of fast-track procedures to ensure public consultation and legislative scrutiny ¹¹³
	Publication of audit reports, final accounts and budget details promptly online
	Assurance of timely submission and verification of MPs' asset declarations, with penalties for non-compliance
	Provision of public access to sessions and events via live-streaming, broadcasts, and the website ¹¹⁴
	Publication of legal acts and minutes promptly, with clear amendment tracking ¹¹⁵
	Maintenance of open communication with the public, including journalist briefings and expert debates
	Facilitation of MP engagement with constituencies and assurance of accessible public information channels
	Formation of a working group to improve transparency under open government principles
Consultation with civil society and interest groups ¹¹⁶	Publication of the parliamentary calendar, procurement plans and key documents for transparency
	Sustainable engagement and consultation with civil society and interest groups in policymaking ¹¹⁷
Integrity ¹¹⁸	Implementation of high ethical and integrity standards in line with GRECO recommendations for MPs
	Assurance of effective application of the national legal framework for integrity (constitution, laws, rules of procedure, electoral code and code of ethics)
	Requirement for MPs to identify and avoid conflicts of interest
	Maintenance of professional conduct for MPs, with regulated salaries and allowances as public information
	Prohibition of MPs and their families from owning or operating broadcasting entities

¹¹² Idem.

¹¹³ Idem.

¹¹⁴ Idem.

¹¹⁵ Idem.

¹¹⁶ European Commission (2023) Rule of law reports, 2023, Albania, North Macedonia.

¹¹⁷ European Commission (2023) 2024 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in North Macedonia [e7197a43-7f00-4eac-b02d-818ac71345f0 en](#).

¹¹⁸ Idem.

	Implementation of recommendations from GRECO and OSCE/ODIHR on ethics and integrity
	Prevention of MPs from using their position for personal gain, including restrictions on gifts and the misuse of information
	Upholding of the principle of parliamentary immunity for MPs

Source: Own elaboration based on desk research and expert interviews.

Overall, the EC's vision of 'functioning democratic institutions,' particularly in reference to parliaments, can be summarised as follows: a parliament should be representative in its composition, ensuring free, fair and transparent elections, as well as the participation of a broad spectrum of society and encouraging female involvement. It should be transparent in its activities, favouring multi-party cooperation and the engagement of opposition forces. A functioning parliament must be accountable for its actions, operate within the framework of the rule of law and the constitution of its country, ensure effective oversight of the executive branch, and be responsive to the needs and demands of civil society.

In the past, the EC's focus on various aspects of a functioning democratic parliament varied depending on the political polarisation, political culture, historical legacy and practices of candidate countries. When reviewing earlier IPA project fiches for projects involving parliaments, it also becomes apparent that the priority of EU funding for candidate countries' parliamentary capacity-building was in many ways focusing on parliament's capacity for 'faster and more efficient adoption of *acquis*-related legislation'¹¹⁹. While this was certainly an issue in the early IPA activities, the tensions between a functioning parliament that effectively performs oversight functions of the government's EU-related legislation (with the danger of vetoing these or demanding 'inefficient' amendments) on the one hand, and an efficient parliament that speedily adopts EU legislations but risks becoming a 'rubber-stamping institution' on the other hand, is still widely mentioned as a point of concern today¹²⁰. Various interviewed experts have also raised this concern from national parliaments and NGOs. A core function of a functioning parliament should thus not only be 'full ownership', 'autonomy' and effective (and high-quality) control of the government. It should also extend to critical engagement with and deliberative improvement of the implementation of EU legislation¹²¹.

Interviews with Commission officials confirm that the Commission's approach focuses on a general, context-specific and often 'indirect' approach that relies on input from other international organisations active in the field of democracy support. Under the general principles of parliamentary functioning, legislative process and accountability, the Commission evaluates how parliaments contribute to the democratic process. This includes the parliament's oversight of the executive, the effective legislative process, and the engagement of civil society in policymaking¹²². For example, backsliding in Georgia illustrated by the foreign agents law demonstrates how legislative changes can hinder the democratic process by limiting civil society participation. In addition, the Commission seeks to retain some degree of flexibility and the room of manoeuvre for context-specific evaluations. Additionally, 'since there is no hard *acquis communautaire* on the functioning democratic institutions, we adopt a context-sensitive approach, relying on standards from international organisations like the OSCE, SIGMA, and the Council of Europe, including the Venice Commission. These bodies help us evaluate how parliaments operate in areas such as

¹¹⁹ See for example European Commission (2010) IPA National Programme 2010 for Albania, Project Fiche No. 4: Strengthening the Assembly of Albania, p. 13 – available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8a09c0b7-3cf3-471a-8869-29ae49ec76a2_en?filename=pf4_parliament_en.pdf.

¹²⁰ See Section 4.1 below.

¹²¹ Interviews CZ1, various interlocutors EP.

¹²² Idem.

elections, accountability, lawmaking, civil society involvement, and media independence¹²³. Indeed, 'the Venice Commission plays a critical role in offering recommendations on constitutional reforms. For example, the Commission's input on Ukraine's anti-oligarch law highlights its advisory capacity in shaping democratic reforms and has been very useful for us.'

Furthermore, interviewed Commission officials stressed that 'there are indeed no fixed benchmarks for functioning democratic institutions. Unlike previous enlargement frameworks that focused on Chapters million

23 and 24, which included detailed and numerous benchmarks, the 2020 new enlargement methodology does not create new chapters and benchmarks for democratic institutions but treats these elements as part of broader fundamentals¹²⁴. Finally, as the screening and rule of law reports are important for the EC's assessment of functioning democratic institutions, 'our own evaluations are complemented by consultations with civil society, think tanks, and government officials'¹²⁵.

However, while the EC's Screening Reports outline general developments concerning activities and reforms involving parliaments, they lack a more in-depth evaluation of the transformations taking place in candidate countries. Interviews with NGOs involved in the capacity-building of parliaments of candidate countries have stressed that the Commission's assessment needs to be more comprehensive, providing more than just a few abstracts of evaluation and a very brief set of recommendations¹²⁶. The impression is that the Commission examines parliamentary reforms in candidate countries relatively sparsely and does not offer a detailed set of recommendations that emphasise more clearly and systematically what is expected from these parliaments and what benefits these reforms could bring¹²⁷. This impression is also confirmed by the fact that the Screening Reports are rather vague and very brief, pointing to the general direction and mentioning only general principles for countries to follow.

3.2 Towards a more robust definition and evaluation process of 'functioning democratic parliaments'?

The brief outline above has underlined that the Commission's approach to evaluating parliaments as part of the new enlargement methodology is rather general and, compared to engagement with the executive, relatively superficial. Interviews point to the fact that the Commission does not prioritise the evaluation of democratic developments of parliaments and 'leaves this happily to the European Parliament or national parliaments'¹²⁸. While this increases the role of the EP even more (see Section 4.4 below), it nevertheless leaves open the issue of the lack of detailed and generally accepted indicators for parliaments as functioning democratic institutions. To this end, it is useful to reflect on the fact that international organisations, such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly (CPA), the UN Development Programme and the IPU have for two decades engaged in a process of developing international benchmarks and principles for national parliaments. Thus, in 2008, for example, the CPA developed a guideline with more than 120 indicators. This has indeed inspired a round of discussions on how to define and measure the democratic credentials of parliaments. In October 2023, the IPU further elaborated the indicators in cooperation with leading organisations from the 'parliamentary community' (i.e. Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Directorio Legislativo Foundation, the EU-financed INTER PARES, International IDEA, the National Democratic Institute, the UNDP, UN Women and the Westminster

¹²³ Interview EUCOM2.

¹²⁴ EUCOM 2, EUCOM1.

¹²⁵ EUCOM 2.

¹²⁶ Interviews NMT1 UKR2.

¹²⁷ Interviews OSCE2, DE2.

¹²⁸ Interview with various think tank organisations in the region.

Foundation for Democracy). The Indicators for Democratic Parliaments framework lists 25 broad indicators, which are further broken down into 108 dimensions. The framework and its draft and preliminary versions 'were extensively tested and reviewed by parliaments worldwide, with input from more than 100 people in 50 parliaments'¹²⁹. This also included testing the framework, indicators, and self-assessment tools by staff members of the Albanian parliament for institutional reform¹³⁰.

Given the fact that the indicators were co-developed by the EU-financed INTER PARES project, which works closely with the EP and national parliaments in EU enlargement countries such as Montenegro and Ukraine, it would be advisable to engage in the broader discussion between the relevant EU institutions, national parliaments and the wider 'parliamentary community' to indeed reflect on how the 25 indicators could be used or adapted as a commonly accepted benchmark for the engagement with parliaments of the candidate countries (or indeed, any parliament in the EU context). The indicators framework, outlined in the detailed 400-page document, also includes a self-assessment tool and concretely described tools for evaluating, measuring and scoring core elements related to effectively functioning parliaments. While the indicators' full range and detailed dimensions might be too detailed for practical implementation in the parliamentary capacity-building context, they nevertheless serve as an important starting point for a more systematic reflection and discussion within the context of EU enlargement and the activities of the EP.

The 25 indicator categories are outlined in the table below¹³¹.

Table 3. Indicators for democratic parliaments

Indicator	Description
Indicator 1.1	Parliamentary autonomy
Indicator 1.2	Members of parliament
Indicator 1.3	Parliamentary procedures
Indicator 1.4	Parliamentary organisation
Indicator 1.5	Administrative capacity and independence
Indicator 1.6	Lawmaking
Indicator 1.7	Oversight
Indicator 1.8	Budget
Indicator 1.9	Representative role of members of parliament
Indicator 1.10	Relations with other branches of government
Indicator 1.11	Key parliamentary powers
Indicator 2.1	Parliamentary ethics
Indicator 2.2	Institutional integrity
Indicator 3.1	Transparency of parliamentary processes
Indicator 3.2	Parliamentary communication and outreach
Indicator 3.3	Access to parliament
Indicator 4.1	Valuing public concerns
Indicator 5.1	Inclusive lawmaking, oversight and budgeting
Indicator 5.2	Inclusive institutional practices
Indicator 6.1	Parliamentary environment for public participation

¹²⁹ See <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/about/partners>.

¹³⁰ See <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/case-studies/parliament-albania-uses-indicators-guide-its-institutional-reforms>.

¹³¹ See <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/resource-library/all-indicators-pdf>.

Indicator 6.2	Public participation in parliamentary processes
Indicator 6.3	Participation of diverse groups in the work of parliament
Indicator 7.1	Electoral integrity
Indicator 7.2	Composition of parliament
Indicator 7.3	Composition of parliamentary bodies

Source: Own elaboration based on <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/resource-library/all-indicators-pdf>.

Utilising these indicators would address many of the criticisms voiced by donors and implementing NGOs and would provide more clarity and depth for the EU's current evaluation and capacity-building process. It would also introduce a more comprehensive and transparent approach to parliamentary capacity-building and the measurement of progress on clearly defined trajectories.

4 Strengthening capacities of EU enlargement country parliaments: Approaches, challenges and best practices

4.1 Assessing the European Commission's approach

The EC's approach to the fundamentals within the EU enlargement context has traditionally emphasised reform processes with interlocutors from the executive branch of candidate countries and civil society. This is understandable, given the crucial role that governments, ministries and civil service play both in accession negotiations and the state of democracy more broadly. Early Commission-financed programmes and actions for parliaments in the context of the pre-accession process predominantly focused on parliaments' capacities for implementing or approximating EU law or advanced, highly specific technical training activities. This technical approach (particularly under the early TAIEX and Twinning umbrella), therefore, did not fully tap into the potential of comprehensive approaches to 'parliament strengthening' as part of a wider democracy support strategy. Instead, the EC rather 'outsourced' parliamentary assistance and capacity-building programmes to other international organisations or experts from national parliaments or acknowledged the growing expertise and activities of the EP in this realm. Yet, with the 2020 new enlargement methodology emphasising parliaments as a significant aspect of the 'functioning democratic institutions', the role of parliaments has gained renewed prominence. Additionally, the current 'NDICI – Global Europe' programming related to the role of parliaments in safeguarding human rights and democracy, has led to increased attention and more dedicated funding for strengthening parliaments in enlargement countries. This sub-section will briefly place the Commission's approach to parliamentary capacity-building in the context of its most important funding instruments for enlargement processes, before assessing the effectiveness of the Commission's support measures.

4.1.1 Main funding streams related to enlargement and parliamentary support

The EC's approaches to strengthening national parliaments in candidate countries can be gleaned from various funding streams, thematic programming, and larger and smaller policy initiatives. Broadly speaking, they fall under the following:

- Provisions for technical and financial support to candidate countries within the various iterations of the IPA I-III from 2007 to the present. This includes the demand-driven technical support projects aimed explicitly at parliamentary capacities under the TAIEX¹³² programme and the Twinning programme (initially financed under IPA).

¹³² See European Commission, TAIEX, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/taie_x_en.

- Parliamentary support actions within the thematic programming on ‘human rights and democracy’ under the ‘NDICI – Global Europe’, which entered into force in 2021.

The IPA was developed in 2007 as the primary funding stream and tool for supporting countries seeking to become EU members with financial and technical assistance. There have been three iterations. From 2007 to 2013, IPA I had a total budget of EUR 11.5 billion and focused, *inter alia*, on ‘transition assistance and institution building’ as well as on ‘human resource development and rural development’¹³³. IPA II ran from 2014 until 2020, with a budget of EUR 12.8 billion and a stronger focus on ‘democracy and governance, rule of law, and growth and competitiveness’. Finally, IPA III covers 2020 to 2027 with a budget of almost EUR 14.2 billion and is entirely in line with the strategic objectives of the revised enlargement methodology. Beneficiaries of the three IPA programmes included Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye¹³⁴. While a complete evaluation of IPA’s successes or limitations is beyond the scope of this study, interview partners have stressed that the EC’s early approach to pre-accession assistance to public administration reform mainly focused on executive branches and ministries and less on the capacities of parliaments¹³⁵. Indeed, an initial overview of the foremost ‘showcase’ activities under the first IPA period from 2007 to 2014 did not include a single reference to parliamentary support but instead focused on various support actions to ministries, civil servants and public administration institutions, excluding the legislature¹³⁶. The few Twinning projects that did focus on cooperation between EU Member State parliaments and partner countries focused on the parliaments’ capacities to prepare for the adoption of EU legislation rather than broader issues of parliaments as functioning democratic institutions¹³⁷. Other international organisations, such as the UNDP or the OSCE, had, by comparison, a stronger focus on the importance of parliamentary support programmes as part of wider considerations of democracy assistance during the early 2000s¹³⁸.

However, the period of IPA II saw a steady increase in Twinning projects with a focus on strengthening the capacities of parliaments of the enlargement countries, particularly the capacities of members of parliamentary administrations. While the EC finances Twinning and TAIEX projects, they are primarily implemented by administrative staff from parliaments of EU Member States or by staff members of the EP and will, therefore, also be examined in more detail in the sections on the EP and Member States below (See Sections 4.2 and 4.4). IPA III coincided with the adoption of the EU’s new enlargement methodology and the consolidation of the external financing under the NDICI umbrella. It is not surprising that the objectives of IPA III are closely aligned with the ‘fundamentals first’ approach, which also includes more extensive references to the importance of strengthening parliaments. In this vein, Article 20 of the IPA III regulation stresses that ‘in accordance with the principle of participatory democracy, the Commission should encourage the strengthening of parliamentary capacities, parliamentary oversight, democratic

¹³³ See European Commission (2024) ‘Overview - Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance,’ available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en.

¹³⁴ In addition, Iceland received IPA funding and remains on the list, as Iceland never completed steps to formally withdraw its EU application.

¹³⁵ Interviews with officials from DG NEAR, 3, 4 and 6 September 2024.

¹³⁶ See European Commission (2015) ‘The Transformative Power of Enlargement - Overview on the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA): Activities and results in the Western Balkans and Turkey,’ available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/18a7ff84-fbba-11e5-b713-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

¹³⁷ See for example one of the early examples of parliamentary capacity-building Twinning projects implemented from 2008 to 2010 by the French and Hungarian parliaments with administrative staff from the parliament of Moldova - <https://ipexl.europarl.europa.eu/IPEXL-WEB/own/8a8629a8889404e8018896028c0c0026>.

¹³⁸ The UNDP began with parliamentary support projects in the mid-1990s, see ‘United Nations Development Programme (2009) Parliamentary Development – UNDP Strategy Note,’ p. 4 available at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/PD_Strategy_Note.pdf; the OSCE included parliamentary support activities in its in-country mission programming since the early 2000s – see for example, ‘OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina – Parliamentary Support,’ available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/0/468498.pdf>.

procedures and fair representation in each beneficiary'¹³⁹. The emphasis on parliamentary capacity-building is even more explicitly developed in the NDICI and the multi-annual indicative programming for the thematic programme on human rights and democracy for the period 2021–2027.

The NDICI-Global Europe, adopted in 2021 and merging some of the most important external action funding tools, is 'the EU's main financing tool to contribute to eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development, prosperity, peace and stability'¹⁴⁰. With a total budget of almost EUR 79.5 billion, the NDICI includes dedicated funding instruments for the promotion of democracy and human rights for both the EU Neighbourhood and global partnerships. The multi-annual indicative programming for the thematic programme on human rights and democracy entails five overarching priorities, of which Priority 2 focuses on actions related to 'building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies', which has the overall objective 'to foster a functioning pluralistic, participatory and representative democracy and protect the integrity of electoral processes'¹⁴¹. Two main actions are built around this objective:

- i. strengthen democratic, accountable and transparent institutions, including enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of parliaments, improving the integrity of electoral processes (EU Election Observation Missions and their recommendations), engaging civil society observers in election observation, and promoting pro-democracy organisations, networks and alliances;
- ii. promote participatory and representative decision-making, including supporting political pluralism and inclusiveness, promoting active citizenship in public and political life and fostering the role of civil society in oversight and accountability mechanisms'¹⁴².

