MAPPING and ORGANIZING
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POLICY REPORT

Harnessing the democratising potential of the EU's foreign policy agenda

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M.O.R.D.O.R. in an international consortium of higher education institutions and think tanks with associated partners on all continents. As an Erasmus+project co-funded by the EU, we have embarked on a mission to illustrate the importance of collaboration between the fields of Area Studies, Political Science, and Policy Analysts and prove their practical (combined) benefits for improving education and policy recommendations.

M.O.R.D.O.R stands for Mapping and Organizing Research on Dictatorships – Open Access Repository and plans to integrate current knowledge on democracy support and comparative authoritarianism, organise this knowledge and channel new insights into two main outputs:

The first main project output is the Encyclopedia Tyrannica (ibidem Verlag, forthcoming 2024) – a compendium of relevant research presenting a full review of the existing literature on comparative authoritarianism from the last five decades, but supplemented with a pedagogic and methodological dimension so that this work can be used by educators, students and scholars alike to foster change and innovation in how these groups teach, learn and engage in research.

To this purpose, M.O.R.D.O.R. complements the Encyclopedia Tyrannica with a didactic booklet for educators (with lesson plans and guidelines to teach about dictatorship, democracy, International Relations (IR) or regional authoritarian contexts (within various Area Studies). This output is aimed at teachers and students of comparative politics, IR, EU politics and those Area Studies focusing on political regimes. All lesson plans will be accompanied with learning outcomes, pre-reading questions, class activities and exercises/ assignments, as well as with specific instructions for educators (within the contexts of their respective fields).

The second main project output is this Policy Paper on EU Democracy Support, which is tailored for EU foreign policy specialists and practitioners. These recommendations for stakeholders present a long-needed new approach, assessing the multi-vector EU democratisation policy from the point of view of EU priorities, norms, capabilities and interests, and well as from the perspective of authoritarian contexts. The policy paper reevaluates the EU position and roles amid a fluid international system, currently challenged by a new wave of authoritarianism.

In addition, the M.O.R.D.O.R. project organised various events related for students (Master Classes) and several conferences and seminars for scholars, researchers and stakeholders. All details and outputs can be found in open access format on the website: www.mordorproject.eu

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Executive summary

This report analyses the European Union (EU)'s approach to supporting democracy as a key element of its foreign policy and problematises the extent to which and how the EU can sustain its role as a normative power amidst shifting priorities and mounting challenges. The central question concerns the following: *how can the EU ensure that democracy remains a key objective in its foreign policy?*

Despite its formal commitment to supporting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law across the globe—as enshrined in Article 21 of the EU Treaty—recent developments suggest a shift away from this role. This relates not only to the limited effectiveness of the EU's democracy support, but also whether the EU can in fact remain a *relevant* actor in supporting democracy at all. Domestic European policy shifts and critiques from the Global South have raised doubts about both the EU's capacity and commitment to maintaining a strong democracy agenda. For instance, the rise of populist radical right parties within the EU, along with systemic competition from powers like China and Russia, has shifted Brussels' priorities, resulting in policy adjustments and budget cuts that diminish the EU's willingness to support democracy abroad. This trend is visible also in the 2024 mission letters that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen prepared for the members of the next College of Commissioners. These letters omit any reference to supporting democracy in third countries, focusing instead on pursuing the EU's strategic interests. Additionally, the EU's strong positioning on Russia's war in Ukraine versus its hesitant response to the war in the Middle East were perceived by some of the EU's partners as entailing double standards and thereby eroding the EU's legitimacy, complicating its role as a credible global democracy advocate.

This report expands the concept of democracy support to encompass a more holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnections between democracy promotion and other policy areas. We assess this broader perspective using two main criteria: the sincerity of the EU's democratic intentions across its foreign policies and the degree to which EU foreign policy resonates with people's lived experiences and tangible aspirations. In three chapters, we detail how the EU's commitment to democracy support is shaped by domestic and geopolitical factors (rather than the reverse); how the EU struggles to ensure democratic coherence across its foreign policy; and how the EU's foreign policy alignment with partner governments' policies often risks amplifying existing power structures which hamper the development of a vibrant public sphere, thus negatively affecting the democratic fabric of the societies the EU seeks to support.

The report concludes that the EU must fundamentally recalibrate its approach if it is to remain a credible and relevant actor capable of fostering democratisation and safeguarding democratic gains worldwide amidst an evolving geopolitical landscape. The report proposes five main actions, each aiming to reaffirm the EU's relevance and credibility as a supporter of democracy.

1. **Mainstreaming democracy across foreign policy**: a coherent democracy narrative within EU external action requires clearly defined objectives that emphasise democratic contributions within all policy domains, from trade to migration. Democracy performance indicators should track and validate the impacts of EU foreign policies.

2. **Balance the EU's discourse to emphasise its democracy ambitions:** while some foreign policy actions inevitably risk harming democracy, the EU should more openly acknowledge these foreseeable impacts, proactively communicate its commitment to democracy with local democratic stakeholders, and work towards mitigation despite the systemic constraints.

3. **Sustained democracy funding**: to prevent the weakening of democracy support, the EU should prioritise continuous funding, especially targeting local civil society organisations. Enhanced transparency, tracking of democracy aid, and better labelling of funding categories are essential for effective resource allocation.

4. **Fostering "joint learning"**: recognising democracy as context-dependent, the EU should engage with diverse perspectives, including non-Western democratic models, to build an inclusive understanding of democracy that resonates globally.

5. **"Do No Harm" principle**: the EU should systematically assess the unintended consequences of its foreign policy on democratisation processes in third countries and adjust its approach to avoid exacerbating authoritarian power structures. The EU should also consider how its broader engagement in a country or region influences local democratisation processes and inform its democracy support cooperation accordingly. This would increase chances of better aligning foreign policy interventions with local realities, thus fostering more sustainable, context-sensitive outcomes.

Introduction

Nathan Vandeputte and Fabienne Bossuyt

The European Union (EU) has long represented itself—and been considered—as a normative power,[1] meaning that it is believed to be both willing and capable of shaping the international order on the basis of universal value systems. Article 21 of the EU Treaty confirms this ambition by stating that "the Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world", including democracy, the rule of law, human rights, equality, and solidarity.

Although this normative nature appeared to also drive a renewed focus on democracy in EU foreign policy at the start of the decade—evidenced by initiatives like the 2019 Council conclusions on Democracy, the various Global Summits for Democracy, and the Team Europe Democracy initiative—its future prominence and clarity of the EU's external democracy support agenda are uncertain. In response to the resurgence of global power politics, the emphasis on democracy has waned, increasingly overshadowed by the EU's geopolitical and strategic interests.[2] This shift continued over the past five years and was signalled in the mission letters issued by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to her Commissioners-designate in September 2024, where she notably distinguished between "strengthening our democracy at home" and "better asserting our interests around the world." Strikingly, references to the need to support and strengthen democracy were absent from the letters to the Commissioners responsible for key foreign policy areas, including the Mediterranean, Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and International Partnerships.

In light of the EU's more interest-driven foreign policy, where geostrategic concerns seem to take precedence over democratic ones, this recommendations report examines how the EU can uphold its treaty-enshrined commitment to advancing democracy on the international scene. Specifically, this report asks: "how can the EU ensure that democracy remains a key objective in its foreign policy?" Building on and adding to ongoing efforts, which seek to reinvigorate and rejuvenate democracy as a central aspect of the EU's foreign and domestic policy agenda, the aim of this report is to make sure that such revival is also aligned with the democratic visions as articulated by those who live it (or hope to live it), both within the EU as well as abroad.

[1] Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", J*ournal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2002): 235-258, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353

[2] Richard Youngs et al., *European Democracy Support: Annual Review 2023*, 2024, European Democracy Hub: https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/EDH23_Democracy_Annual_Review.pdf

From effectiveness of the EU's support to democracy towards ensuring the relevance of EU democracy support

Ever since democracy support became a formal international aid objective in the beginning of the 1990s, both scholars and practitioners have grappled with how to enhance its effectiveness.[3] For example, inspired by the "thinking and working politically" debate,[4] attention has recently centred around effectively countering growing hostility towards international democracy assistance, while still maintaining the "political" nature of such assistance.[5] As part of this evolution, European donors have shifted their focus toward supporting individual activists, bloggers, and human rights defenders in their battles against regime repression with the specific aim of safeguarding a degree of open political space in ever more hostile environments.[6]

However, responding to declining interest in supporting democracy, discussions have also shifted from enhancing the effectiveness of democracy support to—in addition—reinvigorating and rejuvenating democracy support as a key element of the EU's foreign policy agenda. As democracy increasingly became more of an afterthought in EU foreign policy—supplanted by geostrategic and interest-driven concerns—advocates have also stepped up their calls to restore democracy as a foreign policy priority. For example, recommendations include setting specific democracy aid targets,[7] which would also require better categorisation of different aid types.[8] More fundamentally, recurring recommendations have also pointed towards the need to treat democracy support as a key foreign policy interest, with other policy objectives conditioned on its advancement.[9]

While critical in nature, the majority of policy recommendations within the broader democracy support community still insufficiently take into account continued cuts to the EU's development cooperation aid budgets. Additionally, they tend to also overlook the EU's declining global legitimacy. In other words, they insufficiently consider the question of whether the EU in fact can still be considered a relevant actor in terms of supporting democracy?

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[3] Julia Leininger, "Democracy promotion", in *The Handbook of Political, Social, and Economic Transformation*, Eds. Wolfgang Merkel, Raj Kollmorgen, and Hans-Jürgen Wagener (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[4] Thomas Carothers and Diane De Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution* (Carnegie, 2013).

[5] Nicolas Bouchet, Ken Godfrey and Richard Youngs, *Rising Hostility to Democracy Support: Can It Be Countered?,* Carnegie, 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/09/rising-hostility-to-democracy-support-can-it-be-countered?lang=en&center=europe

[6] Richard Youngs, *The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support*, Carnegie, 2024, https://carnegie endowment.org/research/2024/03/the-defensive-turn-in-european-democracy-support?lang=en

[7] Richard Youngs, *A Call To Defend Democracy: Reviving Democracy SUpport Under the EU's Incomping Leadership.* European Endowment For Democracy, 2024, https://www.democracyendowment.eu/assets/Publications/EED_A-Call-for-Democracy_2024_Publication_V3.1-FA-digital_compressed.pdf

[8] See for example the European Democracy Hub's tool: https://democracy-aid.europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/_gl=1*k1eral*_up*MQ..*_ga*MTA4ODAyODUyNS4xNzI1OTA4NjU1*_ga_BHNNDW48HC*MTcyNTkwODY1Mi4xLjEuMTcyNTkwODY2MS4wLjAuMA.?

[9] e.g. Rosa Balfour, *The EU Must Reconcile Geopolitics and Democracy*, Carnegie Europe, 2023, https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/88999

While the new Commission mission letters put doubts as to whether the EU, through its actions and policy choices, is still willing to empower democratisation and preserve democratic achievements globally, the increasing influence of populist radical right parties on the EU's political landscape raise further doubts on the EU's continued capacity to do so. After all, the growing power of these parties increasingly threatens decision-making in Brussels related to democracy support, as well as the means and priorities for bilateral democracy support policies of their own member states. There is evidence that the increasing power of populist radical right parties leads to a strong pushback against supporting civil society both at home and abroad, and that it leads to a stronger linkage of the values of democracy and human rights to a context of Christian morality.[10] In addition, this rightward shift risks reducing the funding available for democracy support. For example, the Dutch government plans to make considerable cuts to its development cooperation budget over the next three years, echoing similar reductions planned in France and Germany.[11] Compounding this issue, even if budgets remain stable in the short term, the rise of populist rhetoric undermines public support for foreign aid, making sustained funding increasingly difficult.[12]

Moreover, the EU's legitimacy as a credible promoter of democratic norms and practices is undermined by a perceived discrepancy between developments in European democracies and the EU's international actions. For instance, in response to climate protests, several European governments have introduced repressive measures against environmental activists, creating "a climate of fear and intimidation for environmental defenders".[13] Similarly, peaceful protests in support of Palestinian human rights across Europe have been banned or met with restrictions. Such actions by liberal democracies, which curtail free speech and stifle legitimate dissent, raise claims of applying double standards in the EU's international action. Adding further insult to injury, the EU's swift condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a threat to democracy and international law, while showing hesitant denunciation of Israel's human rights violations in Gaza has led civil society organisations and NGOs to accuse the EU of applying double standards. Such perceived inconsistencies harm the EU's reputation as a defender of international law and human rights, particularly in countries and societies in the Global South.

[10] Anne Pintsch, Dennis Hammerschmidt, and Cosima Meyer, "Introduction: the decline of democracy and rise of populism in Europe and their effect on democracy promotion", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs,* vol. 35, no. 4 (2022): 405-423. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2082797

[11] e.g. Burton Bollag, "How Germany is cutting billions from foreign aid", Devex, 2024, https://www.devex.com/news/how-germany-is-cutting-billions-from-foreign-aid-107055

[12] A. Burcu Bayram, "Manipulating the masses? Right-wing populist messages, political ideology, and public support for multilateral development aid in Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom", *Journal of International Development,* vol. 36, no. 7 (2024), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jid.3927?af=R

[13] Michel Forst, *State repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience: a major threat to human rights and democracy*, UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, 2024, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UNSR_EnvDefenders_Aarhus_Position_Paper_Civil_Disobedience_EN.pdf

Reinvigorating democracy as a relevant EU foreign policy objective

Despite democracy support being a longstanding yet minor component of the EU's foreign policy, current trends reveal growing concerns about the EU's capacity and willingness to prioritise it. Shrinking development aid budgets exacerbated by the political guidelines of the new European Commission suggest a shift away from prioritising democracy in the EU's external actions. While the Commission remains focused on strengthening democracy within the EU, the new geopolitical landscape increasingly leads the EU to more strategically prioritise and assert its interests globally. Given these dynamics, coupled with the EU's declining legitimacy in the Global South, the EU's commitment to supporting and consolidating democracy abroad—as mandated by the Treaty—feels increasingly hollow. The question is no longer about whether the EU is ineffective or absent on the global stage, but rather whether it can in fact remain a *relevant* actor in supporting democracy.

