



**EU Democracy Support to Lebanon:
Towards an Understanding of Local Voices
and Contestation**

Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of the European Union's (EU) democracy support practices in Lebanon, highlighting the challenges and contestations identified by civil society organisations (CSOs) and other local actors through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews. It reveals a complex relationship between the EU and local Lebanese stakeholders, marked by frustration, mistrust, and structural barriers that hinder meaningful engagement.

The report focuses on the EU's engagement in Lebanon, addressing contestation to the EU and feedback (1.2), interaction between local actors and the EU, including funding and constraints (1.3), central epiphanic moments and their unfolding (1.4), the role of gatekeepers (1.5) and two pivotal issues: the genocide in Gaza and Syrian refugees in Lebanon (1.6).

A major issue is the role of third-party implementers in EU-funded projects. These entities, often CSOs with prior experience in executing EU programming, act as intermediaries between the EU and Lebanese civil society. However, instead of fostering communication, these implementers create a rupture, positioning themselves as de facto gatekeepers. By justifying their role as "purely technical," they absolve the EU from accountability and create frustration among local actors. Consequently, EU-funded projects become "activity-driven" rather than catalyzing political or democratic change.

The proposal process for EU funding was also identified as a significant barrier. Local CSOs find the application process to be "the hardest to apply to," requiring specialized expertise that many organisations lack. This leads to the reinforcement of a small, trusted group of CSOs—often the "usual suspects" in dealing with the EU—thereby reinforcing the phenomenon of NGOisation. This process limits inclusion and creates an exclusionary environment that undermines the EU's ability to engage with a broad cross-section of Lebanese society.

Additionally, EU engagement is impacted by the geopolitical context, especially the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. These issues have led to heightened perceptions of EU double standards, particularly in its application of democratic values and human rights principles. One journalist remarked that "some leaders in Europe have shown that they believe human rights are not for Arabs," highlighting a pervasive sense of inequality in EU policies. Furthermore, the recent EUR 1 billion aid package to Lebanon, aimed at curbing migration flows, has been criticized as an act of "externalisation" that legitimizes the traditional political elite without requiring democratic reforms.

Finally, the Lebanese political elite was identified as another critical gatekeeper. Participants expressed frustration with the elite's hoarding of information and lack of transparent communication with the EU. The political elite's approval of the EUR 1 billion aid package without understanding its terms reflects the power dynamics that continue to shape EU-Lebanon relations.

In conclusion, the report calls for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of EU democracy support in Lebanon. The EU should reassess its approach, taking into account local frustrations, structural barriers, and the broader geopolitical context, to foster more inclusive and meaningful engagement with Lebanese civil society and political actors.