The EC explicitly includes strengthening parliaments (in terms of effectiveness, accountability and transparency) as part of its human rights and democracy priorities. Parliamentary strengthening is closely linked to the promotion of solid and robust electoral processes and active citizenship. The document specifies in more detail the types of actions under the objective of 'enhancing the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of parliaments':

'The programme aims at strengthening the institutional and technical capacity of Parliaments to exercise their core democratic functions of representation, legislation, oversight and budgetary power in an effective, accountable and transparent manner. It shall complement geographic programmes by supporting broader inter-parliamentary cooperation, peer-to-peer exchanges and research studies on parliamentary development. In order to increase parliamentary accountability and transparency, the programme shall foster the participation of civil society in parliamentary monitoring by supporting parliamentary monitoring organisations (PMOs). It shall also promote the adoption of codes of conduct or ethics for members of parliaments (MPs)'¹⁴³.

Lastly, under the related action of 'supporting political pluralism and inclusiveness', the Commission places emphasis on enhancing multi-party systems and opportunities for women and youth. In addition,

¹³⁹ See Official Journal of the European Union (2021) 'Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III),' available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R1529>.

¹⁴⁰ European Commission (2021) 'Global Europe – The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument,' available at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/0996d6c5-01b6-4fc4-a237-84f2d9fb9fb1_en?filename=factsheet-global-europe-ndici-june-2021_en.pdf.

¹⁴¹ European Commission (2021) 'Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy Multi-Annual Indicative Programming 2021-2027,' p. 2 – available at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/4cc34cd1-dc34-461b-92a3-4e471fa0609a_en.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 19.

dedicated actions shall address polarisation and ‘promote cross-party alliances and multi-party dialogues on policy issues of common concern’¹⁴⁴.

Out of a total budget of EUR 1.5 billion, a third is dedicated to the priority of ‘building resilient, inclusive and transparent institutions’, with EUR 364.1 million dedicated to strengthening democratic, accountable and transparent institutions. Regarding regions, a third of the entire in-country budget under the human rights and democracy programme is earmarked for the Western Balkans, Türkiye and the European Neighbourhood countries¹⁴⁵.

Hence, both the IPA III and the NDICI funding tools include explicit actions and budget lines for supporting the functioning of parliaments in EU candidate countries and beyond. These actions are either embedded within actions related to the integrity of electoral processes or wider issues of civil society and inclusive representation – more recently, with a strong emphasis on the role of women and youth¹⁴⁶. In this context, it is also important to note that both the Ukraine Facility and the Western Balkans Facility make support conditional upon the fact that the beneficiaries continue to respect and uphold effective democratic mechanisms and institutions, including a multi-party parliamentary system and the rule of law. Furthermore, under the Ukraine Facility, the Verkhovna Rada should be informed and consulted at all stages of the facility’s life cycle and play a role in the implementation of the Ukraine Plan.

However, despite the substantial funding for parliamentary capacity-building, the expected outcomes and indicators’ descriptions remain vague and very general. For the specific action on strengthening parliament, the ‘expected outcomes’ are described as ‘improved effectiveness of parliamentary functions and improved integrity, transparency and accuracy of electoral processes’ without further specification, while the corresponding performance indicators are simply ‘number of parliaments receiving support through EU-funded actions’¹⁴⁷. Much, therefore, hinges on what is understood to contribute to the ‘effectiveness of parliamentary function’ and how to promote it in the short-, medium- and long-term.

4.1.2 Assessing the European Commission’s approaches to parliamentary strengthening in practice

The EC has implemented several measures to support the functioning of parliaments in accession countries. These have yielded mixed results. The success of these initiatives depends on the specific political and institutional contexts and political will of each candidate country or potential candidate¹⁴⁸.

While the EC has in recent years included more explicit actions and funding for strengthening parliaments as functioning democratic institutions, it does not itself play a major role in implementing capacity-building projects on the ground. Instead, Commission-funded projects and activities are either carried out by think tanks and independent institutes (as is the case in the INTER PARES project¹⁴⁹) or through national experts (often experts from the administrations of national parliaments) via the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument of the EC (TAIEX) and Twinning schemes¹⁵⁰. The EC created TAIEX in 1996 to prepare associated countries and their public administration bodies to comply with the required

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 30-31.

¹⁴⁶ See the earmarked EUR 40 million for a ‘Global Programme on Political Pluralism and Inclusiveness’ including the support of parliamentary development and peer-to-peer approach with a strong focus on youth and women; see <https://www.gtai.de/resource/blob/891136/bc441d85e8dffd0913fd6da696a53fac/PRO20220901891060%20-%20Annex%208.pdf>.

¹⁴⁷ European Commission (2021) ‘Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy Multi-Annual Indicative Programming 2021-2027’, p. 36.

¹⁴⁸ COM2.

¹⁴⁹ Implemented by International IDEA.

¹⁵⁰ See European Commission, TAIEX, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/taieux_en.

regulations of the European single market. Over the years, it has become a flexible tool and instrument for demand-driven advice on a wide range of technical and institutional advice provided to candidate countries by EU public policy experts. Interviews with representatives from both receiving institutions (parliamentary administrations in parliaments in the Western Balkans and Ukraine) and expertise providers from EU Member State parliament administrations highlight the usefulness of the short-term activities for targeted knowledge transfer and the provision of technical expertise, ranging from budgeting procedures to specific aspects of implementing the *acquis*¹⁵¹. TAIEX funding allows for three types of activities that are, in principle, relevant to parliamentary strengthening in the context of enlargement: workshops provided by EU Member State experts to candidate countries, expert missions (where EU experts are sent to candidate country parliaments for specific hands-on training) and study visits of staff from candidate country institutions to EU Member State institutions or indeed EU institutions.

Activities that are funded under this programme are short in duration: typically between one and five days. While respondents appreciated the usefulness of this flexible tool for solving concrete tasks and questions on a wide range of complicated EU regulatory topics, it is less appropriate for longer-term and less technical issues – particularly those related to societal challenges of democracy or issues involving political power dynamics, political culture in parliaments and wider issues of executive-legislature relations¹⁵². As one respondent stressed, ‘it is, of course, good and helpful to do these activities – but we have to be realistic that it might also sometimes look like a technical box-ticking exercise in a country where there are much more fundamental and deeper problems to tackle’¹⁵³. Yet, this might also miss the main point of TAIEX, which deliberately focuses on technical advice and on specific concrete issues that can be tackled within a short timeframe. It is also about managing expectations for these activities more comprehensively. The advantage of TAIEX is that it is comparatively light on administrative burdens (unlike Twinning projects) and, because of its short-term nature, can be deployed, from the EC’s perspective, in high volume to a wide range of countries on a wide range of issues. From 2015 through 2020, a total of 8 584 experts were deployed to 111 beneficiary countries in order to run 6 712 events for 103 011 participants¹⁵⁴. There are several ways the EC and lead organisations have tried to evaluate the impact of TAIEX initiatives, ranging from participant feedback on trainers’ expertise to an impact evaluation questionnaire delivered six months after the activity, asking specific questions about improved technical knowledge or organisational change¹⁵⁵. This instrument’s sheer scale and flexibility are its strengths, but its short-term and highly technical nature is limited if the expectation is to tackle more deep-seated political problems in a recipient country. The share of TAIEX projects that target parliaments for capacity-building is still relatively low compared to projects with other public administration institutions, agencies or ministries¹⁵⁶. The reasons behind this can range from human resource shortages in parliamentary administrations both in recipient and lead countries (compared to large ministries) to less available expertise on behalf of trainers and TAIEX experts (outside serving parliamentarians or national parliament administrations).

¹⁵¹ Interviews with representatives from the Parliament of Montenegro, North Macedonia and Ukraine, September 2024. Interviews with administrative staff from the parliaments of Sweden, The Netherlands and France, responsible for international cooperation with national parliaments – September 2024.

¹⁵² Interview with members from the North Macedonian, Montenegrin and Czech parliamentary administration.

¹⁵³ Interview with representative from EU Member State parliamentary administration involved in TAIEX projects, 15 September 2024.

¹⁵⁴ European Commission (2022) ‘Factsheet Evaluation of the TAIEX Instrument 2015’ – 2020, available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/362a98ef-3379-4232-8d96-7a14a9d87c48_en?filename=TAIEX%20Evaluation%20-%20Publishable%20factsheet.pdf.

¹⁵⁵ Impact evaluation categories include, ‘Better understanding of EU legislation covered,’ ‘Organisational Changes – creation of new departments/positions,’ ‘improved internal working procedures,’ ‘Draft of a new law/act or modification of existing one,’ see, Laza Todorov, DG NEAR (2017) ‘TAIEX and Twinning – Instruments for Sharing EU Expertise,’ PowerPoint presentation, slide 20 - available at <https://cfr.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/03.pdf>.

¹⁵⁶ See TAIEX database, available at <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/TMSWebRestrict/resources/js/app/#/library/list>.

In addition to TAIEX, the EC also developed and launched in 1998 the ‘Twinning programme’ to support public policy reforms in EU candidate countries. To date, close to 4 000 Twinning projects have been funded under this scheme during the last 26 years. Similar to TAIEX, the EC provides the funding under the NDICI (formerly under the IPA), but implementation is carried out by EU Member State organisations and institutions pairing up with institutions in EU candidate countries (and beyond). EU Delegations in the country of the partner administration are tasked with administering the Twinning projects and are, therefore, also essential actors within the coordination and reporting loop. Like TAIEX, the Twinning programmes are based on peer-to-peer learning and knowledge transfer between EU Member State institutions and candidate country ones¹⁵⁷. According to the Commission: ‘Twinning is an EU assistance delivery tool supporting institutional capacity-building, medium to long-term reform processes and peer-to-peer cooperation between public administrations in EU Member States and partner countries.’

In contrast to the short-term nature of TAIEX, Twinning is geared towards more long-term and comprehensive peer-to-peer knowledge transfer with a duration of two to three years (for medium and long-term projects) and a budget of more than EUR 1 million per project. A ‘light twinning’ option is also available for projects lasting up to 8 months and capped at EUR 250 000 per project.

Twinning projects related to parliamentary strengthening are implemented either bilaterally or through consortia of EU Member State parliaments and partner parliaments worldwide, including EU candidate countries. Twinning has become a focal tool for EU Member State parliaments to engage in capacity-building and dialogues with EU candidate country parliaments. Interview respondents for this study reported their involvement in Twinning projects with, among other things, the parliaments or parliamentary institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. In addition, Montenegro received training via the INTER PARES project¹⁵⁸, as did Ukraine¹⁵⁹. Twinning also provides opportunities to involve members of the EP and the EP’s administration in events, workshops and advice missions, even though members of the EP cannot directly benefit from the EC funding. Various evaluations at different stages of the Twinning history have been carried out, and the value of this approach has been identified, including increased learning about EU regulations and approximation to the *acquis*, the creation of networks and the sparking of administrative reform and change¹⁶⁰. Twinning projects also increased peer-to-peer networks between parliamentarians, mainly administrative staff in candidate countries and EU Member States. This also led to the creation of a community of practice and an crucial source of contact points for ‘informally checking certain issues when you do not have the answer in-house’¹⁶¹. Yet, compared to Twinning projects between ministries or agencies that work on ‘less political’ topics, expectations towards Twinning projects between parliaments are inevitably stronger towards ‘real and wider results on democracy promotion’ compared to other Twinning partnerships¹⁶². Therefore, one must be transparent about the results one can achieve with technical, peer-to-peer cooperation. In this light, the ‘political work’ being done through other formats (e.g. the Jean Monnet Dialogue) becomes even more critical.

¹⁵⁷ For an overview of the Twinning programme, see European Commission, What is Twinning? Available at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/technical-assistance/twinning_en.

¹⁵⁸ See INTER PARES partnership with the Parliament of Montenegro (Round III), available at <https://www.inter-pares.eu/en/partnerships/inter-pares-partnership-parliament-montenegro-round-iii>.

¹⁵⁹ See <https://www.inter-pares.eu/en/partnerships/inter-pares-partnership-verkhovna-rada-ukraine>.

¹⁶⁰ See for example for the early period, Chris Cooper et al. (2003) ‘An Evaluation of Completed Twinning Projects – A report presented to the national contact points’ meeting,’ 30 January 2003, available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3f0d9323-f3d0-4c9f-8f2a-173485c9f59d_pt; for a more recent evaluation, see GDSI Limited (2019) ‘Evaluation of Twinning in the Period 2010 – 2017,’ available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/0754c987-946c-483d-93c2-cfaad9d62a81_en?filename=final_report_-_volume_i.pdf.

¹⁶¹ Interview with administration staff of North Macedonian Parliament.

¹⁶² Interview with senior staff member of the European Parliament administration.

Overall, technical peer-to-peer approaches to EU-related capacity-building are essential to Commission-funded activities. The impact in the sphere of parliamentary strengthening depends on the design, expertise, political environment and dynamics in which each parliament finds itself at a given moment. The limitations of 'deep impact' on broader democratic issues are also often apparent, pointing towards the fact that Twinning and TAIEX projects can only be seen as one part of the wider puzzle of parliamentary strengthening work and more comprehensive democracy support programming, including regional and bilateral financial instruments, peer-reviews, political dialogues and collaborative approaches with major international organisations, including the Council of Europe and the Venice Commission, OSCE and UNDP¹⁶³.

This points to a wider issue that emerged during interviews with both Commission officials and representatives from international organisations. Despite the wide range of activities for democracy promotion and different instruments relevant to parliamentary support, there is no dedicated directorate for democracy support in the EC, let alone a unit dealing with parliaments. Instead, initiatives and policies on democracy support (and the connected issues of the rule of law and human rights) related to candidate countries are spread across different DGs, such as DG NEAR, DG INTPA, DG JUST, along with the EEAS and EU Delegations on the ground. 'Without a central body dedicated to overseeing democracy initiatives, some projects have experienced delays and inefficiencies, particularly in ensuring long-term follow-up and support for more far-reaching reforms'¹⁶⁴. One small, albeit not substantial enough, step was the launch of a new Team Europe Democracy (TED) initiative within DG INTPA in December 2021. As part of the more comprehensive Team Europe Initiative, TED brings together 15 Member States and two development agencies (Belgium and Germany) to 'establish and strengthen networks among EU institutions, EU Member States, think tanks, academia, CSOs and other like-minded organisations in the areas of democracy support, human rights and other related areas. It will produce and share best practices, lessons learned, approaches and tools on democracy support'¹⁶⁵. Yet, TED does not have the mandate or ambition to bring together the different officials of the relevant DGs and institutions in the EU working on democracy support in the candidate countries and with parliaments. There is arguably still a need to seriously consider setting up a dedicated directorate since 'the focus on national parliaments and their democratic functioning is certainly underdeveloped right now in the Commission's approach'¹⁶⁶.

The visits of citizens and officials from the enlargement countries to EU institutions are also supported by the EU Visitors Programme¹⁶⁷. The findings of this study suggest that more focus, linkages (integration into thematic activities) and structure would improve the added value of the programme.

Another critical element of the EC's approach to functioning democratic institutions is the Screening Process with candidate countries themselves¹⁶⁸. While the process is mostly carried out on a Commission-to-government basis, several processes are in place to gather input from civil society and parliaments. In interviews with Commission officials involved in the Screening Reports, it was stressed that extensive discussions and consultations are carried out with colleagues from the Council of Europe (including the Venice Commission) and OSCE/ODIHR regarding feedback on parliaments' democratic progress and the integrity of elections¹⁶⁹. Yet, the sections dedicated to functioning democratic institutions and functioning

¹⁶³ Interview with European Commission official, 4 September 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with European Commission official, 6 September 2024.

¹⁶⁵ See European Commission, 'Team Europe Democracy Initiative', available at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/team-europe-democracy-initiative_en.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with European Commission official, 4 September 2024.

¹⁶⁷ EU Visitors Programme, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-visitors-programme_en

¹⁶⁸ European Commission (2022) 'What is the Screening Process and How does it Work?', https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a6f16348-ef71-4c99-af55-b58f977322ac_en.

¹⁶⁹ Interviews with European Commission officials, 3, 4 and 6 September 2024.

parliaments, in particular, are relatively brief and do not follow detailed indicators other than the four broad categories of general functions: transparency and accountability, integrity, and effectiveness of parliament (see Section 3 above). This may be not so much a reflection of less emphasis on behalf of the Commission on this aspect of the Screening Process, but rather a result of the need for conciseness in the reporting¹⁷⁰. The sections on parliaments in the North Macedonian and Albanian Screening Reports are cursory indeed. The parliamentary dimension of the Screening Process (and beyond) is, therefore, a field where there is an important role to be filled and played by the EP in coordination with other parliamentary representatives from EU Member States and international organisations and experts. The role of the Commission in this context is perhaps less to take the lead on detailed parliamentary reviews (this can be done better by other bodies and coalitions of organisations and experts and – if additional resources can be mobilised – by the EP) but rather to reinforce a strong message in Commission meetings with the executive and members of the governments that only a robust, autonomous and fully functioning parliament can be a guarantee for progress on the fundamentals. In this vein, it should also be noted that the EP has played an important role in the realm of rule of law expert missions, needs assessment missions and MEPs as mediators and facilitators¹⁷¹.