To reverse this declining relevance, it is imperative to find ways to balance geopolitical constraints with the EU's normative commitment to democracy support and protection. Without dismissing the ongoing debates that seek to preserve and reinvigorate core democracy support,[14] we propose to go with the grain of current developments and broaden the concept of "democracy support" itself. Considering that the EU is unlikely to reverse the "geopolitical turn" in its foreign policy, we should consider the possibilities of a more holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnections between democracy support and other policy domains. Notably, such a broader perspective aligns with the EU treaty's vision. While the treaty does not explicitly mention "democracy support," it calls for "the EU's *action on the international scene"* to contribute to the consolidation of democracy. This raises the question: how can the EU's foreign policy be leveraged—both in its intended and unintended effects—to support democracy beyond the traditional understanding of "core democracy support"?

Adopting this expanded view does not imply a relativistic stance. For the EU to remain a credible and relevant actor in democracy support, its commitment must meet two essential criteria. More than merely emphasising democracy, such an emphasis must be both sincere and meaningful.

Firstly, the EU has often adopted a highly normative narrative expressing support for democracy around the world. For example, nearly 50% of Commission statements, speeches, and press releases (peaking at 76.1% in 2022) contain at least some focus on democracy.[15] Yet, such an emphasis is nevertheless often absent in the EU's actual foreign policy. As previously mentioned, while the new political guidelines underscore a strong commitment to defending democracy within the EU, they conspicuously omit any reference to international democracy commitments. Such absence further entrenches an earlier approach as outlined in the EU's Global Strategy,[16] which states that the EU "will take responsibility foremost in Europe and its surrounding regions, while pursuing targeted engagement further afield". Such targeted engagement will be on the basis of "principled

[14] Youngs, *A Call To Defend Democracy.*

[15] Richard Youngs et al. *European Democracy Support Annual Review 2022,* 2023, Carnegie Europe, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/EDH22_Annual_Review_v3_updated.pdf

[16] European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy,* 2016, Brussels.

pragmatism", which indicates that the EU's guiding principles are shaped "as much by a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment as by an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world". In other words, the EU has come to adopt a very ambiguous approach to supporting democracy, whereby it is unclear how sincere the EU is about fulfilling its commitments to democracy as stipulated in the EU Treaty. Going forward, the EU should therefore clarify its intentions and integrate "democracy" as a constituting principle throughout its foreign policy.

Secondly, the assessment of the EU's credibility and relevance as a global democracy supporter cannot ignore outside-in perspectives, nor the actual impact of the EU's foreign policy on the ground. If democracy in its most simplistic form entails rule by the people, of the people, and for the people, "the people" must be a constituting factor in determining how and what such rule should be about. As such, beyond the sincerity of its intentions, the EU's foreign policy should also be measured according to what extent it meaningfully speaks to people on the basis of their lived experiences and concrete aspirations. Learning from global manifestations and expressions of justice and good life[17] and considering the socio-economic motivations underlying global protests—from the Arab Spring to colour revolutions to the yellow vests—we can understand that around the world people strive to be free from diminishment and exploitation, and to be free from misery. In other words, at the heart of global democratic aspirations lies a shared drive for human dignity.[18] Indeed, as also established in the very first sentence of the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human dignity should be recognised as "the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world".

Therefore, if the EU is to leverage its foreign policy to support democracy beyond the traditional understanding of "core democracy support" and if the EU is to be perceived by the beneficiaries of the EU's foreign policy as a credible and relevant actor, the EU's foreign policy must contribute to people's dignity. Whether it is trade, security, migration, climate, or any other foreign policy, the EU must make sure to align and engage with the democratic aspirations of local communities or do no harm at the least.

The report in brief

The two criteria of sincerity and meaningfulness form the foundation of the three chapters in this report. Each chapter assesses whether the EU's commitment to democracy support meets these criteria using empirical evidence, elaborating on one or both of them in distinct ways, and ultimately developing specific policy recommendations. The views presented in the different chapters are the authors' own.

Chapter one delves into the geopolitical and domestic political shifts that jeopardise the EU's relevance as a global actor in democracy support. Specifically, it identifies five structural and contextual factors that undermine the EU's democracy support agenda: autocratisation, the rise of populist radical right parties, systemic rivalry with China and Russia, contestation of EU actions in the Global South, and external policy trade-offs. The chapter highlights how these factors influence the

[17] Ashish Kothari et al, *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Tulika Books, 2019).

[18] Petra Kleindienst and Matevž Tomšič, "Human Dignity as the Foundation of Democratic Political Culture: Legal and Philosophical Perspective", *Law, Culture, and the Humanities,* vol. 18, no. 2 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872117738229

EU's democracy support agenda rather than the other way around, raising questions about the sincerity of the EU's commitment to democracy.

The question of sincerity is further interrogated in chapter two, which examines the EU's commitment to aligning its external action with the advancement of democracy, as mandated by Article 21 of the EU Treaty, and reaffirmed in the 2019 Council Conclusions, through the lens of "policy coherence". The chapter identifies three potential pathways for ensuring greater coherence in the EU's foreign policy. The first is the "more for more" principle, which employs positive incentives to support democratisation. Conversely, the adoption of sanctions represents a second mechanism, leveraging negative reinforcement. A third, albeit more implicit mechanism, focuses on mitigating or balancing the negative impacts of the EU's foreign policy actions on local democratisation processes by delivering more targeted and effective democracy aid to affected communities. The chapter highlights how democracy support has been competing with other foreign policy interests and how the EU needs to find a balance between pursuing its interests and its commitments to democracy.

While the first two chapters adopt a predominantly EU-centred perspective, chapter three shifts to an "outside-in" approach and questions the "meaningfulness" from the point of view of the recipients and beneficiaries of the EU's foreign policy. Given that today's authoritarian trends are often characterised by the shrinking of civic space,[19] this chapter explores to what extent the EU's foreign policy speaks to people's democratic demands and aspirations. It examines whether it fosters a vibrant public sphere—a cornerstone of any democratic society—where conflicting views can be freely expressed. Using case studies from Uganda, Lebanon, and Tunisia, this chapter highlights how the EU's foreign policy always comes with a range of unintended consequences. Most crucially, while the EU's interventions usually align with local authorities' policies, its civil society engagement is often very exclusionary. Within an authoritarian setting this risks amplifying existing power structures, thus affecting the democratic fabric of the societies the EU seeks to support.

Across all three chapters the conclusion is clear: the EU's emphasis on democracy in its foreign policy is too often neither sincere nor meaningful. To avoid persisting in ineffective path dependencies, the report argues that the EU must fundamentally recalibrate its approach if it is to remain a credible and relevant actor, capable of fostering democratisation and safeguarding democratic gains worldwide. The following section outlines these recommendations.

Policy recommendations

According to the latest V-Dem data, the level of democracy enjoyed by the average person in the world is down to 1985-levels. For 15 consecutive years, the share of the global population living in autocratising countries has exceeded those in democratising nations, reaching 71% in 2023.[20] Consequently, as democratic attitudes are often shaped by the availability of political goods like

[19] See the "the democratic space barometer", via: https://v-dem.net/demspace

[20] *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot,* V-dem Institute, 2024, https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf

honest elections, transparent governance, and personal freedoms,[21] surveys also indicate a decline in global support for democracy.[22] Worryingly, such trust in democracy is notably lower among young people, increasing concerns for democracy's future.[23] Nevertheless, the majority of the world's population still believes democracy to be preferential to any other system of government. Many are also very much dissatisfied with how democracy is working in their country, whereby such discontent is tied to concerns about the economy, individual rights, and out-of-touch elites.[24] Most people around the world are receiving far less democracy than they desire.

While the EU Treaty legally obliges the EU to support the advancement of democracy globally, the global demand for democratic governance offers a clear and strategic opportunity for the EU to strengthen this commitment. Unlike the autocracy promotion pursued by many competing geopolitical powers,[25] widespread support for democracy presents a powerful policy avenue through which the EU can enhance its global relevance.

Hence, to sustain its global relevance as a democracy supporter, the EU should recognise that promoting democratic values can align with, rather than oppose, its strategic material interests. This report therefore proposes five actions to help the EU merge its foreign policy objectives with its normative duty to support democracy, as outlined in Article 21 of the EU Treaty. Given the challenges to the EU's legitimacy and effectiveness in this role, these five actions need to be considered and realised as a package.

1. Strengthen and mainstream a democracy narrative throughout the EU's external action

The EU Commission's narrative often emphasises the EU's commitment to democracy.[26] Yet, since such an emphasis is often not reflected in actual foreign policy actions, the sincerity of the EU's commitment to democracy is often put into question. All too often references to "democracy" remain a tick-the-box exercise, whereby it is unclear how the EU actually intends to fulfil its commitments to democracy as stipulated in the EU Treaty. Therefore, the EU must better anchor its mainstreaming practice and clearly define how foreign policy priorities contribute to democracy. Specifically:

- While the EU treaty stipulates that the EU's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, the EU should make explicit and clarify how such experience informs a given foreign policy action.

[21] Robert Mattes and Michael Bratton, "Learning about Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance, and Experience", *American Journal of Political Science,* vol. 51, no. 1 (2007): 192-217, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00245.x

[22] e.g. *African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective*, Afrobarometer*,* 2024, https://www.afrobarometer.org/feature/flagship-report/

[23] *Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?*, Open Society Foundation, 2023, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/focus/open-society-barometer

[24] Richard Wike, Laura Silver and Alexandra Castillo, *Many Across the Globe Are Dissatisfied With How Democracy Is Working,* Pew Research Centre, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/

[25] Rachel Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad* (Lynne Riener, 2017).

[26] Youngs et al., *European Democracy Support Annual Review*

- The EU should make explicit the underlying causal mechanisms through which its mainstreaming of democracy is expected to affect democracy, positively or negatively. The various impact assessments should be complemented with clear democracy performance and results indicators.

2. Balance the EU's discourse to emphasise its democracy ambitions

Whenever the EU's obligation to support democracy globally is analysed in light of other foreign policy objectives, such a relationship is often described on the basis of being a nexus.[27] The EU is found to either prioritise its interests—e.g., trade, security, or anti-migration—or to prioritise democracy. In other words, the EU's pursuit of its foreign policy interests leads to a diminished emphasis on democracy.[28] Such an imbalance should be rectified. The EU's foreign policy discourse should reflect rather than obscure the continued focus on democracy support in its international cooperation programmes. Specifically:

- There should be no one-dimensional distinction between either "strengthening our democracy at home" or "better asserting our interests around the world." Rather, strengthening democracies abroad should be as well understood as a strategic interest and this should be communicated more clearly.
- With regards to the Global Gateway, the EU should ensure several high-level political interventions to accentuate its commitment to supporting democracy in line with its operational choices and budgetary priorities.
- While adverse consequences of the EU's foreign policy on local democratisation processes may be inevitable and unintended, many of these effects should not be unexpected. After all, the very nature of international politics compels the EU to at times cooperate with authoritarian regimes, which ultimately risks empowering their hold on power and undermining local democratisation efforts. The EU should acknowledge these foreseeable impacts, proactively communicate these with local democratic stakeholders, and work towards mitigation despite the systemic constraints.

3. Safeguard continuous and adequate funding for democracy support

The adverse effects of the EU's foreign policy agenda on local democratisation efforts highlight, above all, the importance of sustaining consistent and adequate funding for democracy support. Although the Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy program has a budget of €1.5 billion for 2021–2027—a modest increase from the €1.3 billion previously allocated under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights—this amount remains comparatively small next to other EU budget commitments. In light of emerging global challenges, including expected shifts in U.S. foreign policy,

[27] e.g. Assem Dandashly, "EU democracy promotion and the dominance of the security–stability nexus", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2018): 62-82, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2017.1358900; Luisa Faustini-Torres, "Another nexus? Exploring narratives on the linkage between EU external migration policies and the democratization of the southern Mediterranean neighbourhood", *Comparative Migration Studies*, vol. 8, no. 9, (2020), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0165-z

[28] e.g. Susan Dodsworth, "Double standards: the verdicts of western election observers in sub-Saharan Africa", *Democratization*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2019), 382-400, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1534099

the upcoming EU external action budget will likely face significant pressure. Therefore, as negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework are on the horizon, the EU should prioritise preserving its current funding for democracy support and seek opportunities to enhance it to effectively address these evolving challenges.

- While the EU appears to be moving towards focusing more of its attention to its flagship €300 billion investment strategy – Global Gateway approach, it should pair these investments in infrastructure, with support to democratic actors that can foster accountability and transparency.

4. Strengthen "joint learning" on democracy

Analysis of EU foreign policy tends to emphasise the decision-making procedures behind certain policies, or to assess the actual content and results of a particular policy. All too often, it does so purely from the point of view of the foreign policy actor and the implementation objectives that it has set, and as such it does not sufficiently pay attention to the actual impact, relevance, or evaluation of the EU's policy in the targeted state or region.[29] For instance, assessments of the EU's democracy support efforts—and of global democracy more broadly—commonly start from a liberal conception of democracy, which emphasises individual political and civic rights.[30] Yet, in African contexts, where many ethnographic studies reveal that values like community, collectivism, and social harmony hold greater cultural importance, these liberal principles may clash with local norms and practices.[31] This suggests that imposing a singular democratic model risks creating discontent or resistance rather than strengthening local democratic structures. Notably, the critique of liberal democracy as the sole model isn't unique to North-South dynamics. Even within Europe, movements such as Occupy, the Yellow Vests, and Podemos reflect popular disillusionment with established liberal democratic norms.[32] These movements highlight issues like economic inequality, representation, and political alienation, challenging the EU to reconsider its rigid interpretation of democracy to foster policies that resonate more deeply across diverse contexts abroad and domestically.

A purely liberal perspective on democracy risks oversimplifying an essentially contested and complex concept. It can fail to capture realities on the ground, potentially alienating or even antagonising local counter perspectives. For the EU to ensure that "democracy delivers" both within its borders and globally—and to contribute meaningfully to democratisation processes worldwide—it must go beyond merely refining its methods and strategies. It must strive to understand how democracy operates differently in various contexts and incorporate these insights into a more nuanced policy approach. This would involve respecting local democratic expressions and avoiding the pitfalls of imposing a one-size-fits-all model. Fostering democratic learning and dialogue with alternative

[29] Floor Keuleers, Daan Fonck and Stephan Keukeleire, "Beyond EU navel-gazing: Taking stock of EU-centrism in the analysis of EU foreign policy". *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2016):345-364. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716631777

[30] Jonas Wolff, "From the Varieties of Democracy to the defense of liberal democracy: V-Dem and the reconstitution of liberal hegemony under threat", *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2023):161-181, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2096191

[31] Claude Ake, "The Unique Case of African Democracy", *International Affairs*, *vol. 69*, no. 2 (1993): 244, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2621592

[32] E.g. Paul Mason, *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (London:Verso, 2013).

democratic values and systems could create space for pluralism and constructive contestation, ultimately enhancing the EU's credibility as a supporter of democracy both abroad and at home.

