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EU Unpacked #7

George Robakidze

European Democracy Shield (2025)

An In-Depth Analysis for Non-Experts

December 2025

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1. Executive Summary

The European Democracy Shield is the EU's new comprehensive framework to protect European democracies from both internal and external threats. It addresses rising challenges such as foreign information manipulation and interference (**FIMI**), disinformation, cyber-attacks, online harms, AI-driven manipulation, and increasing pressure on free elections, independent media, and civil society.

The initiative expands on earlier EU efforts, including the **EDAP** (European Democracy Action Plan 2020) and the **DoD Package** (Defence of Democracy Package 2023), but extends significantly further. Its key element is the establishment of the **European Centre for Democratic Resilience (ECDR)**—a new EU-level institution created to coordinate information, analysis, early warning, and responses to threats against democratic systems.

The Democracy Shield has three pillars:

a) **Reinforcing situational awareness** through better detection of manipulation and stronger early-warning systems.

b) **Strengthening democratic institutions,** including elections, political processes, and independent media.

c) **Boosting societal resilience** through education, skills, digital literacy, and citizen engagement.

The Shield is politically important, indicating a move towards prioritising democratic protection alongside defence, cyber, and hybrid threats.

2. Why the Democracy Shield Matters

The EU faces a rapidly worsening threat landscape:

- Authoritarian regimes (especially Russia) utilise hybrid tactics to exploit social divisions, manipulate elections, undermine trust, and distort history.
- Technology-driven vulnerabilities have increased due to AI-generated content, deepfakes, and algorithm-driven polarisation.
- Falling revenues, platform dominance, and the rise of influencers as news sources weaken media ecosystems.
- Political actors encounter growing intimidation, online harassment, and targeted manipulation.
- EU candidate countries (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Western Balkans) are subject to especially intense pressure.

The Shield considers democracy not only a value but also a vital infrastructure requiring coordinated defence.

The European Democracy Shield is built around three central pillars that together form a comprehensive system for protecting democratic life in the EU. **Pillar One** focuses on understanding, detecting, and responding to threats through enhanced situational awareness and early warning mechanisms. **Pillar Two** strengthens the core institutions of democracy — elections, political processes, independent media, and the rule of law. **Pillar Three** reinforces societal resilience by equipping citizens with the skills, education, and engagement necessary to resist manipulation. Taken together, these pillars ensure that democracy is defended as both a core value and a vital infrastructure. Let's have a closer look at each of them.

3. Pillar One: Reinforcing Situational Awareness *(Detection, Early Warning, and Response)*

The EU intends to create a new institution coordinating threat detection and response at the European level.

3.1. The **European Centre for Democratic Resilience (ECDR)** is the operational heart of the Democracy Shield. It will:

- Collect and analyse information on **FIMI – Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference**

- Connect Member States' national agencies (e.g., France's Viginum, Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency)

- Link EU systems, including:
  - **RAS – Rapid Alert System: E**U mechanism to exchange early warnings on disinformation
  - **EDMO – European Digital Media Observatory: r**esearch network monitoring disinformation
  - **ECAT – European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency:** analyses algorithms of large platforms
- Provide **early-warning reports** on emerging manipulation campaigns
- Organise training, crisis exercises, joint responses
- Bring together civil society, journalists, researchers, and fact-checkers via a **Stakeholder Platform**

This is the first attempt to create an integrated EU-wide structure to detect and counter manipulation *before* it spreads.

3.2 Strengthening Rules for Digital Platforms

Several major EU laws are central to this effort:

- **DSA – Digital Services Act** - Regulates online platforms, obliging "Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs)" to mitigate systemic risks (e.g., harms to elections).
- **AI Act – Artificial Intelligence Act** - Requires labelling of AI-generated content, transparency for deepfakes, and detection of synthetic media.
- **Political Advertising Regulation** - Makes online political ads transparent, restricts foreign funding, and creates an EU-wide public database of ads.

The EU will also develop:

- **DSA Crisis Protocol** – a mechanism for coordinating action during major manipulation incidents.
- **Blueprint for Countering FIMI** – a joint EU guide for anticipating, detecting, and responding to disinformation threats.

3.3 Strengthening Fact-Checking and Research

- **ENFC – European Network of Fact-Checkers** will be established.
- **Expanded EDMO mandate** will support monitoring in all Member States and candidate countries.
- A **Common Research Support Framework** will provide researchers access to secure data and advanced detection tools.

