

# EMBRACE: EMBRACing change - Overcoming Blockages and Advancing Democracy in the European Neighbourhood

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Since the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and the Arab Spring in MENA, few countries in the European neighbourhood have made progress in democratisation. Instead, reverse trends towards de-democratisation and il-liberalisation can be observed.

Funded by the EU Horizon Programme (2021-2027), the EMBRACE project investigates obstacles to democratisation in the European neighbourhood and identifies ways to overcome them. It examines various types of blockages (behavioural, institutional, structural) and studies the cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts in which they emerge. It also reviews the EU's ambitious instruments and impact on democratisation over the last two decades, and engages partners and stakeholders from EU and non-EU countries.



## INNOVATIVE ASPECTS

While having one single coordinator within Horizon Europe project is standard, the EMBRACE project decided for a co-coordinatorship, involving effective collaboration between two entities: Berghof Foundation, focusing on consortium cohesion and external outreach, and Würzburg University, overseeing the scientific aspects.

Weekly project management meetings ensure a strong coordination and smooth communication. This approach emphasizes a division of labour, with each entity leveraging its strengths for effective project management and may serve as an example for others to move the burden of coordination on many shoulders instead of one institution.

## WINNING ELEMENTS

One big strength of the project is the diversity of the consortium including regional partnerships. While a well-balanced consortium is important in all proposals under Horizon Europe, EMBRACE managed to include a wide range of different organizations on an equal level. Including regional partners from all countries where case studies are undertaken not just as some kind of secondary partners that would just collect data and analysis while the concrete applications are done in Europe but giving them a real role in the project is key.

An additional asset evaluators valued, was the installation of stakeholder committees. These six committees, comprised of policymakers and other actors from the EU and the five study regions, monitor, and advise the entire research process, ensuring that both EU and local needs and narratives are considered. It enables the project partners to present interim results already during the project's runtime and co-create further steps together with stakeholders to sharpen the focus and deliver high quality research results toward the end of the project.

## CHALLENGES

The project faced challenges adapting to the new Horizon Europe scheme, including the new impact approach with its three dimensions. While those uncertainties could be solved quickly, the unclarity about the possible level of involvement of partners from the United Kingdom remained until the very last moment.

Unlike others, the project didn't face any significant challenges in translating between academia and practitioners. The diverse consortium, including NGOs with both research and practice experience, contributed to effective communication, and understanding amongst another.

## LESSONS LEARNED

One major lesson learned was the appointment of an "impact manager" within the project consortium. It proved extremely useful to have one partner specifically focusing on this to guarantee a successful impact approach.

Some learnings included budgetary details, like the consideration of an appropriate amount for expenses regarding open access of results. Additionally, centralizing budgets for meetings, social events etc. proved to be helpful to keep a clear overview of the financial situation.

## PROJECT'S IMPACT

As an interdisciplinary, participatory, cross-regional social sciences-based research project, EMBRACE stands at the nexus between fundamental research and practical application. It's combined aim is to advance evidence-based knowledge on blockages in democratisation and ways to overcome them beyond the state of the art while strengthening the capacity of policymakers and local stakeholders to advance democratisation in the European neighbourhood.

Innovative policy and practical tools and a knowledge exchange network are developed to support pro-democracy actors at all levels (national, regional, cross-regional and supranational). Cross-country knowledge exchange and mutual learning will increase the capacity of policymakers and stakeholders to identify, prevent or at least deal constructively with blockages to democratisation once they have emerged. In addition to various policy documents providing targeted recommendations for improved practices, training modules will be developed, tested, and made available via an online platform for stakeholder engagement, containing translated material in different languages.

## NCPs ASSISTANCE

In the project's view, getting in touch with the national contact point is crucial for reassurance, targeted advice, and staying informed about the latest trends and discussions with the European Commission. National contact points provide unique knowledge that complements semantic expertise, especially for teams focusing on research projects.

Useful advice included the importance of getting more practice partners and having an impact manager. The advice to focus on regional partners' roles and extensive collaboration with sister projects under the same call was also emphasized.