Finally, as already mentioned in Section 3 above, there is also a fundamental ‘effectiveness of parliament dilemma’ in the context of enlargement and the EC’s approach. Many interviewed experts from the region, think tanks and even EU officials raised the core question: What should parliaments be ‘effective for and to whom’? On the one hand, parliaments are expected to approve EU legislation speedily and not hold up meaningful and substantial progress of the country’s path to full membership and adoption of the *acquis*. On the other hand, an ‘effective’ and ‘independent’ parliament also needs the time, expertise and opportunities to reject government legislation if, after deliberation, it finds flaws in the proposals. Thus, can a parliament of an enlargement country that holds up pro-EU legislation be seen as performing effective functions even if it directly contradicts the logic of enlargement progress? Or, in other words, can a parliament that rushes through EU legislation be seen as ‘effective’ but with the risk of becoming an EU legislation/government ‘rubber-stamping’ machine? These questions are not easily solved but should be considered when examining some of the tensions in the field of parliamentary strengthening under the new enlargement methodology.

4.2 Assessing support measures by EU Member State parliaments

EU Member States play an important role in parliamentary strengthening in EU candidate countries. Apart from funding and programmes initiated by ministries of foreign affairs (with Sweden, Austria, France and the Netherlands being active funders) and those implemented by international organisations (such as UNDP and OSCE, see Section 4.3 below), national parliaments have their own budgets and approaches within their international cooperation strategies. In addition, parliamentary staff members from several EU Member States have benefited from the EC’s TAIEX and Twinning funding. For the purposes of this study, we focused in particular on the activities carried out by EU national parliaments towards their counterparts in the enlargement countries. We sent requests for a background interview with a structured questionnaire (see Appendix 2) to the international IPEX contact points of all 27 Member State parliaments. A total number of 13 representatives replied, out of which eight agreed to expert interviews. Information about other EU parliament activities and projects was collated through desk research and document analysis. In addition, we interviewed parliamentary staff members and current or former MPs from all 10 enlargement

¹⁷⁰ Interview with former Commission official, 23 September 2024.

¹⁷¹ [On the needs assessment to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine - led by former MEP/EP President Pat Cox, who also facilitates the Jean Monnet Dialogue on Ukraine, see https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20160229RES16408/20160229RES16408.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20160229RES16408/20160229RES16408.pdf); MEPs have also served as facilitators and mediators in North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania; On Albania, see for example <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/05/17/albanian-opposition-accepts-mcallister-plus-proposal-to-resolve-political-crisis/>.

countries – with some responses received in writing rather than live interviews. Both perspectives from the EU Member State lead teams and from the receiving partners in the enlargement countries' parliaments provided some insights into the perceived effectiveness of parliamentary strengthening projects.

Several larger and medium-sized national parliaments in the EU (such as Germany, France, Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Portugal) have dedicated and reasonably well-staffed departments in their administration dealing with international partnerships and cooperation. In these departments, cooperation with parliaments in candidate countries forms one region or priority among many. Some parliaments coordinate their cooperation activities with their counterparts in candidate country parliaments via EU affairs departments¹⁷². Germany and France, given the size of their parliaments, have significant units dealing with international partnerships in their parliamentary administration. However, Sweden and Denmark – despite their relatively smaller size – also have active international cooperation departments in the administration. Other parliaments run their cooperation activities and projects via the Parliamentary Institute and their Department of General Analyses (Czechia), the Analysis and Research Department (the Netherlands) or the Strategy and Innovation Unit (Lithuania). Yet, many EU parliaments (such as Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Spain) do not have dedicated departments for carrying out inter-parliamentary cooperation or capacity-building. Instead, relations are driven by MPs or parliamentary committees (e.g. foreign affairs committees).

In terms of thematic activities, the topic of 'parliamentary strengthening and capacity-building in EU candidate countries' is primarily located in two work streams: democracy support programmes and/or EU enlargement/EU affairs programmes. Both work streams are not necessarily coordinated in Member State parliaments, particularly when dealing with bigger parliaments. Some interviews also revealed that national parliaments follow their own strategic logic and national priorities regarding international partnerships with other parliaments in the context of inter-parliamentary diplomacy and capacity-building¹⁷³. These priorities do not necessarily overlap with a focus on the EU enlargement process aspect of strengthening the effectiveness of functioning democratic parliaments in EU candidate countries. Furthermore, several respondents underlined that the quality and quantity of international partnerships and their prioritisation depend very much on the extent to which senior officials in the parliamentary hierarchy (i.e. Secretary-General of the administration) make inter-parliamentary cooperation an explicit and well-communicated priority. In addition, priorities might shift and change depending on the interests of individual MPs or standing inter-parliamentary delegations. In Germany, for example, MPs of all different parties are in charge of chairing inter-parliamentary delegations with regions or bilateral countries – similar to the EP's inter-parliamentary delegations¹⁷⁴. Thus, at Member State level, MPs are active in peer-to-peer dialogues with MPs of candidate country parliaments and either organise regular visits to the region or receive delegations from the region. Some respondents underlined that their departments responsible for inter-parliamentary cooperation and capacity-building had only more recently developed comprehensive strategies. Before, factors such as 'historical, geographic and political proximity' determined the selection of cooperation partner countries and regions. In the case of Czechia, for example, activities were advanced for countries that faced similar political challenges (post-Soviet transition countries facing challenges of EU accession)¹⁷⁵. Other parliaments of EU Member States had a more 'demand-driven' approach for a long time – i.e. responding on a case-by-case basis to cooperation requests from other EU parliaments, parliaments of the enlargement countries or international organisations (like UNDP) and NGOs¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷² See for example the Dutch House of Representatives, which coordinated cooperation projects via the EU affairs expert in the Analysis and Research Department.

¹⁷³ Interviews with representatives from Swedish and Danish parliaments.

¹⁷⁴ See European Parliament (2024) 'Introduction to European Parliament Delegations 2024–2029', available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/287098/About_EN.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with representative of Czechia's Department of General Analyses, 27 August 2024.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with representative of Danish International cooperation parliament, 6 September 2024.

Several Member States' parliament administrations were involved in capacity-building projects financed under the Twinning programme. An earlier example of a 'success story' of capacity-building projects – which aimed to tackle not only a specific technical issue or a parliament's capacity to cope with the demands of the EU approximation process – was the Albanian Twinning project (2012–2013) called 'Strengthening the Assembly of Albania'. The project was carried out by a consortium consisting of the French Senate and National Assembly and the Belgian, Croatian, Danish and Estonian parliaments and led by the Hungarian National Assembly¹⁷⁷. The aims and objectives of the capacity-building project were rather ambitious and comprehensive: 'The overall objective of this project was to have the Parliament's regulatory and oversight functions improved in order to strengthen the legislative process contributing to the efficient fulfilment of the obligations deriving from the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Agreement during the EU integration period and early pre-accession process'¹⁷⁸. A 2019 evaluation report underlined that the project not only strengthened the parliament's budgetary oversight capacities but also its general legislative control functions over the executive: 'Combining training, practical exercises and recommendations for improving the legal and regulatory framework, the project laid the ground for a stronger control of the executive and a more active involvement of standing committees in the European integration process'¹⁷⁹. The success of the project hinged not only on a solid lead partnership between six EU parliaments (also at a time when the Hungarian parliament was not yet entirely affected by the Orban government's anti-democratic measures) but also on the ambitious project objectives that were part of the Commission's original call for applications for this project¹⁸⁰. General democracy-strengthening objectives were also among the project ones of 'strengthen the parliamentary oversight capacities of all standing committees', 'improve the communication (and information) activities of the Parliament', and 'strengthen the administrative capacities of other parliamentary structures for the Finance and Budget Service and Service for Human Resources'¹⁸¹. This also meant that the project included amending the Albanian parliament's rules of procedures, drafting a communication strategy and reforming budgeting reporting. Furthermore, the project was expected to contribute to 'political stability, a better culture of political dialogue and a normal functioning of the Parliament'¹⁸². Most tellingly, under 'Lesson learned', the Commission fiche notes the following.

'In Albania, as in other EU candidate/potential candidate countries, the balance of power is shifted to the executive branch during the integration process. Moreover, even though the Assembly is the highest lawmaking body in the country, most assistance concerning EU *acquis*-related issues has gone so far for the government bodies. Therefore, the Albanian parliament has special needs to improve its working practices and administration skills further in relation to EU *acquis*-related issues. There is a need to combine long-term with short-term training activities. Combined theoretical and practical training (simulations/workshops) have proven to be more efficient than just having theoretical input. Parliamentary staff and MPs must improve their competencies on EU-related issues. Cooperation with parallel structures in countries that have passed through the same transition period has proven to be efficient'¹⁸³.

This is an early example of the drafters and administrators of the Twinning explicitly underlining the shift of power to the executive. It exemplifies the need to reinforce the expertise and strength of parliaments

¹⁷⁷ See <https://ipexl.europarl.europa.eu/IPEXL-WEB/own/8a8629a8888edeaf0188910088220019>.

¹⁷⁸ *Idem*.

¹⁷⁹ See GDSI Limited (2019) 'Evaluation of Twinning in the Period 2010 – 2017', op. cit. p. 52.

¹⁸⁰ See European Commission (2010) 'IPA National Programme for Albania 2010: Strengthening the Assembly of Albania', available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8a09c0b7-3cf3-471a-8869-29ae49ec76a2_en?filename=pf4_parliament_en.pdf.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, pp. 7 – 8.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p. 9.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, pp 9 – 10.

and the competence of parliamentarians. The document also outlines synergies with the preceding work of the OSCE and is, therefore, a strong example of inter-organisational reinforcement. The project (from initial call to implementation) can, hence, serve as an important case study of a successful capacity-building project in the early 2010s phase. A follow-up project was launched and, based on the recommendation of the first project, was supposed to strengthen Albania's parliamentary oversight function further, which was still judged to be 'the weakest function currently performed by the Assembly'¹⁸⁴. The parliament of Greece led the follow-up capacity-building project from 2016 to 2018 in cooperation with the Croatian parliament, the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Italian Senate¹⁸⁵. Yet, despite the positive evaluations at the time and the comprehensive approach in project design, the Albanian parliament still faces fundamental problems regarding the autonomous parliamentary oversight powers of the parliament and the limited independent and impactful role of the opposition. Twinning capacity-building projects are, therefore, not a silver bullet, and comprehensive measures are, of course, contiguously and continuously required in the medium- and long-term.

Twinning projects can be very narrowly defined and implemented with a strongly 'de-politicised' technical angle or can cover political issues more deliberately and comprehensively. Two Twinning projects for the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina underline the wide scope that parliamentary capacity-building projects can have. In the first early Twinning project, the main focus was mainly on building internal information and communication technology systems. Later projects included more ambitious and wide-ranging capacity-building of an EU affairs secretariat in the parliament and wide-ranging training on the approximation of EU legislation¹⁸⁶.

From 2017 to 2019, the Czech Chamber of Deputies led a Twinning project with the parliament of Moldova on 'Strengthening the capacities of the Parliament of Moldova for EU approximation process'. 'The purpose of the project was to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Parliament of Moldova for a better understanding of the EU approximation process, which is in line with the Association Agenda. Special focus was put on improving the structures, internal procedures as well as the capacity of the technical staff of the Parliament'¹⁸⁷. The consortium included Slovakia and Hungary's parliaments and additional experts from Belgium, Latvia, Poland, and Italy. In the interview with the Czech parliamentary representative, the advantages of the Twinning project were underlined in terms of building a strong network between parliamentarians and administrative staff and a wide range of activities with tangible results. 'The project included more than 70 activities, and the training reached roughly 200 persons from the administration of the Moldovan parliament and government departments. A clear outcome was that the project led to the amendments to the rules of procedure aiming to strengthen the parliament's legislative and oversight functions in the context of the EU legal approximation process. Our proposed amendments were, in the end, included in the draft Code of Parliamentary Rules and Procedures'¹⁸⁸. Yet, despite the wide range of meetings, training and hands-on drafting activities, the long-term effect was less clear. 'Twinning projects can play an important role in getting the ball rolling on a wide range of issues, but the final results depend on many other factors beyond your control'¹⁸⁹. In 2024, the Commission launched a further Twinning project call, focusing on the Moldovan parliament as a follow-up project. The project will be implemented by a consortium led by Greece in cooperation with the parliaments of Romania, Italy, Hungary, Austria and

¹⁸⁴ See European Commission (2015) 'Standard Twinning Project Fiche: Further Strengthening the Assembly of Albania in the context of EU Accession', p. 4, available at

https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/garegemellaggi/2016/05/al14ipajh0116_alparliament.pdf.

¹⁸⁵ See information by the Hellenic Parliament (2018) <https://yeep.parliament.gr/en-us/Projects/European-Projects/twinning-project-of-the-european-union-further-strengthening-the-assembly-of-albania-in-the-context-of-eu-accession>.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with staff member of the administration of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia-Herzegovina, 18 September 2024.

¹⁸⁷ See <https://secure.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/own/8a8629a8889404e801889604b850002c>.

¹⁸⁸ Interview CZ1.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with academic expert, Charles University, 29 August 2024.

the Netherlands. An important factor in maximising impact will be the extent to which the former and new consortia manage to engage in the transfer of lessons learned and exchange of best practices.

Other capacity-building projects include a Twinning project for Serbia on ‘Strengthening Capacities of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in the EU Integration process’ implemented by the Greek parliament in cooperation with experts from France, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Montenegro. The project ran from 2013 to 2014¹⁹⁰. More than 100 activities were devoted to ‘Improving the legislative framework, transparency, efficiency and internal functions of the Serbian National Assembly, in order to strengthen the legislative process and policies that contribute to the efficient fulfilment of the country's obligations during its accession process to the European Union’ and ‘strengthen parliament's interaction with the government and independent authorities, as well as involvement of the civil society in the legislative process’¹⁹¹. Interviews with the Serbian parliament representative underlined that the Twinning project was perceived to be valuable and helpful, particularly the ‘technical aspects’ (including ‘subjects ranging from IT to EU legal harmonisation’), but the preparation and implementation of the many actions were ‘very laborious’ and required the availability and ‘coordination with senior levels of the parliamentary administration’¹⁹². Interviews with Serbian NGOs and parliamentary capacity-building experts also pointed to the often-cited observation that even if further technical capacity-building projects were to be launched, ‘these won’t be able to resolve the Serbian parliament’s political challenges’¹⁹³.

The case of Türkiye also points to similar tensions between successful Twinning projects on the one hand and the more general deterioration of democracy (and Türkiye-EU relations) on the other hand. Two Twinning projects were positively commented on as a ‘good practice’ of inter-parliamentary relations, ties and capacity-building¹⁹⁴. The first Twinning project, ‘Strengthening the capacity of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (GNAT)’, ran from 2007 to 2008 and focused on increasing relations between the parliament and civil society and training Turkish parliamentarians on the EU *acquis*. The project was led by a consortium of the Italian, Hungarian, Polish and German parliament in cooperation with parliamentarians from Denmark, France and the United Kingdom. The project was seen to be successful in increasing both the networks and contacts of Turkish parliamentarians, but also led to concrete draft documents on legal reform¹⁹⁵. Yet, ‘concerns persisted about the ‘administrative capacity’ of the GNAT, particularly related to ‘executive-legislative relations and parliamentary oversight and scrutiny’ as highlighted by an independent external review of twinning projects in Türkiye’¹⁹⁶. The second project, implemented between 2012 and 2014, focused on inter-party dialogue and accession negotiations to tackle the highlighted weaknesses of the GNAT’s relations with the ruling party and its oversight capacities. Despite some progress, the positive impact of these capacity-building initiatives has been considerably diminished due to the worsening EU-Türkiye relations since 2017/2018¹⁹⁷.

Various interlocutors have voiced similar criticisms of parliamentary capacity-building initiatives during interviews. They raised questions about the limits of capacity-building activities and the level of reasonable expectations one can have about the broader political impact. Capacity-building initiatives – particularly

¹⁹⁰ See Greek Parliament, <https://yeep.parliament.gr/en-us/Projects/European-Projects/twinning-project-of-the-european-union-strengthening-capacities-of-the-national-assembly-of-the-republic-of-serbia-in-the-eu-integration-process>.

¹⁹¹ Idem.

¹⁹² Interview with Serbian official working on EU matters, SRB6.

¹⁹³ Interview with Serbian law professor consulting on parliamentary capacity-building, 22nd September 2024 (SRB9)

¹⁹⁴ Interview with staff member of the Turkish parliament, TK2.

¹⁹⁵ Idem.

¹⁹⁶ See Ferri Pot et al. (2011) ‘Review of Twinning in Turkey – Annexes to the Final Report’, p.120; available at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-01/annexes_to_final_report_review_of_twinning_turkey.pdf.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Turkish NGO, 20 August 2024.

twining projects – must be placed in the wider context of democracy support activities by a wide range of actors. However, they can also never serve as a substitute for genuine political progress (based on political will to carry out reforms) advanced by the different centres of power and societal stakeholders themselves. EU national parliaments have a wide range of activities, channels, and tools for engaging with parliamentarians and administrative staff in partner countries, as highlighted by the French Senate's overview of activities¹⁹⁸. Interviews with members of the French Senate's International Relations and Protocol Directorate, as well as the EU Affairs Committee, highlight a sense of 'idealist pragmatism'. While inter-parliamentary activities play an essential role in building peer-to-peer trust, solid networks and providing concrete support for enhancing the capacities and functioning of parliaments in candidate countries, they cannot tackle wider societal and political issues. Such issues include the relations between the executive and ruling party with the minority parties and parliament, or the relationship between the parliament and civil society more generally¹⁹⁹.