There are a number of initiatives the EU could initiate to engage in joint learning:

- Building on lessons from the Conference on the Future of Europe, the EU must initiate and improve spaces for dialogue on the meaning of democracy within Europe.
- While the EU has introduced a dedicated "Team Europe" Democracy Initiative (TED) that aims at sharing experiences and lessons among European donors on democracy support, the EU must open up such learning exercises to also include voices of the Global South. While the EU could learn from how other regions innovatively respond to domestic challenges not too different from its own,[33] such learning should also extend to exploring the problem definition itself. How do the EU's partners define democracy, and what constraints to democratisation do they identify? Such learning contributes to a deeper understanding that democracy operates differently around the world, thereby enabling the EU to more meaningfully address and support the democratic visions as articulated by those who live it (or hope to live it) as a joint endeavour.
- Develop and make better use of learning instruments. For example, political economy analysis should be complemented with foresight instruments that indicate typical procedures or tools used by authoritarian leaders, thereby increasing awareness about ongoing autocratisation processes.

5. Do no harm to democracy

The unintended consequences of the EU's efforts to support democracy have gained increased attention.[34] Such analysis often highlights how the EU's value agenda is contested by local actors, thereby identifying who are key to initiators of such contestation and explaining the role these actors have in such contestation. However, while such analysis seeks to explain *how* such a contestation unfolds, it insufficiently addresses *why* these consequences come to be. All too often, these assessments negate the negative impacts of the EU's broader foreign policy agenda itself. In order to develop an honest and accurate perception of the risk of harm, the EU should therefore more strongly consider a holistic assessment of how its foreign policy objectives across all sectors impact both its capacity to support democracy, and the local public space in partner countries. Specifically:

- A starting point could be to extrapolate to its foreign policy the best practices of the new EU rule of law conditionality regulation, which aims to ensure that internally disbursed EU funds do not bankroll democratic backsliding in member states.

[33] See e.g. https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/projects/exploring-worldwide-democratic-innovations/

[34] e.g. Assem Dandashly and Gergana Noutcheva, "Unintended Consequences of EU Democracy Support in the European Neighbourhood", *International Spectator*, *vo. 54*, no.1 (2019): 105-120, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1554340; Anna Khakee, "Democracy aid or autocracy aid? Unintended effects of democracy assistance in Morocco", *Journal of North African Studies,* vol. 17, no. 2 (2017): 238-258, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1279971

- In addition to rethinking certain funding modalities—such as budget support[35]—the EU must also refine its aid methodologies, like Political Economy Analysis, Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation, and the Human Rights-Based Approach, and integrate them more cohesively into its broader foreign policy agenda. While these methodologies are designed to mitigate project-level risks and potential harms (for example, by identifying local actors impacted by the projects), they currently do not consider how the EU's broader engagement in a country or region might influence the success or relevance of project objectives. Adjusting these methodologies to account for the wider effects of EU involvement could enhance alignment between project goals and local realities, reducing potential misalignments and fostering more sustainable, context-sensitive outcomes.

[35] Ken Godfrey, "How the EU Can Better Avoid Bankrolling Authoritarianism", Carnegie Europe, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/03/how-the-eu-can-better-avoid-bankrolling-authoritarianism?lang=en&center=europe

The rise of geopolitics, populism, and the new wave of autocratisation: implications for EU democracy support

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Article 21 of the European Union's Treaty legally binds the EU to seek to advance democracy in the world. The EU faces challenges in pursuing this mission of being an advocate of democratic values given the wave of autocratisation, populism, nationalism, and polarisation across many countries around the world — including in EU member states. At the same time, geopolitical tensions and an increasing discourse on systemic rivalry between democracies and autocracies is setting the tone internationally. As a result, the EU's democracy support is no longer provided in an international context characterised by a (largely) unipolar world in which democracy tended to be undisputed as the most successful type of political regime, as experienced in the 1990s and 2000s. In response, the EU's current approach acknowledges that it needs to "defend" and protect democratic achievements of the past century as well as counteract persistent autocratisation trends and counteroffers from autocratic actors with its democracy support and broader foreign policy agenda.

As the aforementioned processes of nationalism, polarisation, and populism are well present within the EU's 27 member states, many of the challenges its democracies face originate from within the EU's own borders while also being connected to broader movements and support systems outside. It is also becoming clear that democracy support can no longer be treated solely as an external agenda item as the EU faces attacks on its democratic institutions from both the outside and the inside. In light of these challenges and to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of its agenda for supporting democracy, the EU needs to make the most substantial adjustments to its approaches and instruments since their introduction in the 1990s.

The EU's democracy support has always been one of the most controversial elements of the EU's external action, both in terms of its relevance and its effectiveness. It remains a key concern as to whether the EU is effective in promoting democracy and contributing positively towards political reforms, given potentially conflicting interests and actions and whether, and under what conditions, the EU might unintentionally even strengthen authoritarian regimes. Despite these enduring policy controversies, the EU has developed and institutionalised a wide range of approaches that aim at supporting democratic reforms in the southern and eastern neighbourhood, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other parts of the world. The EU uses various forms of political conditionality in its enlargement policy, development assistance, trade relations, and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. It spends a substantial part of its development assistance on governance and democracy support. For example, about 10% of its development assistance to Africa goes towards supporting democratic reforms.[36]

[36] Christine Hackenesch, Julia Leininger and Karina Mross, *What the EU should do for democracy support in Africa: Ten proposals for a new strategic initiative in times of polarization,* Discussion Paper 14/2020. (Bonn: German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), 2020).

Even though the EU was often criticised for remaining "high on rhetoric but low on delivery"[37] and for being inconsistent in reconciling differing foreign policy goals, it has arguably become a key player in international democracy support. Nevertheless, the EU's current international democracy support instruments are characterised by high path dependencies and have not (yet) changed much in response to the fundamentally changing international context and changing domestic affairs in EU member states. The rapidly changing context, however, has likely increased the risk of unintended effects of EU support.[38]

Regarding the role of democracy in the EU's broader foreign policy agenda, during the past few years the von der Leyen Commission has sought to move democracy higher up the political agenda. One key element in the Commission's attempts to strengthen its positioning as a geopolitical actor was a stronger rhetorical emphasis on values and norms in the EU's external relations. In particular, the EU's Global Gateway Initiative was presented as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which would be more attractive for the EU's partners because the EU—in contrast to China—would emphasise values, norms, and standards in its external investment and cooperation with partners in that context. At least rhetorically, democracy support is reflected in the initiative as part of a "European offer"—a term first floated in the EU's Global Gateway proposal of December 2021—by which the EU seeks to set itself apart from other external actors. In practice, however, the substance of the EU's approach of engaging with partners around the world in political reforms under its Global Gateway initiative has arguably changed little and has not lived up to the level of expectations created by the EU's rhetoric.

Domestically, the EU considers its own democracy to be increasingly threatened by external actors and facing the challenge of "information warfare". Under these conditions, the EU appears to take a more defensive approach, epitomised in the proposed "European Democracy Shield" that is supposed to make European democracies more resilient against external influences and influencers.[39] With its aim to "strengthen the rule of law" in its member states and the strengthening of sanction/conditionality mechanisms to prevent attacks against the rule of law, the EU also responds to domestic political shifts. This more internal and defensive approach to supporting democracy under the von der Leyen II Commission, which is not specifically linked to the EU's international democracy support agenda, is visible in the Political Guidelines for the period 2024–2029.[40]

In this chapter, we assess the implications of the new geopolitical context and domestic political shifts on the EU's democracy support embedded in its broader foreign policy agenda. We focus on the EU's explicit democracy support instruments, the role of democracy in the EU's broader foreign policy agenda, and the links to domestic efforts to support and protect democracy. The analysis is structured along five major internal and external challenges: 1) autocratisation, violent conflicts, and political

[37] Gordon Crawford, "The European Union and Democracy Promotion in Africa: The Case of Ghana," *The European Journal of Development Research 17,* 4 (2005): 571-600, https://doi.org/10.1080/09578810500367516.

[38] Niels Keijzer and Nathan Vandeputte, The (un)intended effects of EU development cooperation on democracy. IDOS Blog (2023), https://blogs.idos-research.de/2023/02/08/the-un-intended-effects-of-eu-development-cooperation-on-democracy/.

[39] Ursula von der Leyen, *Europe's Choice: Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029*. Strasbourg (2024), https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf, p. 23.

[40] ibid.

mobilisation; 2) de-democratisation and the rise of populist radical right parties in Europe; 3) systemic rivalry and China and Russia's political influence in Europe; 4) contestation of the EU's external action in the Global South; and 5) priorities and trade-offs in the EU's external relations. In doing so, we address the question "to what extent can the EU still be considered as a relevant democracy supporter in times of autocratisation?". Lastly, we conclude with five recommendations on how to reform EU democracy support over the next five years to meaningfully empower democratisation and preserve democratic achievements globally.

Key internal and external challenges and what they imply for EU democracy support

Several key trends challenge the EU's engagement as a norm entrepreneur and the effectiveness of its external democracy support more specifically. When moving forward, the EU will need to fundamentally adjust its approach to responding to those trends if it wants to remain a relevant actor supporting and protecting democracy at home and abroad.

Autocratisation, violent conflicts and political mobilisation

Autocratisation rather than democratisation has been the dominant trend across many countries across all world regions, including in parts of the so-called Global North. According to V-Dem's latest Democracy Report covering 2023[41], 42 countries worldwide are currently experiencing an autocratisation trend, while 71% of the world's population today lives in an autocratic regime. On top of these regime trends, in 2023 violent conflicts reached their highest number since the end of World Word II[42] and thus created a political vacuum in many places. At the same time, polarisation, political mobilisation, and protests in urban settings are accompanying autocratisation trends.

For the time being, most EU democracy support instruments still implicitly assume a stable and favourable situation from which democracy can be built and strengthened or a situation of transitioning from autocracy towards democracy where the EU can support that positive domestic trend. EU democracy support instruments thus are currently not well placed to respond to autocratisation and de-democratisation trends. The preamble to the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) Regulation emphasises that "under the Instrument, the Union should address human rights and democratisation issues at all levels." At the same time, much of EU democracy support that is funded under the geographic programmes of the NDICI – Global Europe Instrument (2021–2027) requires active cooperation from partner governments to be successfully implemented. Governments can leverage their cooperation with the EU to direct democracy support towards areas and sectors where domestic political costs are limited or where EU

[41] V-Dem. *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy winning and losing at the ballot*. 2024. https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports.

[42] UCDP. *UCDP: record number of armed conflicts in the world*. Press release 03.06.2024. https://www.uu.se/en/press/press-releases/2024/2024-06-03-ucdp-record-number-of-armed-conflicts-in-the-world.

democracy support could even strengthen domestic legitimacy and stability.[43] EU democracy support can thus inadvertently contribute to the strengthening of authoritarian rule if the instruments are not used in a context-sensitive way.

Democracy assistance provided under the thematic programmes of the NDICI – Global Europe instrument as the successor of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has more flexibility to work directly with domestic civil society groups and individuals acting as democracy and/or human rights defenders, with the possibility to even bypass local governments. In the Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy programme, the EU reserved €1.3 billion to support democracy and human rights abroad between 2021 and 2027. About €700 million of this fund, i.e., roughly half, is reserved to provide short-term assistance to human rights activists and democracy defenders. In times of shrinking spaces for civil society organisation and trends towards more restrictive legislation for civil society in many countries around the world, providing assistance directly to individuals and small groups is a highly relevant and important addition to the EU's democracy support toolbox. However, by design, it does not address structural factors to counter autocratisation processes, instead focusing on individuals and human rights groups.

The EU's democracy support therefore needs to be fundamentally reformed to move from a predominant focus on democracy support in favourable contexts towards democracy protection in the context of shrinking democratic spaces and political vacuums, particularly in fragile and authoritarian contexts. To be able to react appropriately to specific local contexts, the EU needs to expand and explore new approaches for its toolkit.

De-democratisation and the rise of populist radical right parties in Europe

The EU's discourse about democracy support is gradually placing less emphasis on direct democracy support provided to its partners and increasingly acknowledges the importance of democracy protection at home in light of the rise of populist radical right parties and de-democratisation processes in some European countries.

A number of European governments, particularly the Fidesz government in Hungary and the previous PiS government in Poland have sought to undermine media freedom and the independence of the judiciary in order to secure long-term rule. Moreover, populist radical right parties have generally increased their electoral support all over Europe since the early 2000s and particularly since 2015. They have not only become important opposition parties, but increasingly also join governments as junior or major partners. The 2024 European Parliament elections resulted in the mainstream political groups maintaining their majority but are confronted by no less than three political groups that bring together parliamentarians linked to populist parties.

In addition, broader trends related to political participation and information challenge democracy in Europe. Participation rates in elections have reduced rather than increased in recent years and political parties see their memberships decreasing. Misinformation and disinformation or deep fakes

[43] Christine Hackenesch, "It's domestic politics, stupid! EU democracy promotion strategies meet African dominant party regimes," *World Development* 75: 96-96, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.04.002. Christine Hackenesch and Julia Leininger, "7. Democracy protection: fundamental reforms needed to adjust to the new context," in *The European Union's Global Role in a Changing World: Challenges and Opportunities for the New Leadership (IDOS Discussion Paper 11/2024)*, ed. Christine Hackenesch, Niels Keijzer and Svea Koch (Bonn: IDOS, 2024).

provide additional challenges, particularly during election periods. Indeed, according to Eurobarometer, on average only 47% of European citizens were satisfied with the level of democracy in their country in 2023 and worryingly these figures vary from as high as 79% in Denmark to only 26% in Bulgaria.[44] At the same time, trust in national governments is declining.[45]

These domestic political trends are major challenges for Europe. Simultaneously, they challenge EU external democracy support in at least two ways. First, if democracy is under attack in Europe, this challenges the normative credibility of the EU to support and promote democracy elsewhere, which is more effectively done when one's own house is in order. Second, populist radical right parties can directly and indirectly influence the framing, funding allocations, and substance of EU democracy support abroad. Populist governments can shape decision-making processes in Brussels on democracy support as well as the bilateral democracy support policies of their countries, while populist opposition parties can pressure governments to adjust their countries' engagement on democracy support.