4. Pillar Two: Stronger Democratic Institutions, Elections, and Media

4.1 Electoral Integrity

The document highlights elections across Europe face coordinated attacks involving: Disinformation, Cyber-attacks, Vote-buying, Covert political financing, including cryptocurrencies, Deepfake videos and Fake websites impersonating media or authorities

To counter this, the EU strengthens:

- **ECNE – European Cooperation Network on Elections** - Facilitates cooperation between national electoral authorities.
- **NIS2 – Network and Information Security Directive (updated EU cybersecurity rules)** - Improves protection of election infrastructure.
- **CRA – Cyber Resilience Act** - Ensures digital products used in elections meet cybersecurity standards.

The EU will also issue:

- **Guidance on AI in Elections**

- **Updated DSA Elections Toolkit**
- **Best-practice guidance on safety for political candidates and elected officials**

A particular focus is placed on threats targeting women candidates.

4.2 Media Freedom and Pluralism

The EU sees independent media as a foundation of democracy. Key instruments include:

- **EMFA – European Media Freedom Act** - Protects media independence, transparency of ownership, and limits political interference.
- **Anti-SLAPP Directive** - Protects journalists from abusive lawsuits designed to silence them.

Upcoming actions include:

- **Review of the AVMSD – Audio-visual Media Services Directive** - Updating rules to strengthen local media, regulate influencers, and modernise advertising.
- **Review of the Copyright Directive** - Addressing AI training on copyrighted content.
- **Media Resilience Programme** - Financial support for independent journalism, local media, media literacy, and digital transformation.
- Stronger enforcement of competition rules under:
  - **DMA – Digital Markets Act**
  - **EU antitrust law**
  - Revised **Merger Guidelines**

Special emphasis is placed on vulnerable countries, including candidate states and those fighting foreign interference.

5. Pillar Three: Boosting Societal Resilience and Citizen Engagement

5.1 Citizenship Education and Skills

A core idea of the Shield is that democracy is defended not only by institutions but also by **informed citizens**.

Key initiatives:

- **Union of Skills (EU flagship initiative)**
- **Basic Skills Support Scheme** for schools
- **2030 Roadmap on Digital Education**
- Updated guidelines on **media literacy**, **critical thinking**, and **AI literacy**
- **EU Citizenship Competence Framework** (new)

The objective is to embed democratic skills into education systems from an early age.

5.2 Media Literacy Beyond Schools

The EU will support:

- Libraries, youth centres, civil society organisations
- Community-based media literacy projects
- Intergenerational initiatives (elderly and youth)
- Digital literacy programmes targeting vulnerable groups

6. Moldova Case Study: A Real Example of Hybrid Threats

The document uses Moldova as a detailed case study to demonstrate the scale of Russian interference, the use of AI-generated content, fake bomb alerts, cyber-attacks, disinformation targeting elections and the EU

integration narrative, vote-buying, and illicit financial flows. The EU supported Moldova through EDMO FACT Hub, cyber and hybrid threat simulations, platform escalation mechanisms, the EUPM – EU Partnership Mission, support for civil society, independent media, and strategic communication. Moldova is framed as proof that resilience investments work — and that candidate countries require even more substantial support.

7. Implications for EU Member States

The Democracy Shield marks significant changes: protecting democracy now integrates security and defense policies; the EU will enhance collaboration on elections, safeguarding the information space, and media oversight; Member States are expected to fulfill new responsibilities under the DSA, AI Act, EMFA, and other laws; and national authorities will participate more actively in the ECDR, sharing sensitive information more frequently.

8. Key Risks and Challenges

Despite its ambitious goals, the Shield faces several structural challenges, including:

- The reliance on voluntary participation by Member States, which may limit its effectiveness, and inconsistent national capacities that could lead to uneven protection.
- Financial instability within the media sector remains a persistent systemic issue.
- Hybrid threats are evolving faster than our regulatory tools can keep pace.
- Political polarisation might hinder the implementation of measures at the national level.
- AI-generated manipulation is becoming increasingly sophisticated.

A key test will be whether the ECDR can effectively coordinate systems, navigate political sensitivities, and provide clear, actionable early warnings.

9. Conclusion

The European Democracy Shield represents the EU's most comprehensive effort to date to defend democracy as a strategic asset. It treats the democratic system as **critical infrastructure**, requiring:

- real-time monitoring and early detection of threats
- coordinated response mechanisms and strict rules for digital platforms and AI,
- resilient elections, protected media and empowered citizens.

For Member States and candidate countries, it signals a new era where democracy protection moves from a political principle to a **security necessity**.

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George Robakidze

George is a diplomat and expert in international politics, security and European integration. During his career in the Georgian public service (2004–2023), he held senior positions focused on political affairs, European and Euro-Atlantic integration and regional security. Beyond diplomacy, he has contributed extensively as an author and researcher, specialising in the rise of radical and populist movements in Eastern Europe. He currently serves as the executive director of the EU Awareness Centre, a Brussels-based NGO promoting democratic reforms, good governance, and EU values. He continues his work as an independent researcher on political and international issues.