Yet, several interviews with members of parliaments in EU Member States revealed not only frustrations about political backsliding but also a sense of 'capacity-building fatigue'. Respondents from an EU member state parliament engaged in a Twinning project with the Georgian parliament since 2022 voiced frustrations about the lack of engagement and availability of MPs and staff on the partners' side. In interviews, the limited impact (particularly due to but not only because of Georgia's political situation) on the parliament was mentioned. Often, change was not possible due to an unwillingness or inability of parliamentarians and administration officials to adopt new practices. The lack of involvement of senior leadership also led to limited effectiveness since the counterparts (junior or mid-level officials in the administration of the parliament) were often not in the position to push for implementation or nudge other members of committees or parties into reform paths. Feedback also pointed to a high workload for administrative staff, resulting in limited availability for planned training and workshops. In terms of coherence, interview partners underlined the lack of donor coordination (e.g. duplication of training content with, e.g. The United States Agency for International Development, USAID) and a lack of information sharing with other national agencies active in the same country on the same topics²⁰⁰. In addition, the worsening political situation overshadowed many of the objectives and planned activities for the project. 'The issue is then: at which stage do you accept that the tool is no longer working?'²⁰¹.

Intense frustrations were also voiced by a German MP who had been involved extensively during the last decade in relations with parliaments and democracy support in the Western Balkans. According to this interview partner, as long as the fundamental democratic problem of state capture and total control of the ruling party is not being addressed, most capacity-building projects, young leader programmes or parliamentary visits 'are just a farce and simply entrench the power of the ruling parties'²⁰². Ruling parties decide which 'young leaders' are selected for workshops and programmes, and corruption and increasingly powerless parliaments provide mean that capacity-building initiatives become relatively meaningless and inter-parliamentary delegations 'risk becoming a cynical circus'²⁰³. Yet, the interviewee underlined the importance of the EP (particularly the EP resolution on Serbia in the wake of the fraudulent election in December 2023) and called for a 'truly effective network for empowering the opposition and the shrinking numbers of civil society actors, who still believe in democracy and the EU'²⁰⁴. Various

¹⁹⁸ The overview document is on file with the authors.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with members of the French Senate's International Relations and Protocol Directorate and the EU Affairs Committee, joint meeting, 18 September 2024 (FRA1, FRA2, FRA3).

²⁰⁰ Interview with administrative staff member of the Dutch parliament.

²⁰¹ Interview with representative of an EU member parliamentary administration involved in organising twinning projects, 5 August 2024.

²⁰² Interview with German MP, 2 September 2024.

²⁰³ Idem.

²⁰⁴ Idem.

interviewees also expressed more general concern about the loss of EU credibility as a value-based actor in the region, citing, in particular, the uncritical support for the Serbian government by various EU Member States and the EC as a broader problem²⁰⁵. Germany, in particular, received criticism for the decision to enter into a wide-ranging lithium deal with the Serbian government, despite protests from environmental and human rights groups. The fear is palpable that geopolitical and economic interests crowd out any meaningful continued pressures for democratic reform, send disastrous signals to pro-democratic forces, and ‘tarnish whatever little credibility was left of the EU as a normative and value-based power in the region’²⁰⁶. The fact that such criticism has been voiced by a senior member of the German parliament and seasoned expert in parliamentary capacity-building and democratisation highlights some of the tensions and the importance of a comprehensive and consistent approach to democratic capacity-building. Thus, it is important to ensure that technical and issue-specific capacity-building projects are also accompanied by broader political pressures, incentives and dialogues. Peer support and pressure on the sister parties inside pan-European political families can be yet another valuable tool contributing to democratisation and EU-related reforms, while the inability to do so on time can lead to failure to stop democratic erosion²⁰⁷.

Overall, many interviewed respondents underlined the importance of Twinning capacity-building projects despite the heavy investment of time and human resources that such projects require. Approximately 20 Twinning projects between parliaments have been carried out during the last 26 years with EU candidate country parliaments. Yet, this only amounts to a fraction of the total of Twinning projects – most of which focus on cooperation in other sectors and with other public administration bodies and ministries. An analysis carried out by the research team of the available project fiche pipeline and published by DG NEAR and Member States highlights that between 2016 and 2023, there were 126 Twinning projects with partner institutions in the nine candidate countries. Out of those 126 projects, only five were focused on parliamentary capacity-building²⁰⁸. Thus, less than 4 % of all Twinning projects with candidate countries focused on parliamentary support during the last seven years.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that peer-to-peer capacity-building has lost its importance. Innovative initiatives by EU Member States, such as Austria, underline the significance of capacity-building with parliaments. Austria has not only participated in and led a variety of Twinning projects with parliaments in the Western Balkans but has also established innovative democracy support programmes, such as the European Fund for the Balkans Fellowships and Democracy Workshops with the countries of the Western Balkans²⁰⁹.

The section above highlights the wide range of initiatives that EU Member State parliaments carry out – either in partnership or bilaterally. Yet, the exchange of best practices between EU Member States, the EP and international actors still remains patchy, and the lack of coordination risks undermining the potential of a more coherent approach. While initiatives such as INTER PARES (see below) point towards a recent trend towards more coordination, several interviewed representatives from EU national parliaments viewed the EP as a more suitable place for coordination, given its ability to focus on EU accession countries more comprehensively and with in-house solid and robust expertise.

4.3. Assessing support measures by international organisations and government-funded agencies and institutions

The activities of EU institutions and national parliaments must be viewed in the wider context of the long-standing and comprehensive work of other major international organisations active in the field of

²⁰⁵ Idem; Interviews with Serbian NGO representative and experts from the European Parliament.

²⁰⁶ Interview with German parliamentarian (SPD) 2 September 2024.

²⁰⁷ Council 1; NEAR 1, NEAR2, NEAR 3.

²⁰⁸ Analysis of 126 Twinning Projects, 2016-2023 – on file with the authors.

²⁰⁹ See Parliament of Austria (2024) Cooperation, available at <https://www.parlament.gv.at/en/eu-international/cooperations/index.html>.

parliamentary strengthening in the region, as well as bigger agencies, foundations or institutions funded by EU or non-EU states with a strong focus on parliamentary strengthening in the regions of the EU enlargement countries. Table 4 below provides a (non-exhaustive) overview of some of the most active organisations and agencies involved in parliamentary strengthening and capacity-building programmes.

Organisations range from the OSCE and UN Development Programme²¹⁰ (with strong mission presence on the ground since the late 1990s) to the Council of Europe and its Venice Commission for setting standards and monitoring the implementation of the rule of law. Furthermore, the EC and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have developed the 'SIGMA' programme together to enhance public administration institutions' reform and quality, including parliaments²¹¹. NATO's Parliamentary Assembly built up significant expertise in parliamentary oversight of the security sector and armed forces during the 1990s and is currently preparing the creation of a Centre of Excellence for Democratic Resilience, recognising the threats to democracy also within the alliance²¹². The Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and Council of Europe provide important platforms for exchanging views on parliamentary support initiatives with Member States of common interests and – together with the NATO PA – form partnerships for election observation missions. Finally, the IPU is the most comprehensive and long-standing body dealing with parliamentary standards and providing a global platform for exchange.

Arguably, the Swiss and German development agencies (GIZ), as well as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, are some of the most active organisations in the Western Balkan region. The Swiss Development Agency – in partnership with several local CSOs – has developed a sound base for parliamentary scrutiny in North Macedonia, while the German Development Agency sustains annual meetings of regional parliamentary staff dealing with EU integration. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) has implemented a wide range of parliamentary assistance programmes across the entire region with extensive funding from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

In addition, on the implementation side, both EU Member States and states outside the EU fund important agencies or foundations that have built up strong expertise in parliamentary capacity-building.

The United States predominantly engages in parliamentary support measures for democracy legislation through the USAID's Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) branch. USAID regularly operates in parallel with the House Democracy Partnership (HDP), National Democratic Institute (NDI), UNDP, and International Republican Institute (IRI)²¹³. Most recently, the 'Supporting Political Pluralism and Governance Process in BiH' (2019–2023) project for Bosnia and Herzegovina, implemented alongside the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) and IFES, concluded. The project sought to provide parliamentary and legislative capacity-building through intensive, long-term training programmes for young parliamentarians²¹⁴. The project successfully supported candidates who were able

²¹⁰ Activities for parliamentary capacity-building are advanced under the label 'Parliamentary Development' As part of UNDP's governance programme – 'UNDP works to strengthen parliamentary bodies by: boosting efforts to reform and improve parliaments and local assemblies, making them more representative, open, and accountable; delivering training and building skills among parliamentarians and their secretariats on legislative scrutiny, gender equality, and international human rights obligations, and critical sustainable development issues that parliaments need to act on; and enhancing parliamentary transparency, using new technologies, tools, and capacities in data, budgeting, and finance.' see <https://www.undp.org/governance/parliamentary-development>.

²¹¹ See OECD, <https://www.sigmaxweb.org/>.

²¹² Interview with two officials of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 15 October 2024.

²¹³ 'FY 2023 Report to Congress: USAID Legislative Strengthening Programs,' USAID, accessed 27/10/2024, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/USAID%20Legislative%20Strengthening%20Report%20to%20Congress%202023_1.pdf.

²¹⁴ USAID, 'FACT SHEET: Support to Political Pluralism and Governance Processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina,' USAID, accessed 26/10/2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/bosnia-and-herzegovina/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-support-political-pluralism-and-governance-processes-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

to engage with cross-party cooperation; however, the longevity of such parliamentary caucuses will be of concern as the 'informal nature threatens their sustainability and makes them dependent upon re-election of their members for continuity'²¹⁵.

Table 4. Overview of main organisations active in parliamentary capacity-building

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	The United Nations Development Programme has worked on what they refer to as 'parliamentary development' since the mid-1990s. Their approach focuses in particular on: - 'boosting efforts to reform and improve parliaments and local assemblies, making them more representative, open, and accountable; - delivering training and building skills among parliamentarians and their secretariats on legislative scrutiny, gender equality, and international human rights obligations, and critical sustainable development issues that parliaments need to act on; and - enhancing parliamentary transparency, using new technologies, tools, and capacities in data, budgeting, and finance.'	UNDP has worked closely with candidate countries' parliaments through their national missions, particularly since 2005. In 2009, it also released strategic guidelines on how to design support programmes and identify best practices²¹⁶. Implemented support programmes include strengthening the budgetary oversight procedures of the Georgian parliament, strengthening the role of the parliamentary research institute of the parliament of North Macedonia, and drafting transparency regulations for the parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result of its long-standing presence in each country (often longer than 20 years), the UNDP has developed strong networks and relations with parliamentarians and the government and is, therefore, a strong and impartial actor and potential partner for the EP in the realm of parliamentary strengthening. UNDP programmes are often co-financed or even entirely financed by the EU. It would also be a useful partner for organising systematic brainstorming and exchange activities on lessons learned, cooperation opportunities and future challenges. In this respect, drawing on the many (publicly available) external evaluation reports of UNDP parliamentary development programmes, including its Global Programme, is useful²¹⁷. Finally, the UNDP has been involved in various multi-donor initiatives to develop transparent and systematic indicators and standards for supporting and evaluating the development of parliaments.

²¹⁵ IMPAQ International, 'Midterm Performance Evaluation: Supporting Political Pluralism and Good Government Processes (SPPG) in Bosnia and Herzegovina,' *USAID*, September 2021, p. 28, accessed 27/10/2024, <https://www.measurebih.com/uimages/MII20SPPG20PE20Report20FINAL2028completed292011-11-2021.pdf>.

²¹⁶ See UNDP (2009) Parliamentary Development: UNDP Strategy Note, available at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/PD_Strategy_Note.pdf.

²¹⁷ See for example Tim Baker (2011) Global Programme for Parliamentary Strengthening III: Evaluation Report, available at <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/6703>.

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)	The IPU is the oldest multilateral organisation dedicated solely to parliaments. Founded in 1889 and based in Geneva since 1921, it now has 181 members and 15 associate members – meaning it includes almost every parliament. Its mission is to 'promote democratic governance, institutions and values, working with parliaments and parliamentarians to articulate and respond to the needs and aspirations of the people [...] through political dialogue, cooperation and parliamentary action' ²¹⁸ . IPU can be seen as an important 'knowledge bank' and forum for facilitating wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge on the functioning and strengthening of parliaments and their role in promoting human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and gender and youth empowerment. The IPU has also become an important organisation for (co-) developing and setting standards for support to parliaments.	The IPU is of high relevance to any EU efforts in the realm of parliamentary strengthening, given its convening power and standard-setting nature, but also in a range of committee activities and operational work (such as an IPU mission to Türkiye in 2019 related to alleged human rights violations of parliamentarians, supporting the Serbian parliament with a gender-sensitive self-assessment exercise, supporting the Georgian parliament with a self-assessment exercise on general functioning, and supporting the Serbian and Albanian parliament with SDG self-assessment) ²¹⁹ . In addition, the Albanian parliament used various IPU guidelines, indicators and self-assessment tools ²²⁰ . For the EP, cooperation with the IPU on the adoption (and EU-specific adaptation) of the 'Indicators for Democratic Reform' for institutional development and common standards of evaluations could be useful. These indicators were developed in cooperation between IPU, UNDP and other partners, including the INTER PARES project – thus, indirect cooperation already exists in this realm. In addition, the IPU's 'Common Principles for Support to Parliaments' from 2014 were co-developed in collaboration with the EP, UNDP and the French National Assembly and have been endorsed by 149 national parliaments around the globe ²²¹ . The mainstreaming and more visible use and application of these principles should be a priority of EU/EP parliamentary support actions.
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)	The OECD has been active in advancing good governance and effective public policymaking through data, analysis, in-depth reviews, data-driven advice, and various convening formats. This also includes a strong focus on the role of parliaments and good governance. In 2011, the OECD created its Global Parliamentary Network , which it describes as a flexible 'legislative learning hub for legislators and parliamentary officials' ²²² . The OECD	An important, relevant area of cooperation between the EU and OECD is the SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) initiative financed almost entirely by the EC ²²⁶ . Its key objective is 'to strengthen the foundations for improved public governance, and hence support socio-economic development through building the capacities of the public sector, enhancing horizontal governance and improving the design and implementation of public administration reforms, including proper prioritisation, sequencing and budgeting' ²²⁷ . In cooperation with DG NEAR, the

²¹⁸ See Inter-Parliamentary Union, About Us – available at <https://www.ipu.org/about-us>.

²¹⁹ Interview IPU.

²²⁰ See <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/case-studies/parliament-albania-uses-indicators-guide-its-institutional-reforms>.

²²¹ See <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/common-principles-support-parliaments>

²²² See OECD Global Parliamentary Network, available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/networks/parliamentarians.html>.

²²⁶ See <https://www.sigmaweb.org/about/>.

²²⁷ Idem.

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
	has played a role in multilateral discussion on donor coordination and effective parliamentary support programmes since the early 2010s, including the support of the drafting of 'Principles for Parliamentary Assistance' ²²³ . In 2023, it released an advice paper on 'OECD Best Practices for Parliaments in Budgeting' ²²⁴ . More recent focus areas include the use of AI in parliaments and comparative analyses of evidence-based policymaking by parliamentarians ²²⁵ .	SIGMA initiative also works with public administration bodies of the 10 enlargement countries. Even though this work also includes parliaments (particularly in the realm of budgetary matters and relations with financial audit bodies), the vast majority of the work focuses on public administration support related to government branches and ministries. Yet, given the OECD's strong expertise in effective public administration support and the EU-OECD SIGMA initiative, it could be explored how closer cooperation between the OECD, DG NEAR and EP could be advanced in the context of parliamentary strengthening in the enlargement countries.
Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)	The OSCE has, broadly speaking, three institutions relevant for parliamentary support. Firstly, the presence of the OSCE missions in enlargement countries has developed close relations with various ministries and parliaments in the enlargement countries and has implemented a wide range of parliamentary support actions. Secondly, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is the OSCE's prime body for providing 'support, assistance and expertise to participating States and civil society to promote democracy, the rule of law, human rights and tolerance and non-discrimination' ²²⁸ . This includes carrying out reviews, advice programmes and training. The ODIHR also carries out election observer missions (in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the EP). In addition, the ODIHR runs a	Similarly to the UNDP, the OSCE has had a long history and track record of supporting the functioning of parliaments in the regions where the 10 enlargement countries are located. Through legislative and democratisation support programmes, the OSCE missions have implemented a wide range of parliamentary assistance initiatives. In addition, a wide range of cross-cutting democratisation and good governance projects have been (co-)funded by the EU and external donors. A recent example is the three-year project ' <i>Stronger Democratic Institutions in Eastern Partnership Countries</i> ', co-funded by the EU, Italy, Switzerland and Norway, which includes the development of a 'comprehensive package of tools to bolster systems of democratic governance, increase public trust in institutions, and encourage more representative government, as well as inclusive and participatory political and decision-making processes' ²³⁰ . While some tensions have emerged between the OSCE and EP when it comes to election observations, the scope for cooperation and exchanges of best practices between the EP and OSCE missions on the ground related to parliamentary strengthening remains very strong. Regular exchanges between the OSCE PA and

²²³ See Greg Power (2012) Principles for Parliamentary Assistance, available at <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264183636-13-en.pdf?expires=1733050003&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=D363EA2F0573AEED34EC8CCEAF5AFE7>.

²²⁴ See <https://www.pbo.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/OECD%20Best%20Practices%20for%20Parliaments%20in%20Budgeting%20Jan%202023.pdf>.