Initial evidence on the influence of populist radical right parties on democracy support provides mixed results. So far, the authoritarian ideology of these parties has not translated into a strong or consistent positioning on the relationship between development policy and democracy support in their election manifestos.[46] Whereas quantitative studies indicate that the rise of populist radical right parties leads to a decline in democracy promotion, qualitative analyses paint a more diverse picture.[47] Populist governments are found to adjust the substance of democracy promotion instead of implementing massive cuts to democracy aid.[48] In addition, differences in political orientations of populist radical right parties lead to differences in their contestation of democracy promotion.[49] At the European level, studies suggest that populist radical right parties do fundamentally challenge norms such as gender equality and seek to establish their own definition of these norms at the EU-level.[50] Whether this extends towards EU democracy support more generally, however, is under-researched.

For the time being, it seems that the EU has addressed these issues mostly with a domestic focus, trying to fight against disinformation, the erosion of the rule of law, and broader autocratisation processes. With the introduction of the "Strengthening the Rule of Law within the Union: A Blueprint for Action" (2019), the von der Leyen Commission began to launch a rule of law mechanism that

[44] Eurobarometer, Democracy - Dezember 2023 - Eurobarometer survey (europa.eu), 2023.

[45] OECD. OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results. Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment. (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en.

[46] Christine Hackenesch, "Populism and development policy," in *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy*, ed. Sandra Destradi, Angelos Chryssogelos and David Cadier (forthcoming).

[47] Anne Pintsch, Dennis Hammerschmidt & Cosima Meyer, "Introduction. The decline of democracy and rise of populism in Europe and their effect on democracy promotion," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 35, 4 (2022): pp. 405-23, doi:10.1080/09557571.2022.2082797.

[48] Aleksandra Monkos, "Democracy promotion under populist rule? The case of Poland's democracy aid in Ukraine," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 35, 2 (2021): pp. 1-19, DOI:10.1080/09557571.2021.1980497.

[49] Aron Buzogány, Oriol Costa and Magdalena Góra, "Contesting the EU's External Democratization Agenda: An Analytical Framework with an Application to Populist Parties." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 35, 4 (2021): pp. 500-522, doi:10.1080/09557571.2021.2002264.

[50] Julian Bergmann, Niels Keijzer, Christine Hackenesch, "Blackmailing and identity profiling: The behaviour of populist radical right governments in EU development policy," *Politics and Governance*, online first (2024), https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8180.

includes annual rule of law reporting of the member states and the formulation of explicit recommendations. Going further, the Commission intends to conditionally link the reporting and tracking of the implementation of recommendations with financial support for the member states.[51] In 2023, the Commission further introduced a "Defence of Democracy" package to protect democracy in Europe and fight against mis- and disinformation, including those diffused by foreign actors. This will likely be further developed under the new leadership in the aforementioned "European Democracy Shield".[52] Challenges to the normative credibility of the EU are addressed mostly by attempts to communicate more strategically, for instance around Team Europe and the Global Gateway Initiative. Attempts by populist radical right governments to influence the framing of democracy, human rights, or gender are countered by the EU institutions on a case-by-case basis, rather than in more structural ways.

Systemic rivalry and China and Russia's political influence in Europe

The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion in Ukraine have further fuelled perceptions in Europe that autocratic powers are proactively seeking to position their political system as an alternative model to Western democracy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government actively sought to promote an alternative narrative of the "origins of the Coronavirus" to present the Chinese authoritarian system as particularly successful in fighting the pandemic and its approach to cooperation as being more helpful for partners in the Global South in comparison to the EU or US activities. The EU's High-Representative on Foreign and Security Policy referred to a "politics of generosity" in this context.[53] Russia, in turn, has used recent political turmoil and military coups in West Africa to position itself as an alternative cooperation partner to the EU that "delivers" and provides military and security support with "no political strings attached".

In addition, external actors increasingly take political influence in Europe. In the past, the EU debated on how to contribute to political liberalisation in China, Russia, and elsewhere through trade and societal exchanges. Today, discussions about Chinese and Russian attempts to exert influence in the EU's partner countries as well as in Europe itself dominate political debates. This has been very visible in the European Parliament (EP). During the 2024 EP election campaign, investigations revealed that Russia and China might have paid European Parliamentarians and their political advisors to buy access to information and influence debates on Russia and China in the EP. Already in 2022, the "Qatar-Gate" revealed how foreign entities sought to buy political and economic influence in the EP through corruption and bribery. The EP's informal China Friendship Group was abolished in 2021, when allegations were made that the group received funding from China and its leading MP transferred confidential information on trade negotiations to China. These examples from the European Parliament are illustrative of a broader trend where Russia and China use "sharp power" to gain influence on parliaments, the media, civil society, academics, or beyond to promote their political

[51] von der Leyen, *Europe's Choice*, p. 24.

[52] von der Leyen, *Europe's Choice*, p. 23.

[53] Aline Burni, Benedikt Erforth, Ina Friesen, Christine Hackenesch, Maximilian Hoegl and Niels Keijzer. "Who called Team Europe? The European Union's development policy response during the first wave of COVID-19", *The European Journal of Development Research* 34 (2021): pp. 524-539, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-021-00428-7.

goals and thereby purposefully or unintentionally undermine democratic processes in Europe, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries but also elsewhere.[54]

The EU has made first steps to respond to these trends in Europe as well as in its external relations. Internally, the Defence of Democracy package is at least partly directed at countering foreign influences. The fight against disinformation and misinformation and attempts to increase transparency of funding for political parties, civil society organisations, and members of parliament are more or less explicitly also directed at countering interference from Russia, China, and other external actors. Externally, the EU has so far mostly positioned Global Gateway and Team Europe as two major initiatives to strengthen the EU's strategic communication and re-position the EU as an attractive value-based partner. Moving forward, the EU will need to invest more in developing a convincing narrative and provide proof of why democracy is attractive and delivers tangible socioeconomic benefits and protection from arbitrariness for citizens.

Contestation of the EU's external action in the Global South

Cooperation with the EU and the EU's global role are now much more controversially discussed in countries across the Global South, though without disengagement from the EU being an option in all but a limited number of states. The vast majority of developing countries follow a de-facto policy of maximising possibilities for international cooperation, which includes democracy support. Yet despite this overall picture, the EU's migration policy, the EU's response to Russia's invasion in Ukraine, its positioning on the conflict in Gaza, its trade and energy policy (framed by critics as "green colonialism"), or more generally the framing of a new systemic rivalry in global politics which the EU prominently re-emphasises are increasingly contested in (parts of) the Global South. Another example concerns the clash between conservative developing country governments (and societal groups) on the one hand, and the EU's promotion of gender equality and reproductive health, as well as action against discrimination based on sexual identity and orientation, on the other – including in the recent negotiations of the Samoa agreement.[55] Direct contestation of EU policy agendas is not a new phenomenon, as the "Stop EPA" campaign targeting the EU's trade negotiations showed two decades ago,[56] but these examples show that the contestation is increasing in scope and intensity.

Regarding Russia's invasion in Ukraine, for instance, some African governments, as well as parts of African civil society, do not subscribe to the narrative that Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's backing of Russia are an expression of a new systemic rivalry between democracy and autocracy. Moreover, while some African governments that have decided to "take sides" and align with the EU, the US and the West have more broadly been faced with a strong backlash in domestic political debates. In Zambia, the political opposition used the occasion of the "Summit for Democracy", which

[54] Thorsten Benner, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti & Kristin Shi-Kupfer, "Authoritarian advance: Responding to China's growing political influence in Europe," Report by MERICS and GPPi (2018).
[55] Bergmann et al., Blackmailing and identity profiling.
[56] Friedrich Plan, Niels Keijzer & Arne Niemann, "Outside-in Politicization of EU–Western Africa Relations: What Role for Civil Society Organizations?" *JCMS* 59, 1 (2021): pp. 161-179, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13144.

was co-hosted by the Zambian government in 2023, to portray the government as a "puppet of the West" that falls into the trap of the neo-colonial practices of Western countries.[57]

For the time being, it is unclear whether the broader contestation of the EU's external action in the Global South is paralleled by a broader contestation of EU democracy support. At the level of citizens, Afrobarometer data[58] suggests that in Africa support for democracy generally remains high. Around 68% of respondents in Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021–2023) view democracy as the most preferred political regime for their country, even though it has been slightly reducing in recent years. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the supply of democracy is also very high. For African citizens, perception of overall cooperation with the EU remains positive on average — 39% of surveyed citizens in 2021–23 found the EU's influence to be positive for their country.[59] It can therefore be assumed that European democracy support continues to be relevant.

Priorities and trade-offs in the EU's external relations

As noted above, the promotion of human rights and democracy is a horizontal objective that is enshrined in the EU's treaties and permeates all actions funded under the EU's NDICI instrument. Yet the reality is that such various horizontal objectives compete for attention and funding, and that some of these represent trade-offs and real choices for the EU.

One example is the introduction of the EU's Global Gateway initiative in December 2021, after first being announced by von der Leyen during her annual State of the Union address to the European Parliament in September that year. The high-level announcement effectively promoted a political reorientation of the EU's external action to more assertively promoting the EU's strategic interests, seeking to ramp up the EU's infrastructure investment and the involvement of the European private sector in these. Although the initiative refers to being a value-based European offer, the positioning of the initiative as an alternative to China's BRI indicates an essentially competitive approach and one where supporting democracy is not a major consideration. The incoming European Commission leadership seeks to take Global Gateway to the next level, including by developing Global Gateway packages that bring together major projects, trade policy measures, and budget support (macro-economic financial support).[60] It is clear that this direction does not accentuate an attention to democracy, thus suggesting that the human development aspects of Global Gateway risk becoming further de-emphasised.

Prior to the unfolding of the Global Gateway initiative, the EU also brought forward ambitious Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) during the von der Leyen I Commission. First designed as a means to bundle and represent the EU's collective external response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the summer of 2020 the approach to promoting Team Europe was broadened to promoting collective action by the EU, its member states, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the European Investment Bank. The outcome of these efforts were TEIs, packages of joint actions and combined

[57] Cynthia Kamwengo, "Social Media Debates on Zambia's Evolving Relations with the West and East. Trends and Implications," Megatrends Policy Brief 21 (2024), doi:10.18449/2024MTA-PB21.

[58] Afrobarometer. Online data analysis tool. Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023). 2024. https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/.

[59] Note that 27 percent of respondents answered 'Don't know / Haven't heard enough', while 12 percent selected 'Neither positive nor negative' and 22 percent 'Very negative' and 'Somewhat negative'.

[60] von der Leyen, *Europe's Choice*, p. 24.

efforts of the EU in specific sectors and areas that are taken forward at the national and regional level. An external evaluation noted that some geographic TEIs included democracy components, but that there were otherwise no dedicated TEIs focused on democracy promotion.[61] Potentially offsetting this lack of attention, one TEI was created with a global focus to combine efforts to support and strengthen democracy, the Team Europe Democracy (TED) initiative that is taken forward in the period 2022-2027 with a total budget of EUR €15.7 million.[62] A notable feature of TED is the strong involvement of the implementing agencies of Germany and Belgium, which together provide for a joint secretariat to facilitate the joint actions taken further under this TEI.

Although TED and other high-level efforts to promote democracy represent commendable efforts by the EU, horizontal objectives promising a systemic attention to democracy throughout the EU's international cooperation raises expectations that should be considered and at least monitored. Specifically, in addition to evaluating whether the EU's projects achieve their stated objectives, dedicated efforts need to be made to determine what extent these projects produce unintended effects on democracies and institutions in developing countries.[63] The recent evaluation of the NDICI instrument indicates the effectiveness of democracy support is decisively influenced by the EU Delegations' capacity for understanding the needs and contexts in which these interventions are taken forward.[64] Specifically, the evaluation observed deteriorating commitments to democracy, freedom, and fundamental rights in many EU partner countries, which affects the conditions for such interventions to be effectively implemented given the importance of country ownership.[65]

Taken together, our analysis shows that the importance of the EU's democracy support and protection efforts have increased in the face of major external and internal challenges to democracy. However, current approaches are not yet adjusted to the current more challenging context to supporting democracy in which, in addition to a changed geopolitical situation, attacks on democracy from within and competing priorities must also be taken into account. Finally, the importance of the EU's own democracy performance has become more salient as a key factor influencing its legitimacy and effectiveness as a democracy support actor.

[61] Landis MacKellar, Camille Massey, Tino Smaïl, Sarah Bellot Le Hellidu, Jean Bossuyt, Volker Hauck, Alexei Jones & Michael Lieckefett, "Evaluation of the European Union External Action: Instruments Evaluation. European Union's External Financing Instruments (2014-2020 and 2021-2027)." Volume I: Synthesis Report, European Union (2024), https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fa67d6be-550b-450a-b3c3-f9d5959f55af_en?filename=evaluation-eu-external-financing-instruments-2014-2020-and-2021-2027-main-report-provisional_en.pdf, p. 3.

[62] European Commission, *Team Europe Democracy Initiative*, 2024, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/team-europe-democracy-initiative_en

[63] Keijzer & Vandeputte, The (un)intended effects.

[64] MacKeller et al., Evaluation of the European Union External Action, p. 15.

[65] MacKeller et al., Evaluation of the European Union External Action, p. 18.

Five proposals on how to reform EU democracy support over the next five years

1. Invest more in strengthening a democracy narrative

The EU needs to make more efforts to explain how democracy is not only a value in itself, but at the same time also delivers concrete socio-economic benefits for its citizens. Rejuvenating democratic values and norms within the EU and its populations is necessary. Democracy as a value and norm has been contested in European societies, therefore offering spaces for dialogue about a joint vision of democracy could be a valuable approach to re-creating the democratic foundations of the EU and its people. The EU also needs to move towards a joint learning approach in cooperating with partners on democracy support. In some areas, for instance regarding the role of social media in election campaigns, European countries face domestic challenges not too different from their partners. The EU should use the opportunity for joint and open exchanges rather than prescriptions and lecturing.