²²⁵ See Bagrat Tunyan and Klaus H. Goetz (2024) Parliaments and evidence-based law-making in the Western Balkans: A comparative analysis of parliamentary rules, procedures and practice, available at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/parliaments-and-evidence-based-lawmaking-in-the-western-balkans_e95bebb9-en.html.

²²⁸ See <https://www.osce.org/odihr>.

²³⁰ See OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 'Building Stronger Democratic Institutions in Eastern Partnership Countries', available at <https://www.osce.org/node/572410>.

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
	comprehensive 'legislative assistance' programme – often in cooperation with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. This also includes the review of specific legislations and their compliance with OSCE and international human rights standards²²⁹. Thirdly, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly brings together the parliaments of all OSCE member states and plays an important role as a convening and deliberation forum on issues related to human rights and democracy. In recent years, the deterioration of relations with Russia (and the obstructive role it plays within the OSCE) has also had an effect on the effective functioning (and staffing) of core OSCE activities.	the EP could also include a dedicated and reinforced dialogue on parliamentary capacity-building initiatives. However, the destructive role played by Russia in the OSCE in recent years (particularly in the area of election observation reporting) requires an extra resilient approach to safeguard and effectively use the OSCE's comparative advantages while avoiding the negative impacts of its current limitations related to Russia and Russian influence.
Council of Europe (CoE)	The CoE has played an important, active and indirect role in many parliamentary strengthening programmes, particularly for the EU. It is an essential normative body for democracy and human rights standards, particularly embodied by the EC for Democracy through Law (or 'Venice Commission')²³¹. Their activities and reports often inform EC reports and reviews of the state of human rights and the rule of law in enlargement countries. Crucially, the Venice Commission has its own focus area on 'functioning democratic institutions'²³². Together with the strong role of the European Court of Human Rights, the Venice Commission has strong institutional clout and legitimacy when it comes to actions related to issues of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In addition, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PA) is an important venue for bringing together	Alongside the OSCE's ODIHR, the Council of Europe plays a significant role for the EC when it comes to providing information and reviews on enlargement countries' track-records in strengthening the rule of law, democratic institutions and human rights. DG NEAR and DG JUST officials regularly use Council of Europe insights for their own Screening Reports. In addition, regular exchanges take place between a variety of CoE and EU bodies. Structured cooperation between the EP and Council of Europe on issues related to parliamentary strengthening and capacity-building in enlargement countries could be further enhanced.

²²⁹ See OSCE, Requesting Legislative Assistance from ODIHR, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/407447>.

²³¹ See <https://www.venice.coe.int/>.

²³² See https://www.venice.coe.int/WebForms/pages/?p=02_Institutions&lang=EN.

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
	parliamentarians and deliberating on core issues related to democracy and human rights. PA members also participate in joint election observation missions with the EP and OSCE.	
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)	The CPA was created in 1911 and encompasses the national (and regional) parliaments currently or previously associated with the British Commonwealth. Its main objective is to promote parliamentary democracy and good governance: 'we undertake an extensive range of programmes, projects and activities' ²³³ . It includes a wide range of resources, training programmes, and a dedicated 'Institutional Parliamentary Strengthening' programme ²³⁴ . This includes technical assistance to institutions as well as individual professional training. Due to its long-standing history and experience with a variety of parliamentary forms, the CPA is a valuable umbrella organisation for parliamentary matters, including capacity-building.	The CPA has built up a substantial track record over the decades in flexible and locally adapted parliamentary strengthening programmes. It serves as an important knowledge hub and has also contributed, in cooperation with other international organisations, to developing and formulating benchmarks and documents related to model codes of conduct and elements for the functioning of democratic parliaments ²³⁵ . This also includes the contribution of the CPA to the IPU-led 'Indicators for Democratic Parliament' (see above). Prior to the development of the Indicators, the CPA had developed in 2006 (and updated in 2018) the 'Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures' – in cooperation with, inter alia, the EP ²³⁶ . The EP thus has a long history of cooperation and should continue exploring synergies enhancement.
German Development Agency (GIZ)	GIZ has carried out a wide range of projects at the intersection of development, democratisation and human rights. It is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and has close to 25 000 members of staff operating in more than 100 countries ²³⁷ . Since 2001, the 'Regional cooperation for European integration' also includes a parliamentary track. The approach is focused on: - annual meetings of the Balkan region's parliamentary staff; - technical capacity-building; - informal sharing of 'best practices';	The underscored non-political approach of the GIZ allows parliamentary staff to openly discuss issues and learn from each other, integrating this knowledge into daily work. A joint reflection has taken place within this forum on effective principles of parliamentary oversight. However, it should be remembered that the staffers operate within specific political constraints, so their effective networking does not automatically create incentives for respective MPs to engage in parliamentary scrutiny. While the EP runs the Jean Monnet Dialogues for high-level political figures, GIZ's actions are complementary in the sense that they provide similar dialogue and networking opportunities for parliamentary staff.

²³³ See <https://www.cpahq.org/what-we-do/>.

²³⁴ See <https://www.cpahq.org/what-we-do/institutional-parliamentary-strengthening/>.

²³⁵ See https://www.cpahq.org/media/k4bhbzvd/codes-of-conduct-2024_final.pdf.

²³⁶ See <https://www.cpahq.org/media/10jjk2nh/recommended-benchmarks-for-democratic-legislatures-updated-2018-final-online-version-single.pdf>.

²³⁷ See <https://www.giz.de/en/aboutgiz/profile.html>.

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
	- joint reflection on common challenges and solutions to them.	
German political foundations	All parties represented in the German parliament have their own political foundations with an extensive global network and a wide range of democracy support initiatives and programmes. The most important ones are the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation (KAS), the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation (FES), the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBS), the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, the Hans-Seidel Foundation and the Rosa-Luxembourg Foundation. The political foundations regularly organise workshops, conferences, and track-two meetings for parliamentarians and civil society organisations. They have also run a wide range of parliamentary support initiatives.	German political foundations, particularly KAS, FES and HBS, have been very active in convening parliamentary roundtables and fostering exchange and peer-to-peer discussions with parliamentarians from enlargement parliaments and MPs from national parliaments of EU member states. Synergies can be enhanced and used for track-two discussions and platforms for dialogue and exchanges of parliamentary practices.
Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)	The WFD, set up in 1992, is the UK's non-departmental public body funded by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office for promoting democracy around the world. It has a long trajectory of parliamentary strengthening programmes and is also often at the forefront of formulating guidelines, policy advice and insightful evaluations. The WFD has been running programmes with Western Balkan countries as well as Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine since the mid-2000s. Its approach focuses on: - support in the development of legal frameworks that assist and determine the flow of parliamentary oversight; - support in organising discussions with civil society representatives; - support in systematic engagement of civil society representatives in legislative parliamentary work; - support in developing parliaments' own means of conducting analysis.	The support of the WFD has focused on developing either the legal framework of scrutiny (according to international best practices) at both plenary and committee levels or developing parliamentary bodies that would provide MPs with independent analysis and greater transparent control of their own resources (i.e. budget offices, research centres). In addition, it has placed some emphasis on integrating civil society into the legislative process as well as organising the dialogue between MPs and the public. While the EU may focus on capacity-building in terms of general parliamentary staff training, study visits and political dialogue, the WFD helps develop legal frameworks for parliamentary scrutiny at various stages of the legislative process. It has built a strong reputation in local support work, high-level research, and evaluation frameworks. Its experts are often invited as experts in either implementing large-scale projects or providing their expertise in policy and scholarly discussions. It certainly is a valuable partner for the EP for exchanging best practices and co-developing policies. The WFD has also contributed to the IPU-led 'Indicator for Democratic Parliaments' project.
US Agency for International	For approximately 30 years, USAID has been operating	The substantial resources allocated to USAID allow it to engage with a wide array of projects, some directly

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
Development (USAID)	'legislative/parliamentary strengthening' activities in over 70 countries. USAID legislative/parliamentary strengthening activities are categorised along four pathways: - building institutional capacity for legislative support services; - increasing oversight capabilities; - focusing on issue-based policies; - increasing citizen participation within local and national governments and raising public awareness of parliamentary processes.	while others strictly through funding. The flexibility granted to USAID has allowed for in-depth approaches to parliamentary strengthening programmes, ranging from consultations with parliamentarians and technical assistance to direct engagement with a host of constituents for building citizen engagement. The Moldova Inclusive and Participatory Political Processes (MIPPP) is a multi-phase project that includes five participating organisations (including USAID). MIPPP has engaged all sectors of the Moldovan political process, strengthening the accountability of legislators and creating channels for civil society to engage with their representatives within the Moldovan parliament.
The National Democratic Institute (NDI)	The NDI is a non-profit American non-governmental organisation whose stated mission is to 'support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability'²³⁸. It is loosely affiliated with the Democratic Party of the US Congress. The NDI's Democratic Governance programme area includes 'legislative development' as a core initiative for developing effective democratic structures. The core principles include: - building global networks to connect legislators; - conducting training and consultations; - engagement with constituents and local interest groups; - improvement of transparency and executive oversight.	The NDI has a substantial funding base, strong networks in the enlargement countries, and strong operational capacities. It has been a partner for the EP and other EU initiatives in a variety of formats. The NDI's work in building communication channels and information exchanges between Western Balkans and Central Europe legislators has helped facilitate best practices exchanges central to the accession process, such as the 2009 Regional Parliamentary Initiative. Most recently, the NDI hosted a legislative strengthening event in Sarajevo, bringing together PMOs from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia for a workshop on parliamentary capacity-building. Such workshops are helpful and valuable for candidate countries to exchange best practices for parliamentary capacity-building, especially when considering the different challenges each country faces. For the EP, the NDI's expertise and track record is a valuable asset, including its inputs to the EP's Jean Monnet Dialogues and its Young Political Leaders programmes.
The International Republican Institute (IRI)	The IRI is a non-governmental organisation funded by the US government and loosely affiliated with the Republican Party in Congress. The IRI's approach to parliamentary strengthening is guided by two core principles:	The IRI engages in bi- and multilateral parliamentary strengthening programmes, working towards advancing its two-pronged approach towards parliamentary and governance building. The IRI consistently facilitates parliamentary exchanges and bilateral meetings for legislators, often doing so with the support of the HDP and Institute for Representative Government – most

²³⁸ See <https://www.ndi.org/>.

Organisation	Background and main approach	Relevance for EU's/EP's approach to Parliamentary strengthening
	- parliamentary officials' responsiveness to their constituents and effective oversight; - direct civilian participation in government processes and advancement of interest groups' representation²³⁹.	recently, it was a bilateral meeting between MPs from Ukraine and the US Congress. In addition to such activities, the IRI conducts extensive surveys within participating countries, which is in line with the IRI's stated goal of working towards advancing the interests of the countries' citizens.

Source: Own elaboration.

The project 'Rada Next Generation (RANG)' is a five-year, USD 10 million USAID-led activity which seeks to support 'the Rada [Ukrainian parliament] to become a modern, effective institution advancing accountability and democratic development'²⁴⁰. For this project, Internews-Ukraine is the primary implementing body, with support from the American Councils, Agency of Education Policy Development, Center of Policy and Legal Reform (CPLR), IRI, and WFD. In Kosovo, the 'Inclusive and Accountable Representation Activity' is a five-year, USD 15 million, wide-ranging initiative supporting gender-inclusive legislation, fiscal policies, and parliamentary oversight²⁴¹. USAID also funds (without direct involvement in implementation) legislative and parliamentary support activities, including the 'National Governance Program' in Georgia (2023–2027)²⁴² and the 'MIPPP' in Moldova (2016–2026)²⁴³. Besides that, in Georgia, the USAID has supported several critical activities and projects for building parliamentary capacity, including 'Promoting Rule of Law in Georgia (PROLoG) Activity' (2015–2021)²⁴⁴, which aimed to enhance the legal framework relating to human rights and due process protections. The project, implemented by the East-West Management Institute, engaged various stakeholders in the NGO community, the parliament, the Ministry of Justice, and other vital institutions and provided critical workshops for multiple stakeholders and trainers despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic²⁴⁵. The project also positively shaped the work of governmental institutions during the pandemic²⁴⁶. Another important project was the 'Human and Institutional Capacity Development (HICD) Activity in Georgia'²⁴⁷, which aimed to achieve sustainable results in key Georgian institutions' human and institutional capacity development. Despite the tense political environment in Georgia, the project engaged with the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) of Georgia, whose work directly impacts the work of other state institutions, including the parliament. Most importantly, the project assisted the Public Defender of Georgia (Ombudsperson's Office) and has

²³⁹ See <https://www.iri.org/>.

²⁴⁰ USAID (2023) 'Governance and Decentralization,' 31 May 2023, accessed 27/10/2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/ukraine/fact-sheets/may-26-2022-governance-and-decentralization>.

²⁴¹ USAID (2024) 'Inclusive and Accountable Representation,' accessed 26/10/2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/kosovo/fact-sheets/aug-21-2023-inclusive-and-accountable-representation#:~:text=Inclusive%20and%20Accountable%20Representation%20is,integrity%20and%20resilience%20to%20information>.

²⁴² PMCG (2024) 'National Governance Program,' accessed 26/10/2024, <https://pmcg-i.com/project/national-governance-program/>.

²⁴³ 'Governing Justly and Democratically: Strengthening Participatory Democracy,' USAID, accessed 26/10/2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/moldova/governing-justly-and-democratically>.

²⁴⁴ East-West Management Institute (EWMI) (2021), 'Promoting Rule of Law in Georgia (PROLoG) Activity 2015–2021'. Available at: <https://ewmi.org/promoting-rule-law-georgia-prolog-activity>, accessed 28/10/2024.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ USAID (2020) 'Promoting Rule of Law in Georgia (PROLoG): Quarterly Report Year Six, April 1, 2020 – June 30, 2020'. Available at: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WR3B.pdf, accessed 28/10/2024.

²⁴⁷ PMC Group. (n.d.). 'Human and Institutional Capacity Development (HICD) Activity'. Available at: <https://pmcg-i.com/project/human-and-institutional-capacity-development-hicd-activity/>, accessed 28/10/2024.

contributed to several key results, such as improved HR Strategy, improved IT and cybersecurity infrastructure, etc.²⁴⁸.

USAID also engages in multilateral channels of support, such as the Moldova Partnership Platform and the Open Government Partnership²⁴⁹. The United States House of Representatives is involved with democracy promotion through the HDP²⁵⁰, providing opportunities for individuals from EU candidate countries, including Moldova, as of October 2022²⁵¹, to observe and engage with the political process of the United States. The insight provided by a USAID representative for Moldova suggests that such direct-participatory exchange programmes, with the United States House of Representatives or with EU institutions, provide a high rate of return. This is because such programmes facilitate the transfusion of democratic principles and practices that are often missing in post-communist societies²⁵². The lack of practical experience that United States agencies and practitioners have with the parliamentary system is an area where the EU could take a more active role, especially in the more technical aspects of the legislative process²⁵³.

In addition, a strong player in parliamentary capacity-building is the NDI, which has long-standing and wide-ranging experience in parliamentary strengthening initiatives in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova²⁵⁴. Interviewed stakeholders from EU national parliaments have underlined the impact of cooperation with the NDI in various initiatives. For instance, since December 2020, the NDI has cooperated with the Czech and Slovak parliaments to establish a Parliamentary Institute in the Parliament of Albania to strengthen research and training capacities for Albanian MPs²⁵⁵.

Likewise, the IRI is a democracy-promoting organisation whose strategy for building parliamentary capacity in host countries relies on a 'supply-side' and 'demand-side' approach, with the former emphasising government institution's ability to engage with and respond to its constituents' needs and interests, and the latter on engaging with developing an active civil society to encourage government accountability²⁵⁶. The Baltic Eurasia Inter-Parliamentary Training Institute (BEIPTI) is a parliamentary capacity-building programme launched by the IRI, the goal of which is to provide officials from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine with best practices for strengthening democratic norms and practices in their respective governments through exchanges with Baltic states' parliamentarians²⁵⁷. The BEIPTI has hosted approximately 500 elected officials from participating countries²⁵⁸. The IRI is also a contributing partner to the 'MIPPP' programme and 'USAID RADA: Next Generation (RANG) Program' (see above). Switzerland has also dedicated substantial funding and initiatives to parliamentary support in EU candidate countries via the Swiss Parliament Support Programme, and the UK government has been an

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Interview USAID1.

²⁵⁰ 'The House Democracy Partnership,' *The House Democracy Partnership*, accessed 27/10/2024, <https://hdp.house.gov/about>.

²⁵¹ Interview USAID1.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ See <https://www.ndi.org/house-democracy-partnership> and <https://www.ndi.org/legislative-openness>.

²⁵⁵ Czech Chamber of Deputies – Parliamentary Institute, <https://pspen.psp.cz/office-of-the-chamber/parliamentary-institute/inter-parliamentary-cooperation/>.

²⁵⁶ International Republican Institute, 'Submission to the House of Commons International Development Committee Inquiry on Parliamentary Strengthening,' UK Parliament, accessed online 19 October 2024, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/54700/html/>.

²⁵⁷ International Republican Institute, 'Baltic Eurasia Inter-Parliamentary Training Institute Program Summary,' International Republican Institute, accessed 19 October 2024, <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/Baltic%20Eurasia%20Inter-Parliamentary%20Training%20Institute%207-2011.pdf>.

²⁵⁸ 'Baltic Eurasia Inter-Parliamentary Training Institute,' International Republican Institute, accessed 19 October 2024, <https://www.iri.org/what-we-do/programs/baltic-eurasia-inter-parliamentary-training-institute-eurasia-regional/>.

active and strong player in parliamentary strengthening, mostly through funding the WFD (see Mapping Overview)²⁵⁹.

Within the EU, the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) has been instrumental in providing networking opportunities for parliamentary staff from EU candidate countries, particularly in the Western Balkans, within the framework of its 'Regional Cooperation for EU integration' programme. Although having a dedicated parliamentary track only as of 2021, parliamentary staff were occasionally involved even earlier when topics related to EU *acquis* and transposition were discussed in settings dominated by representatives of ministries of foreign affairs and EU integration²⁶⁰. From the donor perspective, the network facilitates some technical capacity-building (in terms of *acquis* approximation), shares best practices in public outreach and oversight of the accession process, and maps the respective needs of national parliaments in the Western Balkans. The document 'Principles of Effective Parliamentary Oversight in the European Integration Process' focuses on these aspects and does not directly address the more political aspects of executive oversight. In fact, the technical, non-political aspect of the programme has been at the fore: 'We try to be on the technical level, don't let the political level ruin it'²⁶¹. Such a view was supported by another interviewee who mentioned that GIZ used to work on technical assistance primarily and 'now tries to apply technical criteria to political situations, i.e. consider how many meetings were held, etc.'²⁶². From the participant's perspective, the main advantage is that 'now we have contacts for everyone', as a Serbian parliamentary staff member mentioned²⁶³, providing examples of contacting Albanian and Montenegrin colleagues to discuss particular transposition and reporting issues. A notable example of a think tank engaged in strengthening parliaments is the Centre for European Security Studies (CESS), which focuses on enhancing the capacity of parliaments to exercise effective oversight, accountability, and transparency, particularly in the field of security sector governance. CESS's activities revolve around promoting inclusive oversight and engaging with parliamentary bodies, CSOs, and other key stakeholders. To this end, CESS produces policy briefs and papers on various issues and organises targeted training sessions for MPs and parliamentary staff. CESS focuses on the latter, recognising that they are often more responsive to training and serve as critical long-term assets in developing democratic practices. By consistently engaging the various individuals across different institutions, CESS builds a community of well-informed, skilled professionals who can foster greater legislative efficiency and accountability. CESS's training programmes have garnered positive feedback, especially from younger MPs and parliamentary staff who value the opportunity to gain new skills and forge meaningful connections with peers from other institutions. An example of critical activity organised by CESS is the simulation games for parliamentary staff and representatives from other institutions, which can now be organised in roughly 20 scenarios prepared by the CESS staff. CESS also works closely with parliamentary research centres, providing training on policy drafting. The organisation's geographical focus spans several regions, with notable engagement in the Western Balkans. For instance, in North Macedonia, CESS helped develop a parliamentary committee monitoring tool and contributed to drafting a code of conduct. CESS has also conducted projects in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, tailoring its initiatives to the specific needs of each country's parliament but mainly focusing on security sector oversight. In recent years, CESS's work has expanded to address emerging challenges in cybersecurity and legislative oversight in defence matters, reflecting its

²⁵⁹ The Mapping Overview for this Report is available on the website of the Global Governance Institute:
<https://www.globalgovernance.eu/project/enhancing-democracy-through-parliamentary-capacity-building-in-eu-accession-countries>.

²⁶⁰ Interview DE1.

²⁶¹ Idem.

²⁶² SRB4.

²⁶³ SRB6.

commitment to equipping parliaments with the tools and knowledge necessary to navigate complex contemporary security issues.

Finally, recent years have also seen the emergence of new hybrid and multilateral initiatives in the realm of parliamentary capacity-building. The 'INTER PARES Parliaments in Partnerships' initiative is a project financed by the EC's DG INTPA (with funds from the NDICI) and implemented by the Stockholm-based think tank International IDEA in cooperation and coordination with a variety of partner organisations and partner parliaments. Crucially, it brings together representatives of the 27 EU national parliaments and has entered partnerships with the IPU, the EP and the EEAS²⁶⁴. The initiative has been mentioned by various interview partners from national parliaments, the EP, and parliamentary administrators from Montenegro and is cited as a good starting point for a more multilateral and coordinated approach. Yet, some representatives from EU Member State parliamentary administrations also expressed some worry that it could duplicate the existing work of EU national parliaments under Twinning programmes. Interviews with an INTER PARES senior staff member highlight, however, that there is a clear awareness about addressing the challenge of duplication, overlap and 'donor competition'. In this context, INTER PARES staff members have also developed an extensive donor mapping of activities related to support to the parliament of Ukraine to increase awareness of the variety of activities in the field and how to strengthen coherence. Some respondents stressed that INTER PARES lacked the political dimension in its activities, which, for example, the EP has with its Jean Monnet Dialogues and mediation workshops²⁶⁵. Yet, the project was lauded for its innovative focus on women and youth (including piloting a youth parliamentary academy) and its work on contributing to the development of benchmarks, guidelines and methodologies of parliamentary capacity-building in cooperation with international partners. Yet, further coordination and harmonisation with the EP (including the IPEX database) would be desirable to reinforce a structured and sustainable exchange between national parliaments and other international organisations in the field, such as the Council of Europe, OSCE and UNDP. Questions also emerge about the project's long-term sustainability as the second round of funding will end in 2025. If there is to be a follow-up third round of funding from the EC, effective coordination should receive prioritised attention, particularly with the role of the EP and IPEX. Since representatives from the EP's administration are part of the Steering Committee of INTER PARES and, in turn, INTER PARES officials are invited to the EP-led Democracy Support Network as well, there are already good foundations for enhancing cooperation and coordination. Ideally, this could lead to a structural approach to facilitate cooperation between the EP and the representatives of the 27 national parliaments across the EU and core staff members from the parliaments of the candidate countries. Within the EP itself, more robust cooperation and information flow should be facilitated between the Directorate-General Parliamentary Democracy Partnerships (DG PART), including its Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments on one side and the Directorate-General for External Policies (DG EXPO) and its Directorate for Democracy Support on the other. There is a clear need to improve the coordination and accessibility of democracy support activities under the Platform for EU Interparliamentary Exchange (IPEX).

Another important multi-actor initiative that involves international organisations, state-funded foundations and the INTER PARES project is the 'Indicators for Democratic Parliaments' project. As mentioned in Section 3 above, this is a multi-partner initiative led by the IPU that lists seven targets, 25 indicators and 108 dimensions that make up the Indicators for Democratic Parliaments. It can be used for a more precise and extensive definition of the functions of national parliaments but can also more precisely guide the work of parliamentary capacity-builders. During the test phase, the indicators and self-assessment tool were used and tested by members of the Albanian parliament²⁶⁶. Further testing and

²⁶⁴ See <https://www.inter-pares.eu/en/who-we-are>.

²⁶⁵ Interview with a representative from parliamentary administration in a candidate country, 25 August 2024.

²⁶⁶ See 'The Parliament of Albania uses the Indicators to guide its institutional reforms', available at <https://www.parliamentaryindicators.org/case-studies/parliament-albania-uses-indicators-guide-its-institutional-reforms>.

discussions of the adoption of the indicators should also be carried out by the EP and EC in coordination with representatives from the parliaments of EU Member States and external partners to better inform an evidence-based approach to evaluating the progress of national parliaments towards commonly agreed standards and commonly defined benchmarks.

Taken together, EU institutions and Member States do not act in a vacuum. They cooperate extensively with major international organisations and agencies active in the field of parliamentary capacity-building, either in the realm of standard-setting, review and monitoring (Venice Commission), operational in-country support missions (UNDP and OSCE Missions) and benchmark development (IPU) or the implementation of projects implemented by Member States. As various interviews highlighted the recurrent problems of duplication, overlap and lack of coordination, reflections on the EP's role in capacity-building should also include a potential coordinating or convening role, at least for all activities geared towards the parliaments of the EU enlargement countries.

4.4 Assessing support measures and future potential for the European Parliament: connecting dots and filling crucial gaps

Extensive information about the EP's activities in the realm of parliamentary capacity-building and democracy support can be found in the Annual Reports of the DEG. In addition, in 2019, the AFET and the Committee on Development (DEVE) committees requested a study on 'EP Democracy Support Activities and their follow-up, and prospects for the future', which provides some crucial insights into the EP's main activities from 2012 to 2019²⁶⁷. For an earlier external analysis, a study on 'Parliamentary Capacity-Building in EU candidate countries and potential candidates' was carried out in 2015, providing valuable insights into various parliamentary capacity-building initiatives, including several with the active contribution of the EP²⁶⁸. While these documents provided a useful starting point, a wide range of interviews with more than a dozen senior officials from the EP's administration were carried out. The interviews aimed to gain more up-to-date insights into the EP's past, current and potential future activities and approaches to strengthen national parliaments in the context of the new enlargement methodology.

The EP's work on democracy support (including parliamentary capacity-building) is coordinated at both the levels of MEPs and anchored in the EP's administration. At the political level, the DEG was created in 2012. It is the EP's body that is mandated to provide political guidance and supervision to the EP's activities in the area of democracy support. This includes actions in the four broad categories of 'Election observation and follow-up; support to partner parliaments; human rights, including Sakharov Prize Community activities and Mediation and Dialogue Support'²⁶⁹. The DEG is co-chaired by the chairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Development and consists of 16 MEPs appointed by the political groups. In addition, the DEG includes the chair of the Conference of Delegation Chairs, the chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, and parliament's vice-presidents responsible for human rights and democracy²⁷⁰.

²⁶⁷ See Holly Ruthrauff, Sarah Crozier and Hannah Roberts (2019) 'EP Democracy Support Activities and their follow-up, and prospects for the future, Study requested by the AFET and DEVE Committees, Brussels: Policy Department for External Relations of the European Parliament', January 2019, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU\(2019\)603474](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2019)603474).

²⁶⁸ Franklin de Vrieze (2015) 'Study on Parliamentary Cooperation: Overview of Parliamentary Capacity Building in EU Candidate countries and Potential Candidates', available at <https://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/agora-documents/2015-02-17-capacity-building-report.pdf>.

²⁶⁹ See Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (2024) 'Global Democracy Support 2024–2029', available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/287511/DEG%20brochure_EN.pdf.

²⁷⁰ See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/globaldemocracysupport/en/home/democracy-group>.

On the administrative side, a Directorate for Democracy Support was created in 2014 (succeeding the preceding Office for Promotion of Parliamentary Democracy) within the EP's Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union²⁷¹. The Directorate for Democracy Support consists of four units in line with the DEG's four broad categories of democracy support activities:

- Election Observation and Follow-up Unit;
- Parliamentary Support and Capacity-Building Unit;
- Human Rights Action Unit;
- Mediation and Dialogue Support Unit.

Despite a modest budget (around EUR 1.2 million a year) and comparatively limited human resources (around 16 administrators, a director, and several assistants), during the last decade, the different administrative units and the DEG members managed to advance a wide range of democracy support activities that are mutually reinforcing. Notably, the combination of parliamentary capacity-building activities on the one hand and mediation and political dialogue activities on the other (particularly through the Jean Monnet Dialogues) offers opportunities to tackle both technical and political issues in partner countries simultaneously. In addition, a capable administrative unit and dedicated MEPs also offer opportunities for further reinforcing the combination of technical expertise and political convening powers. Since 2014, the DEG and Directorate for Democracy Support have followed a 'Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach' that has undergone several revisions.

While the DEG and Directorate are not eligible for EC funding (they can hence not receive financing from Twinning, TAIEX or other funds), on a case-by-case basis, they can participate in events and activities upon invitation by consortium leaders, but without any coverage of costs. The lack of an appropriate and adequate budget for the Directorate's wide-ranging activities has been a recurring and persistent challenge for the work of the EP in parliamentary capacity-building.

Nevertheless, despite limited resources, the EP has conducted a wide range of capacity-building activities (see Annex 2 for a complete list of recent projects). These include in-depth workshops for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Ukraine and Albania parliament members and staff. As part of democracy innovations, the EP was also involved in creating a Citizen Assembly in Montenegro and Kosovo to strengthen the involvement of civil society in the candidate countries with a particular emphasis on topics related to recent challenges, such as how to tackle disinformation²⁷². The EP has supported Albania and Montenegro through several initiatives, including high-level roundtables on European integration, targeted study visits and fellowships for parliamentary staff. Some of the recent support for Ukraine focused on ethics standards, legislative procedures, macroeconomic and financial affairs, communications and outreach activities. In Moldova, the EP has undertaken targeted capacity-building initiatives to strengthen the Moldovan parliament's legislative and administrative functions in line with the EU accession standards. This includes several study visits for Moldovan parliament MPs on the EU accession process, support in interpretation and translation, seminars on monitoring and fighting disinformation, as well as seminars on transparency, legislative quality, and parliamentary research, ensuring that the Moldovan parliament is equipped with the necessary skills to improve the efficiency and openness of its proceedings²⁷³. Similarly, the EP has facilitated study visits for Georgian MPs to the EP and other EU parliaments, offering Georgian law-makers practical insights into the workings of European parliamentary systems and encouraging the adoption of EU-aligned legislative practices²⁷⁴.

²⁷¹ See [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/reg/2012/0002/EP-PE_REG\(2012\)0002_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/publications/reg/2012/0002/EP-PE_REG(2012)0002_EN.pdf).

²⁷² Interviews with European Parliament capacity-building unit.

²⁷³ Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group - Annual Reports 2016-2023.

²⁷⁴ Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group - Annual Report 2017 - (8th Legislature).

The majority of interviewed stakeholders underlined the importance and impact of the Jean Monnet Dialogues for Peace and Security. The Jean Monnet Dialogues allow political leaders from different opposing parties to be brought together, for example, at the remote Jean Monnet House in the French countryside, to address core political disagreements and reach a proactive consensus²⁷⁵. Dialogues in three countries have so far been organised to address deep-rooted issues between the government and opposition parties – in Ukraine, Serbia (Inter-Party Dialogue) and North Macedonia. In the case of North Macedonia, the dialogues sought to tackle the complex and complicated process of the parliamentary deadlock. Interviews with parliamentary representatives from the three countries underlined the positive impact of the dialogue format since it provides a vital political tool beyond a narrow technical approach. Interviewed MPs and parliamentary staff from Ukraine have described the Jean Monnet Dialogue as highly effective²⁷⁶. As acknowledged by one of the interviewees, the Jean Monnet Dialogue and the EP's Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) in Ukraine (which produced the 'Report and Roadmap on Internal Reform and Capacity-Building for the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine') could be listed as timely and highly effective support measures²⁷⁷.

The NAM resulted from the deepening of Ukraine-EU relations against the backdrop of ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2014 and further agreement between the EP's President Martin Schulz and Chair of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Volodymyr Groysman to launch a comprehensive parliamentary support programme. Ukraine and the EP signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a Joint Framework for Parliamentary Support and Capacity Building in February 2015, renewed in 2021 and 2023²⁷⁸. The MoU mentioned several goals and objectives of the parliamentary support, such as:

- 'strengthening the constitutional roles of lawmaking, oversight and representation of the Verkhovna Rada;
- improving the quality of legislation and of the legislative process in Ukraine;
- increasing the transparency, predictability, efficiency and openness of the proceedings of the Verkhovna Rada;
- contributing to the effective implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.'

Through its 'Report and Roadmap on Internal Reform and Capacity-Building for the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine,' the NAM produced 42 actionable recommendations to achieve these goals, also outlining where the EP could contribute with its expertise and technical support or where external support could be valuable. In 2021, the EP and Ukraine signed another MoU on a Joint Framework for Parliamentary Democracy Support. The two parties agreed to work jointly to implement the NAM's report findings and recommendations, as well as the Conclusions of the Jean Monnet Dialogue, under the guidance of the EP and Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

However, the implementation of certain provisions of the report is lagging behind due to a lack of political will, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and war-related issues imposed by martial law. Reinforced commitment is needed by the EP to work together with Ukraine and international capacity-builders so as not to lose momentum in the parliament's internal reform process²⁷⁹. Respondents also stressed the need to focus on post-war Ukrainian democracy and institutional efforts in the long run. The EP could support this, including the restoration of citizens' rights that had been limited during the war, contributing to the monitoring of a fair electoral process, promoting decentralisation and, crucially, constitutional reform that

²⁷⁵ For more background information, see Holly Ruthrauff et al. *op.cit*, pp. 36-37.

²⁷⁶ Interviews with Members of the Parliament (Ukraine).

²⁷⁷ Interview UKRN2.

²⁷⁸ Jean Monnet Dialogue with the Ukrainian Parliament, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/285651/MoU_EP_VRU_28_November_2023_SIGNED_EN.pdf.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

would strengthen the system of checks and balances and clearly delineate rights, functions and responsibilities between different branches of power in Ukraine²⁸⁰.

In relation to the Jean Monnet Dialogues, some challenges were also identified, such as the widespread ability of ruling parties to *de facto* control the process and, in many cases, avoid meaningful commitments²⁸¹. The dialogue requires not only strong commitment from all parties, extensive time and expertise, and political capital invested by the EP but also a long-term follow-up to guarantee that agreements are honoured and implemented by all parties in the long run. Interviews with EP staff involved in mediation and dialogue underline that maintaining and implementing a hard-won consensus cannot be done by the EP alone but also requires reinforcement and complementary action by other actors on the ground, such as EU Delegations, EU Member States, core supporting non-EU countries (for example USA, Canada, Switzerland, Norway etc.), international organisations and their programmes (for instance UNDP), but also CSOs. In this context, respondents also underlined the crucial influence of the US in the region in terms of operational funds, political influence and various capacity-building programmes implemented by USAID and the NDI.