2. Adjust existing democracy support instruments to the new context

EU approaches need to encompass instruments to support democratisation and protect democracy against autocratisation. Both have different logics and should be applied in different contexts. Foresight instruments that indicate typical procedures or tools used by autocratisers and increase awareness about ongoing autocratisation processes should be established and complemented with dynamic analyses of processes of regime change rather than the status quo of a political economy only. While the EU has reacted to shrinking spaces with more flexible support to individuals, such as human rights defenders and civil society, adaptive approaches are necessary to do justice to current autocratisation trends; in particular, approaches that combine support for pro-democratic actors with diplomatic and economic measures that condemn or even sanction autocratisers at critical junctures of regime change.

3. Strengthen "Team Europe" Democracy

The EU has introduced a dedicated "Team Europe" Democracy (TED) initiative that aims at sharing experiences and lessons among European donors on democracy support. Under this initiative, the EU and several member states seek to share lessons on their democracy support activities. This initiative is an important step forward to strengthening policy-learning across key European actors. Moving forward, European actors engaged in TED should build on knowledge-sharing to strengthen their strategic cooperation at the level of partner countries. Only if the EU institutions and (several) member states join forces can they make meaningful contributions towards political reforms in partner countries.

4. Rethink the Global Gateway to make sure the EU at least does "no harm" to democracy

Global Gateway projects on energy, transport, or digitalisation are currently designed in a way that does not differ much from previous financing initiatives in how they address the political context in partner countries. The projects aim at ensuring that human rights and social standards are well respected. However, large-scale infrastructure projects can also have broader political implications.

For instance, if energy projects provide important rents for traditional elites, they can have a regime-stabilising effect, regardless of whether the EU or another international partner provides the funding for them. The Global Gateway does not address these important political economy questions in different ways compared to previous funding initiatives; democracy support, as such, is not part of the Global Gateway at all. Moving forward, the EU should take the lessons from previous funding initiatives strongly into account and strengthen political economy analyses in project development and implementation. At minimum, Global Gateway projects should at least do "no harm" to democratisation efforts in a partner country.

5. "Do no harm to democracy" as guiding principle for all EU external relations

Support for democracy and human rights is enshrined in the EU's treaties as a key principle for all external relations of the EU. Even if challenging to implement, the EU needs to ensure that this is effectively mainstreamed across various fields of external relations and not just promoted through development policy and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. As a minimum baseline, the EU needs to ensure that it "does no harm to democracy". This will require a comprehensive approach that takes the potential effects of external EU activities in different policy fields such as trade, economic support or development, and military assistance on democratic institutions and practices into account.

Finding a balance: the EU's democracy support in a world of competing interests

Evelyn Mantoiu[66]

The European Union has policy coherence as a commitment under the EU Treaties, which requires that the EU and its Member States take into account the objectives of development cooperation in all their external and internal policies that are likely to affect developing countries. Key aspects include Policy Coherence for Development (PCD), which ensures that external policies support global development goals, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[67] Horizontal coherence focuses on consistency across sectors such as trade, environment, and energy, while vertical coherence ensures alignment between EU-wide policies and those of member states. [68] Additionally, the EU emphasises coherence between internal and external policies, ensuring that domestic actions do not negatively impact global relations. This approach aims to enhance the effectiveness and credibility of EU policies and supports long-term, sustainable solutions to complex challenges like climate change, trade, and migration. Furthermore, the EU has made commitments to support the implementation of SDGs, with SDG16 being given special recognition, with multiple policy documents acknowledging the crucial role of peace, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law for sustainable development.[69] According to the European Treaties, democracy, with human rights and rule of law, is a foundational value of the EU (Article 2 TEU). Indeed, the 2019 Council Conclusions make reference to this in saying that "one of the aims of the European Union's external action is to advance democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as set out in the Article 21 of the Treaty."[70] Altogether, this shows that when it comes to democracy support, there is a well-developed legal and normative framework for democracy support policies in the EU's external action.

However, the EU does not have a definition of democracy support; it is broadly understood as support to democratic institutions, civil society, democratic norms, and democratic governance.[71] Democracy support towards different regions and countries is often muddled by the inherent complexities of the

[66] The author thanks Konstantina Alexopoulou and Ellen Leafstedt for their assistance with the background research and literature review, and the EPD team for their valuable input and feedback.

[67] European Commission. "Policy coherence for development", https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/european-development-policy/policy-coherence-development_en

[68] Carmen Gebhard, "The Problem of Coherence in the European Union's International Relations", in *International Relations and the European Union*, eds. Christopher Hill, Michael Smith and Sophie Vanhoonacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 123-142.

[69] European Parliament, *Peace, justice and strong institutions EU support for implementing SDG16 worldwide,* 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/646156/EPRS_BRI(2020)646156_EN.pdf

[70] European Union, *Council Conclusions on Democracy,* 2019, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12836-2019-INIT/en/pdf

[71] Anne Wetzel, Jan Orbie and Fabienne Bossuyt, "One of what kind? Comparative perspectives on the substance of EU democracy promotion", C*ambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2015): 21-34, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2015.1019726

EU, the interplay between member states interests, and the EU's ability to act as an independent actor. Scholars highlight the EU's "normative power" dilemma, where it strives to promote democratic values while engaging in pragmatic realpolitik with non-democratic regimes, leading to a lack of policy coherence.[72] Conflicting policies have often made democracy even less of a foreign policy priority. Following the European Parliamentary election in June 2024, a new European Commission is being formed, with each proposed commissioner receiving a mission letter. Democracy does not feature in any of the mission letters of the new commissioners, except in reference to internal EU democracy and the need to safeguard this from foreign interference. This is in contrast with issues like migration, security, or economic competitiveness which now occupy a much larger space in the political discourse.

As such, this chapter addresses the issue of coherence when it comes to the interplay between the EU acting as a democracy support actor and pursuing its economic and security interests. It puts forward the argument that the EU's democracy support work is often undermined by competing interests, with democracy support in external action appearing now largely deprioritised, with a noticeable shift toward securitisation or a defensive turn in EU foreign policy. When looking at coherence, this article will consider three dimensions: democracy support aid, the EU's balancing act between its own interests and that of its members, and democracy support and the use of sanctions and conditionality. For the purpose of this chapter, coherence should be understood more broadly as the alignment between different EU policies and efforts to support democracy in a given context.

Democracy is being challenged globally, with more and more countries falling under the grip of autocratisation in what has been dubbed as the "third wave of autocratisation".[73] Historically, the EU has been one of the biggest actors in democracy support, both in terms of verbal commitments and financial support, and alongside its member states can be considered the biggest aid contributor to the sector. However, such efforts have often fallen short due to a prioritisation of economic and security interests over democracy and human rights.[74] The EU's new direction of putting greater emphasis on Global Gateway, the EU's flagship €300 billion infrastructure development initiative, also raises concerns regarding the place democracy support will have in external action in the coming years.[75]

Reinforcing a democratic pathway

The EU is able to support democratic efforts through its financing instruments. When it comes to democracy support, the main financing tool is the Neighbourhood, Development and International

[72] Rosa Balfour, *The European Union as a Global Actor*, (London: Routledge, 2016)

[73] Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg, "A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?", Democratization, vol. 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095-1113, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029

[74] Amandine Sabourin and Sara Gianesello, "A savvier approach for meaner times: The EU's external promotion of democracy", ECPDM, October 9, 2024, https://ecdpm.org/work/savvier-approach-meaner-times-eus-external-promotion-democracy

[75] European Commission, *Global Gateway*. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe. The overall budget of the NDICI Human Rights and Democracy is €1.5 billion for the period 2021–2027, with the five priorities: protecting and empowering individuals (€704 million); building resilient, inclusive, and democratic societies (€463 million); promoting a global system for human rights and democracy (€114 million); safeguarding fundamental freedoms, including harnessing the opportunities and addressing challenges of digital and new technologies (€195 million); and delivering by working together (€6.6 million).[76] This is complemented by the Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations programme, with an approximate budget of €1.5 billion for the financial period 2021–2027, and split across two priority areas: support to civil society for approximately €1.3 billion and the development awareness programme for €151 million, with a designated amount of €30 million for support measures.[77] Democracy support work is then further complemented by geographic allocations from the regional programmes, or from the country programmes. There is a legislative spending target of at least 15% of the geographic programme to be dedicated to activities supporting human rights, democracy, and good governance. Additionally, all EU external action projects include a thematic commitment to gender equality, with a goal that 85% of all new actions across external relations will contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment by 2025, directly contributing to achieving SDG 5 as indicated in the EU's third Gender Action Plan.[78]

The biggest recipients of EU's democracy support cooperation are represented by the African continent and the neighbourhood regions. These receive both the most policy attention and the largest financial allocations for development and democracy support, as seen in the table below. They are seen as strategic areas of engagement. These regions are important both in terms of security and economically, as key partners for raw materials trading and securing Europe's borders. In many ways, supporting democratic actors in these regions is within the EU's strategic interests as it would ensure both a better use of EU's funding and reliability from the partners.

Table 1: Indicative financial allocations to democracy support in regional multi-annual indicative programmes (MIPs)[79]

Region	Period	Priority area related to democracy support work	Amount (EUR millions)	Total indicative budget (EUR millions)
Sub-Saharan Africa	2021–2027	Democratic governance, peace and security, culture	855	10242

[76] European Commission, "Multi-Annual Indicative Programming for the NDICI-Global Europe Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy 2021-2027," n.d., https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/mip-2021-c2021-9620-human-rights-democracy-annex_en.pdf.

[77] European Commission, "Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027, n.d, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-9158-civil-society-organisations-annex_en.pdf

[78] European Commission, "Joint Communication: Gender Action Plan III", https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2184

[79] This table makes reference to multi-annual indicative plans prior to the mid-term review. Figures are based on an analysis of the regional MIPs that can be found here: https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/funding-instruments/global-europe-programming_en

Latin America and the Caribbean	2021–2027	Democratic governance, security, migration	116	1280
Regional Eastern	2021–2027	Resilient, fair, and inclusive societies	126.44	632.24
Regional Eastern	2021–2027	Accountable institutions, the rule of law, and security	94.83	632.24
Regional South	2021–2024	Human development, good governance, and the Rule of Law	59	474

Following the Arab Spring, a more pragmatic geopolitical EU approach was gradually adopted, mainly expressed through the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) which introduced the definitions of "responsible engagement" and "principled pragmatism". Therefore, a "more for more" approach was implemented where democracy support has been an explicit long-term objective for the EU's external action, particularly in the neighbourhood regions. [80] For a while, the EU put an end to overestimating its transformative power by proceeding to follow a so-called "silent promotion" of democratic values in more favourable countries.[81] In practice, this means that the EU is not pursuing a broad democratising agenda, but rather focuses its efforts on those places where there is a democratic opening. However, there is still space for the EU to improve its response mechanisms for democratic openings, both in terms of the response it takes and the speed of its intervention.[82] When dealing with authoritarian regimes, the EU is not seeking regime change, but rather it will invest in socio-economic policies that will have a positive effect on democracy in the long term. This is consistent with the broader approach to democracy support that the EU has taken, which has moved away from engaging directly with governments, and towards supporting civil society actors.[83]

The EU is able to use positive rewards when it sees a democratic pathway in a given context. In addition to trade agreements and aid, the European Union can use a variety of positive reinforcement tools to influence cooperation. These include offering visa liberalisation, mobility agreements, education programmes (Erasmus), and access to its single market, along with regulatory alignment and technical assistance to support reforms. The EU can also engage in security and defence cooperation, support climate action through the European Green Deal, strengthen political dialogue through strategic partnerships, and support infrastructure developments through its flagship initiative Global Gateway.

Positive developments are seen as a window of opportunity for increased cooperation. An example of this is cooperation with Zambia, where a change in government created an opening for

[80] European Commission, "European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) - Fact Sheet", https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_13_236

[81] Jan Techau, *The EU's New Global Strategy: Useful or Pointless?,* Carnegie Europe, 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2016/07/the-eus-new-global-strategy-useful-or-pointless?lang=en

[82] Ken Godfrey, Move Fast and Support Things, Carnegie Europe, 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/12/move-fast-and-support-things-responding-to-democratic-openings?lang=en&center=russia-eurasia

[83] Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Assistance: Political vs. Developmental?", *Journal of Democracy,* vol. 20, no. 1 (2009): 5- 19, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0047.

democratisation, resulting in an increase in the cooperation budget from the EU. Following the general election of 2021, in which the opposition leader won with a landslide victory, cooperation with the European Union deepened.[84] The election was seen as a positive development for democracy and to support the Government's reform plan the EU provided an additional €60 million to the envelope for cooperation with Zambia, modifying the Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2021–2027 between the European Union and the Republic of Zambia to reflect this increase in funding.[85] In addition to this, the EU opted for increased partnerships with the country. Under Global Gateway, the EU signed a new strategic partnership with Zambia on critical raw materials. [86] Alongside this, the EU also provided €110 million in grant funding to the education sector.[87]

However, the EU is also likely to proceed with agreements that are somewhat damaging in the long-term to democracy support efforts. For example, an EU-Tunisia deal, which amounted to up to €1 billion, was pitched as a "template" for strategic partnership with other North African states.[88] The deal gave €105 million to tackle migration and border policy, designating migration as a central pillar of the EU's strategic relationship with North Africa. The substantial financial injection into the Tunisian economy, including €150 million to prop up Tunisia's budget, took place despite rapid democratic backsliding, the arrest of activists, protesters, and opposition figures, as well as what the UN characterised as "racist treatment of sub-Saharan migrants". [89] Moreover, the EU is now set to have a Commissioner for the Mediterranean tasked with leading the bloc's migration policy, indicating that migration is a current political priority.

Although the EU indicated concern for some of these developments, there was little mention of human rights in the final deal, and the financial buttressing of the current regime demonstrated a clear prioritisation of migration policy over support for democracy. The deal generated substantial internal division.[90] In particular, 37 Members of European Parliament (MEPs) criticised the deal as

[84] Chris Mfula, "Zambia opposition leader Hichilema wins landslide in presidential election", *Reuters*, August 16, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/zambian-opposition-leader-hichilema-heads-closer-victory-presidential-vote-2021-08-15//

[85] European Commission, *Addendum 1 to the Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2021-2027 between the European Union and the Republic of Zambia,* https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document:download/dde28e56-ee74-4e6e-9cde-e47f2f43129b_en?filename=mip-2021-zambia-amendment june-2023_en.pdf

[86] "Global Gateway: EU signs strategic partnerships on critical raw materials value chains with DRC and Zambia and advances cooperation with US and other key partners to develop the 'Lobito Corridor'", European Commission, October 26, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5303

[87] "EU and Zambia strengthen cooperation on education and research", European Commission, April 11, 2024, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/eu-and-zambia-strengthen-cooperation-education-and-research-2024-04-11_en

[88] Speech by President von der Leyen at the International Conference on Development and Migration", European Commission, July 23, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_3981

[89] UN experts urge Tunisia to act swiftly to uphold migrants' rights", UNHCR, July 18, 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/07/un-experts-urge-tunisia-act-swiftly-uphold-migrants-rights.

[90] Franziska Grillmeier, Yassin Musharbash and Bastian Mühling, "Ohne Rücksicht auf Verluste", *Die Zeit,* August 2, 2023 ,https://www.zeit.de/2023/33/eu-abkommen-tunesien-migrationsdeal-ursula-von-der-leyen?utm_ referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

"cash for migrant control"[91] while the European Ombudsman opened a case referring to human rights implications.[92] Although the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, called the agreement a success story, Tunisia accused the EU of breaching promises made and returned the €60 million already provided by the EU.[93] Significant funds continued to be provided to Tunisia's government despite President Kais Saied dissolving the parliament, seizing control of the election commission, and pushing through a referendum on a new highly authoritarian constitution.[94] The day before the dissolution, Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi visited the country and confirmed a support package of €200 million for the southern neighbourhood, including for Tunisia.[95] Additionally, the country received a second instalment of €300 million under a COVID-19 aid package, with the EU restating its commitment to providing financial support through the rapid disbursement of €40 million and new macro-financial assistance.[96] The EU was notably silent regarding the 6 October elections, and is currently embroiled in a saga on a potential misuse of EU funds by Tunisian authorities, to whom €150 million has already been paid. [97] The case of Tunisia constitutes a clear example of the EU choosing to prioritise its immediate strategic interests – in this case migration control over democracy. Moreover, the EU-Tunisia deal paved the way for smaller but similar schemes between the EU and Morocco and Egypt for border and migration management. However, to an extent this is also the result of Member States pushing for more efforts to curb and deter migration. This has also given way for states to independently seek migration deals that would allow them to skew their internal commitments to providing asylum and safe passage, such as the deal between Italy and Albania, championed by Italy's far-right government.[98]

[91] Benjamin Fox, "MEPs slam EU over 'grave' human rights abuses following Tunisia migrant deal", *Euractiv,* July 27, 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/migration/news/meps-slam-eu-over-grave-human-rights-abuses-following-tunisia-migrant-deal/

[92] European Ombudsman, *Strategic initiative SI/5/2023/MHZ on how the European Commission intends to guarantee respect for human rights in the context of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding*, Brussels, https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/opening-summary/en/175102

[93] Gregorio Sorgi, "Tunisia hands back €60M of EU funding as migrant deal tensions soar", *Politico*, October 11, 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/tunisia-hands-back-60-m-eu-funding-migration-deal/

[94] Sebastian Usher and Leo Sands, "Tunisia Referendum: President Saied Celebrates Expected Referendum Win," BBC, July 26, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62289550.

[95] European Commission, "Commissioner Várhelyi Travels to Tunisia," March 28, 2022, https:// neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commissioner-varhelyi-travels-tunisia-2022-03-28_en.

[96] European External Action Service, "Tunisia: Speech on Behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Debate on the Political Situation," speech, October 19, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tunisia-speech-behalf-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-debate-political_en.

[97] Mark Townsend, "EU unable to retrieve €150m paid to Tunisia despite links to rights violations", *The Guardian,* October 11, 2024,https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/oct/11/eu-funding-migrant-deal-tunisia-human-rights-violations-asylum-icc

[98] Fatos Bytyci, "Italy delivers first migrants to Albania under new deal", *Reuters,* October 16, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italian-navy-ship-with-migrants-arrives-albanias-port-2024-10-16

A balancing act

The EU's ability to function as an independent actor in democracy support is often weakened by its own structure, as its foreign policy must navigate the competing preferences of its member states, resulting in an inconsistent application of democracy support, as seen in its selective use of sanctions or conditionality mechanisms.[99] The EU acts in the interest of its member states, within a set legislative and normative framework. This means that engagement with third parties is on the basis of different priorities and the possibilities of cooperation within a given context. Challenges exist in harmonising the interests of the three EU institutions (Commission, Council, Parliament) and 27 member states, which can make it difficult to achieve results in non-democratising countries.[100] Additionally, the EU does not have an exclusive competence on foreign policy – this remains the domain of Member States, who have the duty of sincere cooperation under the treaties.[101]

Overall, the EU needs to balance pursuing these interests and ensuring that it does not undermine democratisation efforts, particularly from local actors. At an operational level, the EU has the toolkit necessary to do this to a certain extent via its Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA). However, as a different chapter in this report suggests, perhaps there is space to extend such an approach – taking on a "do no harm to democracy" principle.

When it comes to democracy support initiatives, researchers have found that such efforts are often outweighed by everyday engagements with authoritarian partners, ranging from trade deals to joint security programmes, indicating a general lack of policy coherence amongst the donor community,[102] with some stating that democracy support as a goal has suffered from competition with other economic, political, or strategic interests since its emergence in the policy field.[103] This is explained by the desire of pro-democracy governments to sometimes overlook progress towards democracy for goals such as stability and development, with particular leniency towards partners who are considered to be geostrategically important.[104] The EU has placed emphasis on democracy and the rule of law, and even more so in candidate countries, but while democracy has deteriorated in Serbia, there has

[99] Tanja A. Borzel and Thomas Risse, "The Transformative Power of Europe: The European Union and the Diffusion of Ideas", *KFG Working Paper Series*, No. 1 (2009), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/115939/2009-Tranformative-Power-of-Europe.pdf

[100] Sonja Grimm, *Democracy Promotion in Times of Uncertainty: Trends and Challenges,* Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2018, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep20032.8.pdf

[101] European Union. (2008). *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - Title I: Common Provisions - Article 4*. Official Journal, 115, 09/05/2008, P. 0018. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A12008M004#:~:text=Pursuant%20to%20the%20principle%20of,which%20flow%20from%20the%20Treaties

[102] Nic Cheeseman and Marie-Eve Desrosiers, *How not to engage with authoritarian states,* Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2023, https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/how_not_to_engage_with_ authoritarian_states_wfd_cheeseman_desrosiers_2023.pdf

[103] Oda van Cranenburgh, "Democracy Promotion: Comparing African and Asian Experiences", *The African Review,* vol. 46, no. 1 (2019): 1-31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45420256

[104] Comfort Ero. "The Trouble With 'the Global South': What the West Gets Wrong About the Rest", *Foreign Affairs,* April 1, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/trouble-global-south

not been a strong response from the EU.[105] In contrast, the EU is working on deepening economic relations. The EU has provided continued financial support, and together with Germany, even sought signed deals granting the EU exclusive access to Serbian lithium, despite local protests against mining due to environmental concerns – thereby acting in direct opposition to both pro-democratic and climate-change concerns.[106] France, following a similar example, signed 11 multi-billion-euro agreements increasing cooperation on economics, security, energy, and critical minerals.[107] While the deal secures European access to key resources, it comes at the cost of local protest movements against an autocratic government.[108]

The 2019 Council Conclusions on Democracy frames strengthening democracy externally as being in the EU's strategic interest.[109] However, since then many member states have developed new security partnerships with democracies and less democratic regimes alike, in different regions framing these as being about defending democracies from autocratic threats. [110] However, few governments have backed these agreements with continuous support to democratic actors, particularly to civil society, and in many of these places civic space has since become far more restricted.[111] The EU itself has continued to pursue its natural resources and trade interests, striking deals with autocratic governments, despite concerns regarding human rights and democracy. The energy deal with Azerbaijan is an example of this. It creates a level of interdependence between the EU and the country that is not conducive to democracy support work. When signing the Memorandum of Understanding with Azerbaijan, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen even called President Aliyev a "trustworthy, reliable partner"[112] despite the country's shrinking civic space and high number of political prisoners.[113] Following this deal, Azerbaijan received approximately €19 billion from gas and oil sales to the EU in 2023 alone, with some EU member states including Bulgaria, Italy, Greece,

[105] Dimitar Bechev, Serbia's Authoritarian (Re)turn, Carnegie Europe, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/01/serbias-authoritarian-return?lang=en

[106] Una Hajdari, "Berlin inks lithium deal with Belgrade despite environmental concerns", *POLITICO*, July 19, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/olaf-scholz-maros-sefcovic-lithium-deal-serbia-environmental-concerns/.

[107] Una Hajdari, Laura Kayali and Antonia Zimmermann, "From Paris with love: Serbia's east-west balancing act pays off", *POLITICO*, August 30, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-serbia-aleksandar-vucic-deals-serbia-france/.

[108] Vedran Dzihic, Mining Lithium, Undermining a Democratic Future: EU Deal Takes Serbia Further from Europe, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2024, https://www.boell.de/en/2024/09/30/mining-lithium-undermining-democratic-future-eu-deal-takes-serbia-further-europe

[109] Council of the European Union, Democracy: EU adopts conclusions, 2019, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/14/democracy-eu-adopts-conclusions/

[110] Richard Youngs, *The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support,* Carnegie, 2024. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/the-defensive-turn-in-european-democracy-support?lang=en&center=europe

[111] Ruth-Marie Henckes et al, *Thinking Democratically: A Comprehensive Approach to Countering and Preventing 'Shrinking Space',* European Partnership For Democracy, 2020, https://epd.eu/content/uploads/2023/08/Thinking-democratically-A-comprehensive-approach-to-countering-and-preventing-shrinking-space.pdf

[112] European Commission, Statement by President von der Leyen with Azerbaijani President Aliyev, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_4583

[113] CIVICUS, *Azerbaijan: Watchlist - September 2024*, CIVICUS Monitor, 2024, https://monitor.civicus.org/watchlist-september-2024/azerbaijan/

Romania, Hungary, and soon Croatia, Slovakia, and Austria being the buyers.[114] It was these economic ties that prevented a call for sanctions from Members of the European Parliament following the military strike on Nagorno-Karabakh. [115]

Sanctions and conditionality

Democracy support does not consist only of democracy aid—the financial support to key sectors important for democratic infrastructure—but also of more forceful measures that include the implementation of sanctions and the application of economic and political conditionality. These are instruments available to the EU that could be applied more consistently.[116]

The most important development for the democracy support community came in 2020 when the EU announced a new sanctions framework called the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. This sanctions regime allows the EU to target individuals, entities, and bodies—both state and non-state actors—who are responsible for, involved in, or associated with serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide, no matter where they occurred. Under this regime individuals and entities can be sanctioned on the ground of eroding democracy in a given context.

Despite being set up in 2020, the regimes had been used sparingly until 2023 when entities were added to the list of sanctions following massive protests in Iran. While the extent to which sanctions work remains an issue of debate, the threat of sanctions remains a strong signal the EU can use in its engagement with countries and regions. Experts argue that the sanctions framework has not been used to its full potential (nor has it been used strategically due to an overwhelming focus on Russia) as a means of complementing the already existing sanctions frameworks.[117] Despite its firm commitment to "consolidating and supporting democracy", there are notable cases where democratic crisis and repression did not lead to the implementation of sanctions by the EU, despite there being grounds for such action.[118] Especially with international power players like China, the EU demonstrates limited decisiveness towards the undermining of democratic values. In particular, no sanctions were imposed in relation to China's increasingly harsh clampdown on pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong. The EU continued cooperation with China during these events and only recently moved to a

[114] Shujaat Ahmadzada, *Can Energy Ties Prevent an Azerbaijan–EU Rift?,* Carnegie Endowment, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/04/can-energy-ties-prevent-an-azerbaijan-eu-rift?lang=en

[115] Elisa Braun, Gabriel Gavin and Eddy Wax, "Don't expect EU sanctions on Azerbaijan — even though MEPs will vote for them", *Politico,* October 4, 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-sanctions-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-meps/

[116] European Parliament, *Support for democracy through EU external policy: New tools for growing challenges,* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689344/EPRS_ BRI(2021)689344_EN.pdf

[117] Tinatin Tsertsvadze, *Sharpening the EU's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime,* European Democracy Hub, March 12, 2024, https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/sharpening-the-eus-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime/

[118] European External Action Service, European Union Sanctions, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-sanctions_en

policy of decoupling following China's more aggressive stance in the Indo-Pacific and its close cooperation with Russia.

A further notable example is EU-Turkey relations. Following the country's democratic erosion, the EU has redirected part of its funds from the government to civil society organisations. The amount going to Turkish civil society increased to around €26 million under the EU Civil Society Facility in 2022, with another €4 million allocated from the Global Democracy and Human Rights thematic program. However, despite serious democratic deficiencies, the EU needs to maintain close cooperation with the country for various geostrategic purposes.[119] This includes migration management, for which the EU has provided €10 billion in assistance to Turkey.[120] There is a clear juxtaposition between the two amounts, highlighting where the priority lies, with investment in democracy far outpaced by other priorities.

Policy recommendations

The EU's role as a global leader in democracy support is becoming increasingly challenged in the geopolitical landscape. While the EU has developed a strong legal and normative framework for supporting democracy, its efforts often fall short due to the competing pressures of economic, security, and strategic interests. As this chapter has highlighted, coherence remains a significant challenge for the EU as its engagements with authoritarian regimes either for migration management or accessing natural resources can frequently undermine its democracy support. It is important to note that there are negative implications of the EU's lack of coherence. Accusations of double standards undermine the EU's power of persuasion and room for manoeuvring with different governments, while also affecting the EU's credibility.

To remain a credible and effective democracy support actor, the EU must recalibrate its policies, and better align its democracy support efforts with its broader foreign policy agenda. By focusing on targeted democracy support, adaptable strategies, and the consistent use of its full range of instruments, the EU can reinforce its commitment to democracy support and strengthen its leadership in the face of global democratic backsliding. The recommendations outlined below offer a pathway for the EU to recalibrate its policies and instruments, ensuring its democracy support efforts remain effective in the face of increased pressure from autocratic regimes. In this climate, the EU must recognize that supporting democracy is not only a normative mission but also a strategic one, essential for ensuring long-term global stability and security in an increasingly challenging political environment.