In relation to Georgia, where the EP has tried to establish a Jean Monnet Dialogue for some years, the deterioration of the political situation and relations with the EU, in general, has affected the influence of the EP – which was considerable only a few years ago²⁸². Several former MP interviewees still mentioned the importance of the EP in promoting democracy in Georgia through its capacity-building support measures²⁸³. Some respondents viewed the EU's overall support measures to civil society and NGOs as an effective means of democratisation, including programmes focusing on education and regional development²⁸⁴.

Among the mentioned support measures provided to Georgia collaboratively by several EU bodies and involving EU Delegations and Member States were EU4Democracy and its EU4Georgia programme²⁸⁵, which positively contributes to boosting parliamentary capacities and civic participation²⁸⁶. The interviewee also mentioned the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia, which serves as a valuable framework for providing technical and financial support²⁸⁷. Nevertheless, efforts targeted at mediating the political crisis failed to build trust among parties in the Georgian parliament, which also led to problems in implementing critical EU integration reforms²⁸⁸. Under such circumstances, the Georgian parliament cannot be called an independent institution capable of effectively exercising oversight²⁸⁹.

Another interviewee highlights the necessity of increased cooperation between the EP and the Georgian society and NGOs, especially in the areas of parliamentary oversight and enforcement of effective and practical rules of procedure in the Georgian parliament²⁹⁰. The interviewee calls for the EP to play a more significant role in addressing polarisation issues within parliament by supporting political parties and ensuring unity between them²⁹¹. As a suggestion, the reintroduction of Jean Monnet Dialogue, which was quite effective before the ruling party blocked it, could be a starting point. However, it necessitates consultations with the ruling party or coming back to these support measures after elections take place in

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ NMAC 3-4, SRB5, TR3-4, DE2.

²⁸² Interview with the Georgian NGO representative.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Interview with CSO representative from Georgia, former Member of the Parliament.

²⁸⁶ EU4Georgia. (n.d.). Projects. EU4Georgia. Accessed October 14, 2024, Available at: <https://eu4georgia.eu/projects/>.

²⁸⁷ Interview with CSO representative from Georgia, former Member of the Parliament.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Interview with CSO representative from Georgia.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

Georgia²⁹². Informal meetings between the MEPs and Georgian MPs could be another option if the Jean Monnet Dialogue remains blocked²⁹³. After the elections, the EP could focus on providing training for newly elected MPs, focusing on parliamentary oversight mechanisms that would make the government genuinely accountable²⁹⁴. Although it has been recognised that the current Georgian parliament does not take into consideration inputs from the NGOs, the interviewee still calls for more support dedicated to boosting the capacities of civil society organisations (CSOs) to ensure that any future reforms of the parliament will rely on high-standard recommendations provided by the NGOs²⁹⁵.

In addition, respondents from EU national parliaments expressed their appreciation of the capacities and impact of the EP in capacity-building and mediation, particularly its convening power and expertise²⁹⁶. In this light, respondents also envisaged the EP taking on a stronger role as a central organ for facilitating coordination, mapping, and exchanges of best practices for national and international actors involved in parliamentary capacity-building in the nine candidate countries²⁹⁷. Indeed, while international bodies such as the IPU might be more suitable for global convening and provision of expertise, the EP has the potential to become a more active, natural coordinating and convening centre for parliamentary capacity-building initiatives and democracy support actions towards the candidate countries in the context of enlargement. This could also entail the tracking and advancement of synergies of developments in partner organisations and assemblies, such as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA), the Council of Europe PA and NATO PA.

The EP already has elements of the necessary coordination tools in place. As the host of IPEX²⁹⁸ and the network with national parliaments on democracy support (DSN), the EP could become a fundamental centre for expertise, a repository of best practices (via an updated IPEX system) and an active convenor of a variety of capacity-building activities. Given its role within the enlargement process, the EP can also be an essential conduit between the enlargement countries' parliaments, national EU parliaments, international capacity-builders, civil society and the EC²⁹⁹. However, long-standing budgetary and personal shortages would have to be addressed for this. The EP already plays a critical role in new, multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as INTER PARES. There is, therefore, a window of opportunity to deepen this much-needed role and expertise in the context of the new enlargement methodology and accession process.

Finally, various interview partners at EP and national levels have floated the idea of reinforcing EP's Young Leaders Programme (to identify potential civil society leaders and young political leaders committed to pluralism and democracy more pro-actively and independently from candidate countries' ruling parties) and reinforcing the Women Empowerment (formerly Simone Veil) programme with a particular focus on the regions of the enlargement countries.

Taken together, the EP has developed on various fronts during the last decade as a crucial actor in the field of parliamentary capacity-building, bringing together significant technical approaches with political and mediation initiatives. Given its role as a core actor in the EU enlargement process and a vital organisation in the broader environment of capacity-building initiatives, it might also play a more active role in becoming the hub for coordination and exchanges of best practices in the future. There is, however, a need

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Interviews with representatives from German, Dutch, Swedish and Czech parliaments.

²⁹⁷ Interview with Danish representative of the national parliament.

²⁹⁸ IPEX stands for 'interparliamentary platform for exchange of EU information between the national parliaments in the EU and the European Parliament. IPEX consists of a database containing documents from the EU institutions and parliamentary documents uploaded by the national parliaments themselves. It also provides a calendar of interparliamentary conferences and meetings, as well as information about national parliaments in the EU and the European Parliament. Furthermore, IPEX hosts the websites of a number of interparliamentary conferences that are arranged on a regular basis' – available at <https://www.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/about>.

²⁹⁹ Interviews with European Commission officials.

for an improved internal cross-service EP coordination. Political linkages regarding thematic work impacting democracy support in specific countries (external financing and related dialogues with the EC, EP enlargement reports) should be better exploited, and funding and benchmarks for internal and external democracy support within the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are needed.

5 Towards more coherent and collective impact

The parliamentary strengthening and of the EU enlargement has provided useful context for stronger coordination and cooperation with a variety of organisations active in the regions of the enlargement countries. Yet, despite the firm opinion and various pleas for more coordination expressed by most interviewed experts and representatives of institutions active in the field of parliamentary strengthening, inter-organisational and inter-parliamentary coordination of parliamentary capacity-building remains relatively rare. This is not only a lost opportunity for a more advanced exchange of best practices and the build-up of shared knowledge, but it also leads to harmful duplication, competition and adverse effects. Respondents from parliaments in the candidate countries have underlined that they are often overwhelmed by the sheer number of requests made by national parliaments or international organisations to participate in capacity-building projects, capacity-building field has grown significantly since the mid-1990s with a wide range of actors in the field. From international organisations, such as UNDP, OSCE, IPU, Council of Europe and NATO PA and state-funded actions and agencies, such as USAID, GIZ, or the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation to non-state actors, such as the Westminster Foundation or the NDI, the sheer volume of money, time, know-how and resources spent on the democratic development of parliaments around the world is astonishing. In addition, and next to this environment of different actors, a wide range of national parliaments of EU Member States as well as the EP, have also become active providers of parliamentary capacity-building next to a variety of financial instruments and approaches by the EC. Yet, as a percentage of development aid or funding dedicated to democracy support, the field of parliamentary capacity-building is still relatively small. Thus, there is a solid and compelling argument for enhancing collective impact and facilitating attempts for more coordination between the different organisations, institutions and bodies active in the field. While the IPU is the body with the most apparent and active convening power at the global level, the context workshops, trainings or visits. This is particularly true for EU Twinning projects, which often include more than 100 different activities to be completed during a two-year timeframe. As one interviewed staff member of a Western Balkan parliament stressed: ‘We are a relatively small unit and our parliamentarians are often focusing on their own work – we therefore increasingly do not have the capacities and time to participate in the many training, even though they would be handy for our work’³⁰⁰. Yet, resource constraints also emerge on the part of EU Member State parliamentarians and staff members in an era of cut-backs and increasing workload.

Lack of coordination was also mentioned by staff members of OSCE and UNDP missions, who had to step into the coordination governance gap when recipient country governments failed to fulfil their designated tasks and role of coordination³⁰¹. There are also calls for improvement among respondents from candidate countries, particularly urging international partners to address issues that require minimal resources and are just as important as other issues yet are overshadowed by larger projects to which many donors want to contribute³⁰². Overall, while many recognise the coherence of support from entities like the OSCE, Council of Europe, and USAID, there is a strong need to harmonise project timelines and ensure that support strengthens key democratic institutions³⁰³. Furthermore, ensuring greater collaboration and

³⁰⁰ Interview with senior member of administration of a parliament in the Western Balkans.

³⁰¹ Interview with OSCE mission.

³⁰² Interview with CSO representative from Georgia.

³⁰³ Interview with CSO representative from Georgia, former Member of the Parliament.

communication between different projects is critical³⁰⁴. At times, it seems that some projects are trying to address overarching and intertwined problems or push for significant reforms in parliament. However, as often happens, reforms themselves are interconnected and only work in conjunction with other reforms, so intensive communication between projects and organisations is vital to understanding the local contexts and identifying potential challenges and opportunities.

Coordination worked best between bodies and organisations, where formal channels of inter-institutional cooperation have had a long history. For example, cooperation between the Council of Europe and the EC has been identified as a positive example of coordination. Yet, the institutionalisation of coordination or at least regular exchanges of information is less developed in the field of parliamentary capacity-building, even though several promising initial venues exist. Whether it is the existing IPEX system of the EP or new approaches by projects such as INTER PARES or Agora, the issue of coordination is already being discussed in various corners of the parliamentary capacity-building community. As outlined above, it would make sense to entrust the EP with a coordination role when it comes to the coordination of parliamentary capacity-building activities in the context of EU enlargement. This is not only sensible given existing approaches and infrastructure (such as IPEX and its national parliamentary DSN contact points) but has also been suggested and raised by national parliament staff members themselves. It would, therefore, be beneficial and valuable to carry out a feasibility study on how existing processes and institutions could be updated and enhanced to facilitate more coherence, inter-organisational cooperation and, hence, more collective impact at a critical time where effective, multi-actor parliamentary strengthening is more desperately needed than before.

6 Conclusions and policy recommendations

The EU's enlargement process is at a critical juncture. Amid geopolitical tensions in the wake of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and increasing Russian interference in the political systems of the Western Balkans, Georgia and Moldova as well as the EU itself, a reinvigorated enlargement process is seen as an eminent investment in the continent's security and democratic resilience. At the same time, the EU's new enlargement methodology of 2022 has also been devised with the aim of placing particular emphasis on the fundamentals of the rule of law and functioning democratic institutions. An essential aspect of this category and enlargement process objective is the role of parliaments of candidate countries, and indeed, 'the functioning of parliaments in a democratic system' is a significant aspect of the democratic aspects of the Screening Process. Yet, as the report has highlighted, national parliaments have also become somewhat vulnerable in accession countries, and inter-party cooperation has become difficult, complex, and, in some instances, even violent. State capture, concentration of power, marginalisation of the opposition, unconstructive opposition-governing majority relations, limited capacities for oversight functions, and increasingly polarised societies have weakened parliaments.

In this light, effective and comprehensive tools for strengthening the capacities of parliaments have become an important part of more comprehensive democratic efforts and should also become a strategic objective in the current and future phases of the accession process. Yet, there seems to be a governance gap at the heart of the EU institutions. As this report has highlighted, to start off, even though the EC has included the functioning of democratic parliaments under the heading of fundamentals and functioning democratic institutions, the lack of clear definitions, criteria and benchmarks leaves this element of the enlargement process rather vague. The EU has, at present, no generally accepted definition of functioning democratic institutions nor of a functioning democratic parliament in particular. As interview partners have underlined – this is not just a conceptual or definitional problem but a very practical one: how can supporting organisations design adequate and effective support and capacity-building projects and

³⁰⁴ Deveaux, K. & Konrieieva, T. (2021). 'Evaluation of the EU Support to Parliamentary Reform in Ukraine from June 2016 to February 2021'. Available at: <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/20281>.

initiatives for strengthening parliaments as functioning democratic institutions when the criteria are not entirely clear? To this end, this report clarified the most basic minimum definition the EC uses in official documents, particularly the enlargement communications of 2023 and 2024. The Commission's application of the criteria can be gleaned from the initial Screening Report that was conducted with Albania and North Macedonia, as well as from Rule of Law reports. In addition, past documents – particularly project fiches from funding streams for parliamentary capacity-building can shed further light on past and current criteria. In addition, a wide range of interviews were carried out with former and current Commission officials to clarify some common agreements on core criteria. Complementary interviews were carried out with representatives from national parliaments, the EP and implementation organisations, as well as administrative staff from the parliaments in the candidate countries themselves, to provide further insights into common understandings of core criteria and features of a parliament as a functioning democratic institution. Section 3 also discussed that during the last two decades, various international organisations have developed objective indicators and criteria for a functioning democratic parliament, the most recent example being the development of 25 Indicators for Democratic Parliaments, created by the IPU in cooperation with a variety of international organisations and the EU-funded INTER PARES project. Adopting, adapting and using these indicators could be helpful, as their use could address various issues related to uncertainty and confusion, as well as a lack of objective assessments related to criteria-based evaluations of functioning democratic parliaments.

Section 4 outlined in detail the different approaches and selected projects of a variety of organisations. Since UNDP and OSCE in-country presences began in the mid-1990s with dedicated parliamentary strengthening and support, they have far-reaching, in-depth experience with hands-on support to national parliaments in the accession countries. These range from technical assistance (like drafting rules of procedures, budget oversight capacities and research support) to more political aspects such as developing and adopting a Code of Ethics and Conduct. In addition, the IPU is the only organisation with a global reach and convening power dealing with national parliaments and the development of standards for advancing democratic parliaments. Cooperation between the EP and IPU should also be strengthened via the INTER PARES project. All EU Member State parliaments engage in inter-parliamentary diplomacy and collaboration. Over a dozen EU Member State parliaments reviewed for this study have engaged in capacity-building projects and activities – either via EU funding or through their own funding. There is a substantive body of experience and knowledge across the EU, but it is unfortunately diffuse, and no comprehensively coordinated approach for collecting and applying lessons learned for the effective design of follow-up activities has thus far been established. Indeed, Member State parliament representatives interviewed for this study underline that the EP (mainly via IPEX and its DSN) could play a central role as a knowledge and expertise hub and coordinating entity for collecting best practices, facilitating regular exchanges and collective impact in the field of parliamentary capacity-building. A strengthened 'Network on Parliamentary Democracy Support' that involves EU Member State parliaments and international organisations and NGOs active in the field could enhance the EP's role as a hub for more coherence and impact, particularly in the accession countries regions. Finally, respondents underlined the success and importance of flagship mediation and trust-building activities, such as the Jean Monnet Dialogues and Young Leadership Programme. The EP should enhance both programmes and consider expanding them to new countries.

Looking ahead, the need for well-designed, well-funded and well-networked capacity-building and democracy support programmes for the enlargement countries is indisputable. The various examples of parliamentary capacity-building projects discussed in this report underline not only that there is a vast field and network of organisations and expertise that focuses on supporting functioning democratic institutions in the EU Neighbourhood but that the EP itself has become a significant actor in its own right in this area. Yet, too often, there are still question marks when it comes to transparent and comprehensive evaluations and self-critical assessments of the failure and success of the many initiatives by various organisations.

What is more, the need for better coordination and complementary between the numerous players in the field of parliamentary capacity-building becomes particularly urgent considering the mounting anti-democratic challenges and developments in almost all of the 10 enlargement countries. As various respondents and the analysis in this report have highlighted, the EP is well placed to play a central role as convenor, coordinator and implementing institution of well-designed and reinforced capacity-building initiatives for strengthening national parliaments and, hence, the broader democratic functioning of democratic institutions and society at large in the context of the revised EU enlargement methodology.

In order to maximise its role and impact, the study makes the following policy recommendations:

Policy recommendations

1. Initiate an EU-wide clarification on and development of more transparent and detailed criteria and benchmarks of the common elements that make a parliament effective and a functioning democratic institution. The EP should engage in a comprehensive dialogue with the relevant DGs of the EC and other relevant actors (such as the EEAS, EU Delegations, and Council) to clarify criteria and definitions of effective parliaments as functioning democratic institutions. Given the EP's position and increasing expertise, the DEG and Directorate for Democracy Support could take the lead in this discussion, taking into account important developments advanced by other international organisations and agencies active in the field.
2. The EP's DEG Group should lead reflections and strategic discussions about an EU approach to creating transparent and user-friendly benchmarks for advancing and evaluating progress in parliamentary capacity-building. A starting point could be the adoption and EU-specific adaptation of the 25 'Indicators for Democratic Parliaments' in the EU's (and their partners') work on capacity-building to provide clarity and consistency across different capacity-building initiatives and organisations.
3. The DEG and Parliamentary Support and Capacity-building Unit should engage with the core external international organisations and agencies that are active in parliamentary support programmes to identify together best practices, limitations and the most persistent challenges when it comes to their past and present work with parliaments of the 10 enlargement countries. Such a discussion could be held initially in a flexible manner with a view to more formalised coordination and exchanges in the mid-term.
4. The DEG and Directorate for Democracy Support should lead the focus on strengthening the role of parliamentary independence in the accession process: the EP should be the voice for placing a greater emphasis on the strengthening of capacities and independence of parliaments as an important cornerstone of functioning democracies, particularly in countries where legislative bodies are dominated by the executive. Future IPA funds should prioritise parliamentary capacity-building and institutional reforms that promote checks and balances between the branches of government. This also includes the EU accession process, which is often Commission-Government dominated, which should consist of an EP-led process that monitors more comprehensive indicators for parliamentary strengthening or decline.
5. The EP should lead discussions on incentivising parliamentary reforms through conditionality: the EU's enlargement policy already ties financial assistance to reform progress. This conditionality approach should be strengthened in the realm of parliaments as functioning democratic institutions, ensuring that progress in building and sustaining functioning democratic institutions directly impacts access to EU funds. Both the negative and positive 'democratic conditionality' (sticks and carrots in funding) should be further strengthened.