[119] Serdar San and Akca Davut, "How Turkey's Democratic Backsliding Compromises the International Dimension of Democratization." *DOMES: Digest of Middle East Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2021): 34-52, https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12223

[120] European Union. (2023). *The EU and Türkiye*. European Commission. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a35c752c-adf4-419e-a70b-82e3a1826796_en?filename=EU-TUR%20FS.pdf

1. Making democracy a priority

There is strong evidence for the benefits of democracy, both economically and socially. At the same time, there are also growing demands for democracy globally, which a "geopolitical" Europe should not ignore. The EU should make democracy a strategic priority and increase its current funding for democracy support. Currently, there is only €1.5 billion available via the Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy programme for the 2021–2027 financial cycle. There is strong evidence for the economic and social benefits of democracy, but these cannot be achieved without investment in democracy support.

2. Targeted democracy support

While the EU must maintain a balance between being interest driven, supporting democracy plays into the European Union's long-term interest. Global Gateway investments need to be coupled with efforts on accountability and transparency. Strengthening democratic institutions and supporting civil society organisations should be seen as a priority.

3. Making better use of its full instruments in service of democracy support

Complementing democracy support funding, the EU can make use of tools such as conditionality and sanctions. The Global Human Rights Sanctions regime should be used to its full potential in response to increased authoritarian creep. Similarly, the EU has used conditionality effectively in certain areas, particularly enlargement and trade agreements, especially where it holds significant leverage. However, its inconsistent application and limited influence in some regions reduce its overall effectiveness. The EU should strive to apply conditionality more consistently and balance its strategic interests with its value-driven foreign policy goals.

Foreign policy through the eyes of its recipients

Nathan Vandeputte, Danilo Di Mauro, Stefania Panebianco and Yassin Said

The EU has long presented itself as a normative power,[121] committed to shaping the international system by promoting core values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable development. This self-image has generally been reflected through positive perceptions of the EU in third countries, where it is often viewed as a credible and trustworthy partner, especially for its dedication to democratic principles.[122] This is demonstrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, with studies indicating that African public opinion is generally receptive to the EU's insistence on democratic development, whereby those who prioritise democracy for their country are significantly more likely to hold pro-EU views.[123] Similarly, in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, the Union's emphasis on democracy has been perceived as one of its most attractive qualities, despite concerns that this focus is sometimes overshadowed by self-interest, particularly in areas such as security.[124]

However, the EU's gradual shift toward prioritising foreign policy interests over its normative values—as seen in the political guidelines of the new European Commission[125]—poses a potential threat to its credibility. Especially as the EU's foreign policy actions in pursuit of strategic interests are increasingly facing local contestation, such as scholars highlighting the growing opposition to the EU's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs)[126] and its external migration policies[127] due to their perceived negative local impacts. This turn toward self-interest exacerbates concerns about the EU's inconsistency and application of double standards in supporting democracy.[128]

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[121] Manners, "Normative Power Europe": A Contradiction in Terms?", *JCMS,* vol. 40, no. 2 (2002): 235-258. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353

[122] Henrik Larsen, "The EU as a Normative Power and the Research on External Perceptions: The Missing Link", *Journal of Common Market Studies,* vol. 52, nr. 4 (2014): 896-910, doi: 10.1111/jcms.12109

[123] Floor Keuleers, "Explaining External Perceptions: The EU and China in African Public Opinion", *Journal of Common Market Studies,* vol. 53, nr. 4 (2015): 803-821, doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12231

[124] Assem Dandashly, *Promoting Democracy in the Southern Mediterranean: perceptions and expectations*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2019.

[125] See https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf

[126] Friedrich Plank, Niels Keijzer and Arne Niemann, "Outside-in Politicization of EU–Western Africa Relations: What Role for Civil Society Organizations?", *Journal of Common Market Studies,* Vol. 59, No. 1 (2021): 161–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13144

[127] Bruno Oliveira Martins and Michael Strange, "Rethinking EU external migration policy: contestation and critique", *Global Affairs,* vol. 5, nr. 3 (2019): 195-202, https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2019.1641128

[128] Karen Del Biondo, "Norms, self-interest and effectiveness: explaining double standards in EU reactions to violations of democratic principles in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Africa Focus*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2012), https://doi.org/10.21825/af.v25i2.4953

The "novelty" here lies not in the contestestation itself—after all, sovereignty-based criticisms of the EU are longstanding—but in the expanding diversity of voices questioning its legitimacy.[129] The EU now risks losing credibility not only with foreign governments but also among pro-democracy and human rights activists in the Global South, raising doubt about the EU's relevance. Although attention to the unintended consequences of EU support to democracy is gaining traction,[130] the increasing alienation of key partners in the democratisation process poses a more profound risk: the EU's foreign policy actions may ultimately harm, rather than support, local democratisation processes.[131]

The democratic nature of the EU's foreign policy actions: observations from three case studies

A fundamental element of any democratic society is a vibrant public sphere where diverse and conflicting views can be freely expressed and where citizens have the opportunity to choose among legitimate alternatives. In line with this, a key objective of the EU's democracy support agenda has been to foster more open and responsive societies abroad.[132] The EU pursues this, in part, by building the capacity of civil society and supporting individual activists, bloggers, and human rights defenders in their fight against authoritarian repression.[133]

However, the growing politicisation and contestation of the EU's foreign policy also reveals a more passive—and often unintended—dimension of how it intersects with local societal debates, and by extension, local democratisation processes themselves. Such influence stems from the fact that in advancing its foreign policy objectives, the EU must engage in the exchange of arguments and justifications, negotiating with national authorities, civil society, and the wider public. These negotiations inevitably align the EU with certain actors while marginalising others. Given the inescapable political nature of intervention, how does the EU's foreign policy align itself with those who pursue a vibrant public sphere where a diversity of views can be expressed?

In this chapter, we examine the contested nature of the EU's foreign policy interventions in Uganda, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Each case study explores the interplay between the EU's foreign policy agenda and the local political landscapes, assessing the extent to which it aligns with or diverges from local democratic aspirations. Together, these cases illustrate how local stakeholders often feel sidelined by the EU's approach, which can contribute to strained perceptions of the EU's impact in each country.

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[129] Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués, Martijn C. Vlaskamp, and Esther Barbé (Eds.), *European Union contested: Foreign policy in a new global context* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

[130] E.g. Assem Dandeshly and Gergana Noutcheva, "Unintended Consequences of EU Democracy Support in the European Neighbourhood", *The International Spectator,* vol. 54, no. 1 (2019): 105-120, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1554340

[131] Niels Keijzer and Nathan Vandeputte, "The (un)intended effects of EU development cooperation on democracy", IDOS, February 8, 2023, https://blogs.idos-research.de/2023/02/08/the-un-intended-effects-of-eu-development-cooperation-on-democracy/

[132] European Commission, *Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in External Relations,* 2012, Brussels.

[133] Richard Youngs, *The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support,* Carnegie, 2024. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/the-defensive-turn-in-european-democracy-support?lang=en&center=europe

More critically, this approach risks amplifying existing power structures in authoritarian settings, thus affecting the democratic fabric of the societies it seeks to support.

Uganda

In Uganda, academic analysis has found that the public is generally knowledgeable about and supportive of Western donors' aid agendas, including that of the EU.[134] However, this positive perception is not exclusive to Western donors. Evidence shows that China has rapidly gained equal, if not greater, recognition and favourability among Ugandans.[135] Despite this general support, public sentiment towards foreign interventions remains critical. Specifically, Western and international interventions more generally are expected to align with local understandings of morality, justice, and social order. When these interventions are perceived to clash with local values, they are likely to be labelled as forms of neocolonialism, particularly among young people.[136]

Such ambivalence and critical engagement make Western interventions vulnerable to politicisation. A notable example has been the politicisation of LGBTIQ+ rights by the Ugandan government to assert power over Western influence.[137] Drawing on public attitudes that emphasise nationalism, sovereignty, economic autonomy, Africanness, traditional culture, and Christian conservatism, president Museveni is shown to have successfully confronted the West's support for LGBTIQ+ rights.[138] Notably, Museveni invoked similar narratives to justify the suspension and eventual closure of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), a European basket fund of around €110 million aimed at supporting "a Uganda where citizens are empowered to engage in democratic governance and the state upholds citizens' rights".[139]

While this politicisation of normative foreign policy agendas has restricted the space for the EU and Western donors to operate, it is important to note that the EU has not been at the forefront of pushing through such normative agendas either. In fact, the EU has often adopted a more cooperative approach with the Ugandan government, which has contributed to the shrinking of democratic

[134] Michael G. Findley et al., "Who Controls Foreign Aid? Elite versus Public Perceptions of Donor Influence in Aid-Dependent Uganda", International Organization, vol. 71 (2017): 633-663, doi: 10.1017/S0020818317000273

[135] Keuleers, "Explaining External Perceptions"; Francis Kibirige and Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, "*Afrobarometer Round 6: The Quality of Democracy and Governance in Uganda"*, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2018, https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR36900.v1

[136] Henni Alava, "Acholi Youth Are Lost: Young, Christian and (A)political in Uganda", in *What Politics? Youth and Political Engagement in Africa,* Eds. E. Oinas, H. Onodera, & L. Suurpää (Bril, 2018) ; Mikael Karlström, "Modernity and its aspirants moral community and developmental utopianism in Buganda", *Current Anthropology,* vol. 45, no. 5 (2004): 595-619. https://doi.org/10.1086/423974; Julia Vorhölter, "Negotiating social change: Ugandan discourses on Westernisation and neo-colonialism as forms of social critique", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 50, no 2 (2012): 283-307, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X12000055

[137] Johanne Døhlie Saltnes and Markus Thiel, "The Politicization of LGBTI Human Rights Norms in the EU-Uganda Development Partnership", *JCMS*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2021): 108-125, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13141

[138] Stella Nyanzi and Andrew Karamagi, "The social-political dynamics of the anti-homosexuality legislation in Uganda", *Agenda,* Vol. 29, No. 1 (2015): 24-38, https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2015.1024917

[139] Nathan Vandeputte, "The suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility in Uganda: the illusion of "politically smart aid", *Development in practice,* vol. 34, no. 3 (2024): 336-350, https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2023.2238915

space.[140] Specifically Western donors, including the EU, have been willing to work with and financially support the Ugandan regime in exchange for assistance in managing the refugee crisis[141] and countering terrorism in the Horn of Africa.[142] This interest-driven relationship is likely to intensify with the advent of Uganda's oil exploitation, the EU's energy insecurity following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the involvement of Total Energies, a major shareholder in Uganda's oil project. While such cooperation may be strategic, it risks "crippling Uganda's democracy", as claimed by Uganda's political opposition.[143]

Beyond financially supporting authoritarian regimes, the EU's interest-driven foreign policy also has the potential to negatively affect local democratic debates. This becomes particularly evident in Uganda's oil sector. Like in many countries, the discovery of oil in Uganda has polarised public opinion, with some citizens viewing it as a path to socio-economic development, while others fear it will exacerbate inequality and damage Uganda's ecological resources.[144] While this oil debate in Uganda could be understood to be a new battleground on which heterogeneous civil societies agitate for more responsive and democratic governments, and thus acting as an important space through which democracy can be deepened, the government's decision to exploit oil has led to a harsh crackdown on local communities, environmental groups, and individuals campaigning for "keeping oil in the soil".[145]

Crucially, analysis reveals that the EU fails to protect such a space. The EU's narrative—which is complicated by a mandate to protect European oil investments[146]—closely aligns with the Ugandan government's pro-extractive stance,[147] while showing aversion to those opposing oil exploitation.[148] Since these critical voices are not part of the established Civil Society Coalition on Oil and Gas,[149] they are also often excluded from EU-led dialogues, which further intensifies local power imbalances and

[140] David Anderson and Jonathan Fisher, "Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Uganda", in *Aid and authoritarianism in Africa: Development without Democracy,* eds. T. Hagmann and F. Reyntjens (London: Zed Books, 2016): 67-90.

[141] Kristof Titeca, "Who depends on whom? Uganda's refugee 'success story', corruption and the international community", *Third World Quarterly,* Vol. 43, No 1 (2022): 55-73, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1989301

[142] Jonathan Fisher, "Managing donor perceptions: Contextualizing Uganda's 2007 intervention in Somalia", *African Affairs,* vol. 111, no. 444 (2012): 404–423, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ads023

[143] Bobi Wine, "The West Helped Cripple Uganda's Democracy", *Foreign Affairs,* (2021), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-01-13/west-helped-cripple-ugandas-democracy

[144] Patrick Byakagaba, Frank Mugagga and Dianah Nnakayima, "The socio-economic and environmental implications of oil and gas exploration: Perspectives at the micro level in the Albertine region of Uganda", *Extractive Industries and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2019): 358-366, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2019.01.006

[145] Human Rights Watch, *Working On Oil is Forbidden: Crackdown against Environmental Defenders in Ugan*da, https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/02/working-oil-forbidden/crackdown-against-environmental-defenders-uganda.

[146] Christopher Kiiza, "9 European Banks Join in to Finance Uganda's Oil and Gas Projects", *Chimpreports,* August 21, 2024, https://chimpreports.com/9-european-banks-join-in-to-finance-ugandas-oil-and-gas-projects/

[147] "Uganda's first oil production now pushed to 2021", *the Observer,* November 12, 2018, https://observer.ug/news/headlines/59159-uganda-s-first-oil-production-now-pushed-to-2021

[148] Frederic Musisi, "EU envoy pushes for mature oil discourse", *Monitor,* August 07, 2022, https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/eu-envoy-pushes-for-mature-oil-discourse-3906108

[149] See https://csco.ug/

restricts the democratic space.[150] Consequently, many civil society actors perceive the EU as either influenced by the Ugandan government or as primarily serving Western oil interests. This positioning has sparked criticism, with prominent civil society accusing the EU of betraying both Ugandan interests and its own stated climate goals.[151]

The EU's objective of supporting democracy in Uganda is then caught between a rock and a hard place: its normative agenda is criticised by the regime, while its interest-driven actions alienate local democratic partners. A fundamental rethink of the EU's engagement with Uganda is therefore needed. Such re-evaluation must address not only the EU's actions that fuel contestation, but also its underlying assumptions and intervention logic. A starting point should be to reconsider the EU's methodologies to map and mitigate local contestations to its democracy support agenda, such as Economy Analysis (PEA) and Problem Driven Iterative Analysis (PDIA). There are three notable shortcomings in these approaches.