6. To advance coherence and cooperation, the EP should enhance the capacities of IPEX and 'The Network with National Parliaments on Democracy Support' to promote coordination and systematic identification of best practices of the national parliaments of the 27 Member States and their capacity-building work with parliaments in the accession countries. This includes regular dialogues with national parliament representatives, a more user-friendly, up-to-date and detailed IPEX database and a more comprehensive development of the Network on Democracy Support. This would also include a more streamlined and extensive cooperation between the EP's Directorates for Democracy Support and for Relations with National Parliaments in terms of information exchange and effective coordination.
7. The Directorate for Democracy Support and its Parliamentary Support and Capacity-Building Unit, in particular, should take the lead in creating more coherence between the various activities, databases and coordination mechanisms of EP-internal and external activities, initiatives and expertise related to parliamentary strengthening and capacity-building. The objective of this exercise should be the advancement of more systematic exchanges and – at a minimum level – information sharing related to initiatives towards the enlargement countries.
8. To enhance the effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives in candidate countries and to strengthen the coherence of support measures, it is recommended that the EU's delegations in these countries actively facilitate coordination and communication among various donors and projects. This will lead to better information exchange, identifying potential implementation risks and challenges, sharing past experiences, and discovering new opportunities for parliamentary capacity-building in line with the needs of distinct local contexts. An improved collaboration between the EP, the European External Action Service, and the EC is essential, especially since the latter funds numerous capacity-building projects for parliaments in various enlargement countries undertaken by other actors.
9. The EP should enhance regular cooperation and coordination between DEG and the European Endowment for Democracy (beyond the launch of the annual reports) to strengthen collaboration between civil society and human rights defenders linked to the functioning of parliament and political culture.
10. The EP should build further on the successes and (participants') appreciation of the Jean Monnet Dialogues and consider reinforcing and expanding the programme to other accession countries. Many stakeholders in the region and among the EU Member States have mentioned the Jean Monnet Dialogues as a successful tool for tackling political deadlocks and relations between different parties and political actors in accession countries. Yet, the EP needs to develop further political mechanisms for monitoring and ensuring that participants also deliver commitments voiced during such dialogues.
11. The EP should further enhance the Young Political Leaders programme and ensure that the identification and selection of 'future leaders' take place in an independent manner, being mindful of avoiding the undue influence of governments and ruling parties and including a wide variety of young leaders from civil society (including human rights defenders).
12. The EP should ensure a strong balance between a technical (de-politicised) and deliberately political approach to candidate countries' problematic democratic challenges (e.g. state capture, executive-opposition relations, etc.), utilising the DEG's political convening power of experienced lead MEPs and the extensive administrative expertise in capacity-building of the Directorate for Democracy Support.
13. The EP should monitor and address backsliding: the EP's DEG should develop and lead mechanisms to address democratic backsliding, such as the imposition of restrictive laws on civil society, as seen with Georgia's foreign agents law. Continuous monitoring and rapid

intervention mechanisms should be implemented to ensure that such developments do not undermine the long-term goals of accession. The EP and the EU as a whole should better coordinate their responses to the democratic backsliding in candidate countries in order to adapt to the situation on the ground comprehensively (including reinforced funding conditionality in the next MFF, raising democracy support during the (NDICI- Global Europe, IPA, external Facilities') Dialogues with the EC).

14. The DEG should take the lead in advancing improved internal and cross-service EP coordination. Political linkages regarding thematic work impacting democracy support in specific countries (external financing and related dialogues with the EC, EP enlargement reports) should be enhanced. A 'linked-up' strategy for funding and benchmarks for internal and external democracy support within the next MFF would be advantageous.
15. The DEG and the various units within the Directorate for Democracy Support should utilise the 'Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach' (CDSA) to develop parliamentary capacity-building initiatives that anchor political and technical parliamentary strengthening activities in the broader context of societal and political challenges in the enlargement countries. This also includes a reinforced emphasis on countering disruptive external influences aimed at undermining democratic processes, including disinformation campaigns in the run-up to parliamentary elections with a view to strengthening democratic resilience.

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8 Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Interviews

Interviews				
No.	Code	Organisation/ country	Institution / unit	Date
1	EUCOM 1	European Commission	DG NEAR	07.09.2024
2	EUCOM 2	European Commission	DG NEAR	3.09.2024
3	EUCOM 3	European Commission	DG NEAR	4.09.2024
4	EUCOM 4	European Commission	DG NEAR	4.09.2024
5	EUCOaM 5	European Commission	DG NEAR	06.09.2024
6	EEAS1	European External Action Service (EEAS)	EU Delegation to Serbia	5.09.2024
7	EEAS2	EEAS	EU Delegation to Moldova	10.09.2024
8	EEAS3	EEAS	EU Delegation to North Macedonia	17.09.2024
9	EEAS4	EEAS	EU Delegation to Montenegro	24.09.2024
10	EEAS5	EEAS	EU Delegation to Kosovo	19.09.2024
11	EC1	European Council	Cabinet of the President	2.09.2024
12	EP1	European Parliament	DG EXPO	17.09.2024
13	EP2	European Parliament	Mediation and Dialogue Support Unit, DG EXPO	6.09.2024
14	EP3	European Parliament	Human Rights Action Unit, DG EXPO	30.08.2024
15	EP4	European Parliament	DG EXPO	29.08.2024
16	EP5	European Parliament	DG EXPO	17.09.2024
17	EP6	European Parliament	DG EXPO	17.09.2024
18	EP7	European Parliament	DG EXPO	27.08.2024
19	EP8	European Parliament	Directorate for Democracy Support DG EXPO	01.10.2024
20	EP9	European Parliament	Directorate for Democracy Support DG EXPO	01.10.2024
21	EP10	European Parliament	Directorate for Democracy Support DG EXPO	01.10.2024
22	CZ1	Czechia	Parliamentary Institute, Office of the Chamber of Deputies	27.08.2024
23	CZ2	Czechia	Inter-parliamentary activities for Chamber of Deputies	27.08.2024
24	GER1	Germany	South East Europe Group, German Parliament	2.09.2024
25	GER2	Germany	German-Ukraine Group, German Parliament	19.08.2024
26	ND1	The Netherlands	Tweede Kamer	5.08.2024
27	BiH2	Bosnia and Herzegovina	PA of Bosnia-Herzegovina	18.09.2024
28	BiH1	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sarajevo University/Harvard University	16.09.2024
29	BiH3	Bosnia and Herzegovina	PA of Bosnia-Herzegovina	02.10.2024
30	GEORG1	Georgia	Former MP and member of EU Integration Committee	18.09.2024
31	GEORG2	Georgia	Democratic Institutions Support Programme at the Georgian Young	29.08.2024

Interviews				
No.	Code	Organisation/ country	Institution / unit	Date
			Lawyers' Association	
32	GEORG3	Georgia	Former Georgian MP	06.09.2024
33	MNT1	Montenegro	Parliament of Montenegro	14.08.2024
34	MNT2	Montenegro	University of Donja Gorica	20.09.2024
35	NMAC1	National Democratic Institute (NDI), North Macedonia	NDI	06.08.2024
36	NMAC2	North Macedonia	Open Society	13.08.2024
37	NMAC3	North Macedonia	IDSCS / Centre for Parliament Support and Democratisation	26.08.2024
38	NMAC4	North Macedonia	IDSCS / Centre for Parliament Support and Democratisation	26.08.2024
39	NMAC5	North Macedonia	Parliament of North Macedonia	01.08.2024
40	SRB6	Serbia	parliamentary staff member	04.09.2024
41	SRB1	Serbia	parliamentary staff member	08.08.2024
42	SRB2	Serbia	parliamentary staff member	08.08.2024
43	SRB8	Serbia	member of BiEPAG	16.09.2024
44	SRB7	Serbia	CRTA	13.09.2024
45	SRB4	Serbia	ISAC Fund	15.08.2024
46	SRB3	Serbia	Centre for European Policy	08.08.2024
47	SRB5	National Democratic Institute (NDI), Serbia	NDI	02.09.2024
48	SRB9	Serbia	Academic; parliamentary capacity-building expert	22.09.2024
49	SRB10	Serbia	Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute	25.09.2024
50	SRB11	Serbia	RES Foundation	24.09.2024
51	SRB12	Serbia	IDC Serbia	19.09.2024
52	Slo	Slovakia	Parliamentary Institute Chancellery of the National Council of the Slovak Republic	15.11.2024 (written answer)
53	TKY1	Türkiye	Professor; former parliamentary staff member	13.08.2024
54	TKY2	Türkiye	staff member of the Turkish Parliament	14.08.2024
55	TKY3	Türkiye	Istanbul University	09.09.2024
56	TKY4	Türkiye	Yeditepe University	09.09.2024
57	UKRN1	Ukraine	MP, Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs & Inter-parliamentary Cooperation, Ukrainian Delegation to the PACE	14.08.2024
58	UKRN2	Ukraine	MP, Subcommittee on Legislative Support for the Implementation of the	26.09.2024

Interviews				
No.	Code	Organisation/ country	Institution / unit	Date
			Strategic Course of the State for Full Membership in the EU and NATO	
59	UKRN3	Ukraine	National Institute of Strategic Studies	15.08.2024
60	UKRN4	Ukraine	MP of Ukraine, Member of the Executive Committee of the National Parliamentary Group in the IPU, Member of the Permanent Delegation to the PA of the Council of Europe	30.08.2024
61	KVO1	Kosovo	University of Prishtina	03.09.2024
62	NOR1	Norway	Department for European Affairs and International Trade	08.08.2024
63	USAID1	USAID	Democracy and Governance Office Director USAID Bureau for Europe and Eurasia	22.08.2024
64	OSCE1	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe	OSCE Mission to North Macedonia	22.08.2024
65	OSCE2	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe	OSCE Mission to Albania	13.08.2024
66	OSCE3	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe	OSCE Mission to Serbia	14.08.2024
67	OSCE4	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe	Parliaments and National Assemblies (Human Dimension/ Democratic Governance) OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina	10.09.2024
68	OSCE5	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe	Human Dimension/ Democratic Governance OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina	10.09.2024
69	OSCEPA1	OSCE Parliamentary Assembly	OSCE PA International Secretariat	12.09.2024
70	DE1	German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ)	Regional Cooperation for EU Integration	15.08.2024
71	DE2	Institute of Parliamentary Research, Berlin	Researcher	14.10.2024
72	SWE1	Swedish Parliament	International Department of the Riksdag Administration	13.09.2024
73	FRA1	French Senate	Senior Official, Department of International Relations	18.9.2024
74	FRA2	French Senate	Senior official EU affairs committee	18.9.2024
75	FRA3	French Senate	Administrator	18.9.2024
76	DEN1	Danish Parliament	International Department	6.9.2024
77	COE1	Council of Europe	Political Affairs and External Relations in the Council of Europe Secretariat	18.10.2024
78	COE2	Council of Europe	Member of Staff in the Youth Department, Directorate for Democracy	15.11.2024

Interviews				
No.	Code	Organisation/ country	Institution / unit	Date
79	NATO PA1	NATO Parliamentary Assembly	Defence and Security Committee at the NATO PA	9.10.2024
80	NATO PA2	NATO Parliamentary Assembly	Senior Official NATO Parliamentary Assembly	15.10.2024
81	NATO PA3	NATO Parliamentary Assembly	Democratic Resilience NATO Parliamentary Assembly	15.10.2024
82	UNDP1	UNDP, Georgia	Senior official UNDP Georgia	18.09.2024
83	UNDP2	UNDP, Albania	Staff in the Democratic Governance Team	18.09.2024
84	UNDP3	UNDP, Moldova	Senior Staff Member, Effective Governance Cluster	09.09.2024
85	IPU1	Inter-Parliamentary Union	Technical Cooperation Programme	20.09.2024 (written answer)
86	MEP	European Parliament	Member of the European Parliament's DEG	24.10.2024
87	INTER PARES	Inter Pares – Parliaments in Partnership	Senior Staff Member, Inter Pares – Parliaments in Partnership / IDEA	07.11.2024
88	CESS	The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS), The Netherlands	Senior Staff Member & Senior Researcher	15.11.2024
89	Lith	Lithuania - Parliament	Senior Member of Strategy and Innovation Unit, Lithuanian Parliament	04.11.2024 (written answer)
90	Cro	Croatia – formerly Mission of Croatia to the European Union	Senior Diplomat, formerly Mission of Croatia to the European Union	17.10.2024
91	Alb1	Albania/The Netherlands	Scholar on Human Rights and Democracy	21.10.2024
92	Alb2	Albania/United States	Scholar on good governance	23.08.2024

Appendix 2: Questionnaires

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

REPRESENTATIVES FROM CANDIDATE COUNTRIES' NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

1. What are the official definitions of 'functioning democratic institutions' (in the EU enlargement context or otherwise) that you are using? If there are no official definitions, how do you define or characterise it?
2. How would you describe the current situation of the national parliament as a 'functioning democratic institution'? Where do you see strengths and progress, where remaining weaknesses and challenges and why? In which aspects of its activity would your respective national parliament benefit from EU assistance?)
3. How do you monitor and evaluate progress towards meeting the EU's requirements for 'functioning democratic institutions'?

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4. Could you let us know some concrete examples of support measures by the EU institutions (Commission, Council or EP) that were successful in advancing concrete aspects of the national parliament as a functioning democratic institution? What made it successful? What, in turn, did not work well and why not?
 5. Could you let us know support measures by EU Member States and non-EU Member States that were successful or unsuccessful and why?
 6. Could you let us know support measures by other organisations (e.g. OSCE, Council of Europe, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, UN, Inter-Parliamentary Union or other NGOs) that were either successful or unsuccessful in helping the national parliament to strengthen core aspects of being a functioning democratic institution?
 7. What are, in your view, some noteworthy best practices by any of the above-mentioned institutions?
 8. How coherent are the different support measures you receive by EU and non-EU partners? How can more coherence be advanced?
 9. What are the most pressing needs of your national parliament, the EU institutions must address moving forward? How can the EU institutions better address the various challenges you are currently facing in advancing the national parliament's democratic functions?
 10. Please let us know any other aspect you deem important for improving external support measures

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

REPRESENTATIVES FROM EU MEMBER STATES' NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

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1. Please list any bilateral or multilateral support measures / capacity-building relationships you currently have / have had in the past with EU candidate countries (+Kosovo) in order to advance democracy and fundamental freedoms, particularly in relation to their national parliaments
 2. What are the official definitions of 'functioning democratic institutions' (in the EU enlargement context or otherwise) that you are using? If there are no official definitions, how do you define or characterise it?
 3. How would you describe the current situation of the candidate countries' national parliaments as 'functioning democratic institutions'? Where do you see strengths and progress, where remaining weaknesses and challenges and why?
 4. How do you monitor and evaluate progress towards meeting the requirements of 'functioning democratic institutions'?
 5. Could you let us know some concrete examples of your countries'/institution's support measures that were successful in advancing concrete aspects of the national parliaments as a functioning democratic institution? What made it successful? What, in turn, did not work well and why not?
 6. What are some clear 'best practices' in supporting candidate countries' development of their democratic institutions, particularly related to the parliaments?
 7. How do you perceive the work of the EU (institutions and Member States) in supporting candidate countries' developments as 'functioning democratic institutions'? What has worked? What has not worked? How can EU measures be improved?
 8. How coherent are the different support measures by the EU and other international entities (including your own)? How can more coherence be advanced?
 9. What are the most pressing needs EU institutions and EU Member States must address in relation to the candidate countries' parliaments moving forward? How can external actors better address the

various challenges candidate countries are currently facing in advancing their national parliaments' democratic functions?

10. What role can the EP in particular play in the future?

11. Please let us know any other aspect you deem important for improving external support measures

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

REPRESENTATIVES FROM INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS / NGOs / CIVIL SOCIETY

1. What are the official definitions of 'functioning democratic institutions' (in the EU enlargement context or otherwise) that you are using for your work? If there are no official definitions, how do you define or characterise it?

2. How would you describe the current situation of the candidate countries' national parliaments as a 'functioning democratic institution'? Where do you see strengths and progress, where are remaining weaknesses and challenges and why?

3. How do you monitor and evaluate progress in the candidate country towards meeting the requirements of 'functioning democratic institutions'?

4. Could you let us know some concrete examples of your organisation's support measures that were successful in advancing concrete aspects of the national parliaments as a functioning democratic institution? What made it successful? What, in turn, did not work well and why not?

5. What are some clear best practices in supporting candidate countries' development of their democratic institutions, particularly related to the parliaments?

6. How do you perceive the work of the EU (institutions and Member States) in supporting candidate countries' developments as 'functioning democratic institutions'? What has worked? What has not worked? How can EU measures be improved?

7. How coherent are the different support measures by the EU and other international entities (including your own)? How can more coherence be advanced?

9. What are the most pressing needs international organisations / civil society organisations must address moving forward? How can external actors better address the various challenges candidate countries are currently facing in advancing their national parliaments' democratic functions?

10. What role can the EP, in particular, play in the future?

11. Please let us know any other aspect you deem important for improving external support measures and democratic progress in the country you are working on.

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