Firstly, while these methodologies cannot be expected to fully eliminate uncertainty and risk,[152] the EU's implementation tends to focus narrowly on how local or external factors might affect individual projects. This focus neglects a more comprehensive analysis of how the EU's broader engagement shapes the political and operational space in Uganda. In other words, these tools fall short in providing a holistic assessment of the EU's overall foreign policy agenda in the country and how this agenda impacts given project objectives.

Secondly, these instruments often fail to develop a deep understanding of the motivations behind local partners' acceptance or rejection of certain aid objectives. This failure is known to be particularly problematic in contexts where recipient authorities remain unaligned with core Western donor agendas.[153] Specifically, despite the EU's claims of neutrality, its interventions are frequently guided by a Eurocentric vision of what is "good," which does not sufficiently recognise and acknowledge the legitimacy of locally rooted justice claims. For instance, the EU's emphasis on individual liberty—e.g., through the promotion of (neo)liberal development policies—often clashes with local conceptions of justice, which may prioritise communal well being over individual rights.[154]

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[150] Laura Smith, "The making of Uganda's oil: An exploration of subnational dynamics in an emerging East African oil frontier" (doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds, 2020), https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/29228/1/Laura%20Smith%20Thesis%20Final%20submitted%20July%202021.pdf

[151] Nathan Vandeputte, "The political nature of international democracy support and what to do with it?" (doctoral dissertation, Ghent University, 2024): 160-164, https://lib.ugent.be/en/catalog/rug01:003200188?faculty=LA-PS-TW-LW-WE-UB-RE-PP-GE-VL&i=19&lang=swe-bul-dut-mac-und-hrv-nor-nno-glg-pra-efi-bam-cpp-rar-mon-aka-bem-nia-pli-sux-som-udm&sort=new-to-old&type=phd

[152] Rajesh Venugopal, "Can the anti-politics machine be dismantled?", *New Political Economy,* Vol. 27, No. 6 (2022):1002-1016, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2022.2045926

[153] Sam Hickey and Badru Bukenya, "The politics of promoting social cash transfers in Uganda: The potential and pitfalls of 'thinking and working politically'", *Development Policy Review*, vol. 39, no 1 (2021): 13, https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12474

[154] Vandeputte, "Democratizing EU democracy support"

Lastly, these methodologies often remain highly donor-centric and secretive in nature, and as such they do not allow for sufficient ownership and local participation.[155] For example, the EU was not willing to consider any meaningful inclusion of local stakeholders in the board of the DGF,[156] and deemed those opposing Uganda's oil exploitation to have ulterior motives.[157] This exclusionary approach undermines the EU's stated commitments to partnership and shared decision-making, and it exacerbates local frustrations with its foreign policy interventions.

Lebanon

Lebanese democracy has long been characterised as consociational,[158]designed to ensure the inclusion of a complex kaleidoscopic society of different sects.[159]Social mobilisation tends to occur without a parallel development in economic and political matters.[160] Different militias—Hezbollah being the most prominent—play significant roles in providing economic and welfare services, impeding the emergence of a solid national economy and welfare system.[161] This form of democracy is inherently fragile, dependent on the ability of Lebanese elites to maintain their roles. As a result, Lebanon's democracy, often likened to "a delicate flower in an inhospitable environment", has shown its vulnerabilities several times since independence. From the 1975 Civil War to the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and subsequent political crises, and the 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, each crisis has attacked the foundations of Lebanon's stability: economic security,[162] elite cooperation, and the safety of its citizens. These ongoing disruptions continue to pose serious threats to the country's survival as a democratic state. To exacerbate the fragility, Lebanon is once again under attack by Israeli forces, further clouding the nation's uncertain future.

Most crucially, as suggested by recent data from the Arab barometer survey (see also the graph below), these events have led to a general loss of support for democracy among the Lebanese. While in 2016 66% of respondents agreed with the statement that "democracy is always preferable to any other type of government", eight years later this percentage has fallen to 47%.[163] In 2022 59% of respondents agreed that "as long as the government can maintain order and stability in the country,

[155] Jonathan Fisher and Heather Marquette, "'Empowered patient' or 'doctor knows best'? Political economy analysis and ownership", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2016): 116, https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2016.1119249

[156] Vandeputte, "The suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility"

[157] Vandeputte, "The political nature of international democracy support", 165-166.

[158] Ian Lustick, "Stability in deeply divided societies: consociationalism versus control", *World Politics,* vol. 31, no. 3 (1979): 325–344. https://doi.org/10.2307/2009992;

[159] Shi'a, Sunni, Druze, Isma'ili, Alawite, Nusayri; Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Chaldean, Assyrian, Copt, Protestant.

[160] Bassel F. Salloukh. "The State of Consociationalism in Lebanon", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics,* vol. 30, no. 1 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2023.2187970

[161] Michael Young, "Two faces of Janus: post-war Lebanon and its reconstruction", *Middle East Report,* no. 209 (1998), https://merip.org/1998/12/two-faces-of-janus/ .

[162] For example, according to the World Bank "the Spring 2021 Lebanon Economic Monitor found that Lebanon's economic and financial crisis ranks among the worst economic crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century. See: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview.

[163] Arab barometer VIII, *Lebanon Report*, (2024): 23, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/AB8-Lebanon-Country-Report-EN.pdf

it does not matter whether it is democratic or undemocratic". While a majority of Lebanese nevertheless still prefer a democratic regime compared to a non-democratic one (at least in principle), persistent economic and political frustrations contribute to a growing appeal of non-democratic solutions.

Such loss of trust in democracy mirrors a loss of trust in Lebanese governance institutions and dissatisfaction with the way democracy is implemented today,[164] with only 7% of respondents having some trust in the government. The legal system as a whole is trusted by 13% of respondents (16% in 2022), while the parliament is not trusted by 90% of people. During the last two years the Lebanese level of trust for political institutions has ranked among the lowest of the surveyed countries. Notably, the only trusted institution among the ones mentioned in the survey is the army (85% in 2024).[165]

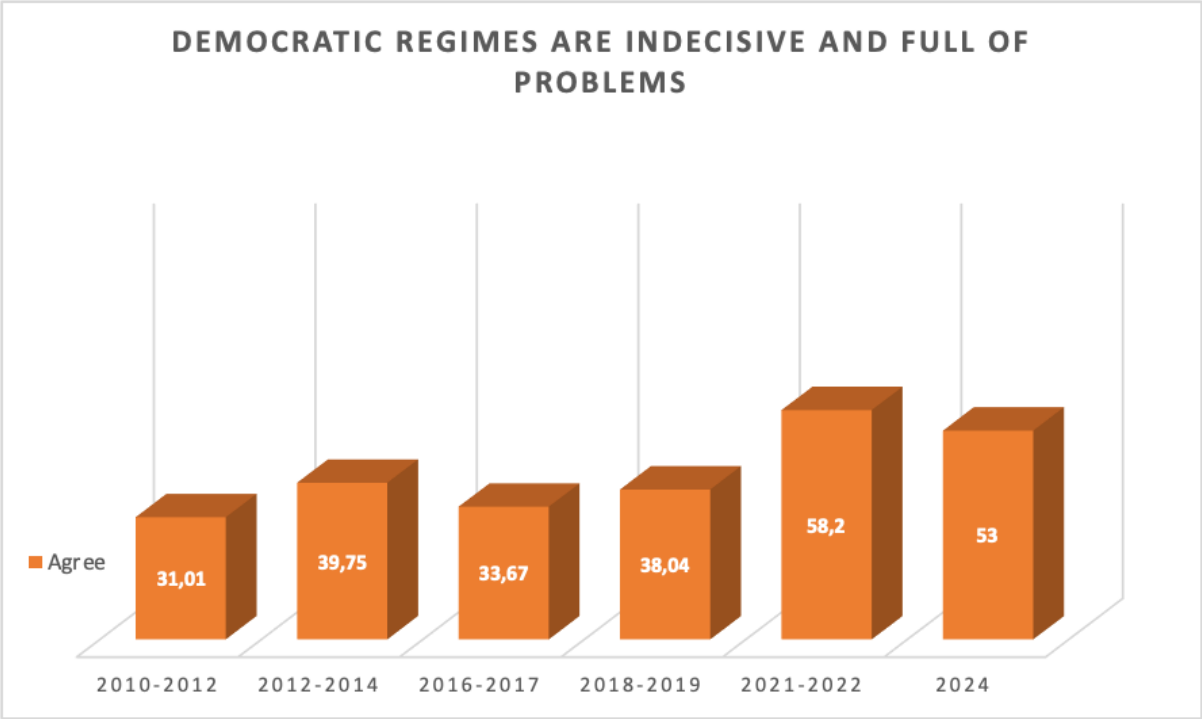

Figure 1. Democratic regimes as "indecisive and full of problems" (own elaboration on Arab Barometer series)

Public distrust has also extended to the international community, which has been criticised for insufficiently supporting people's livelihoods, particularly since 2020. Lebanese civil society has argued the EU's approach to be "technocratic", "unresponsive", and incoherent. This perception of incoherence largely stems from EU member states' actions, which are often seen as prioritising self-interest and aligning more closely with government agendas than with civil society needs.[166] Public sentiment toward the EU reflects this disappointment, with only 45% of Lebanese respondents

[164] On average, in the wave VII of Arab-Barometer survey, about 48% of respondents declared that freedom of expression is guaranteed "to a limited extent" or "not at all" in the country. Similarly, almost half of the sample considers as limited or absent the freedom to participate in protests, while the freedom of the media to criticise is at 43%.

[165] Arab barometer VIII, *Lebanon Report*.

[166] Karina Goulordava, "Lebanon in Transition: Perceptions of the EU in a Fast Changing Landscape", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 25, special issue (2020): 87-108, https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2020013

expressing trust in the EU, compared to 31% for the US, 24% for Russia, and 30% for China. France, trusted by 51% of Lebanese respondents,[167] ranks somewhat higher, yet this did not prevent public discontent during President Macron's visit following the 2020 explosion. Despite popular expectations that Macron would reject the corrupt ruling elite responsible for the disaster—as he himself had promised—the French government instead provided financial and political support through an unfulfilled roadmap for reform. Additionally, France's refusal to endorse an independent investigation into the causes of the explosion has fuelled further public disillusionment.[168]

Since then, however, public support for the EU in Lebanon has increased again. Data from winter (November–December) 2022 show that the EU's positive image returned to its 2019 level, with 65% of respondents holding a positive perception of the EU (although only 53% among 15–24 year olds).[169]In the same survey, 62% of respondents considered EU support for Lebanon effective, citing health (57%) and humanitarian aid (45%) as areas of notable benefit. These two policy areas are also where respondents think the EU could engage more, with 75% preferring more focus on health and 84% on humanitarian aid (57% in human rights). In contrast, almost half of respondents expected the EU to be less engaged in terms of supporting democracy (48%), rule of law (43%), and gender equality (53%).

Corresponding with such increase in public trust lies new EU funding for Lebanon following the dramatic events of 2020, where the EU provided an additional EUR €100 million in funding to help Lebanon address the consequences of the 4 August 2020 explosion, particularly emphasising the need for improved governance and accountability, continued assistance to civil society, and restored access to jobs and economic opportunities.[170] Additionally, in May 2024, Commission President Von der Leyen also announced a €1 billion package to support Lebanon from 2024 to 2027. The new package strengthens the emphasis on welfare (education, social protection, and health), but also focuses on financial and banking reforms, and the equipment and training of Lebanese Armed Forces to contrast human trafficking and smuggling. As such, this focus aligns with peoples' perceptions about a stronger EU commitment on important areas (humanitarian aid, health etc.). However, again, any emphasis on deep institutional changes beyond the current sectarian system is excluded from the package.

In this context, despite some seemingly positive alignment with local needs, the EU's strategy remains widely viewed as inadequate to counteract Lebanon's layered crises. While the EU's engagement is understood to be inadequate to address the disastrous economic and political situation and the increased corruption and human rights violations,[171] the EU's reaction to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon complicates things further. The EU is currently showing a reinvigorated commitment on the Lebanese front of the so called "Israel-Hamas" war by protecting the United Nations Interim Force in

[167] Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *Study of Perceptions and Attitudes of Lebanese Citizens Towards the Economic, Social and Political Situation in Lebanon,* 2021, https://www.kas.de/documents/284382/284431/2021-12+KAS+Public+Opinion+Survey+Lebanon+Report.pdf/bfb92390-cb9b-97f3-423a-d4ec1fc464a0?version=1.1&t=1643958272879

[168] Aya Majzoub and Bénédicte Jeannerod. *Macron's Failed Promises on Lebanon.* Human Rights Watch, July 4, 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/04/macrons-failed-promises-lebanon

[169] see https://south.euneighbours.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Fact-Sheet_Lebanon.pdf

[170] See https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/lebanon-reform-recovery-reconstruction-framework-3rf_en

[171] Goulordava, "Lebanon in Transition".

Lebanon (UNIFIL), and by increasing diplomatic efforts and humanitarian aid.[172] Since this again risks providing another lifeline for the ruling elite, the EU is called upon to sustain a deep change both within the Lebanese political system on key democratic aspects such as rule of law, accountability, and anti-corruption,[173] and also at the regional level by addressing the Syrian civil war and containing Hezbollah-Israeli fighting.[174]

Tunisia

For several years Tunisia has been regarded as the bon élève in EU relations with North Africa and Middle East countries, yet democracy support was never a fully realised aspect of EU-Tunisia cooperation. The 2005 Action Plan, launched under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), set ambitious goals rooted in a mutual acknowledgment of shared values, including democracy.[175] However, until the popular uprisings of 2011, the EU issued very few official statements referencing "democracy" in cooperation with Tunisia.[176]

Before the Arab uprisings, and under Ben Ali's authoritarian rule, Tunisia was regarded by the EU as a stable and reliable partner, and even portrayed as a model for the Mediterranean region.[177]As such, the EU refrained from applying substantial pressure for top-down democratic reforms or engaging with Tunisian civil society to foster grassroots change.[178] This stance was particularly evident during the initial stages of the uprisings, as the EU adopted a cautious "wait-and-see" approach, prioritising stable relations over supporting the democratic aspirations of Tunisian citizens.

Following the overthrow of President Ben Ali, however, the EU changed its stance and officially committed to supporting Tunisia's democratic transition. The EU launched key initiatives such as A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean (PDSP) and A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood (NRCN). These frameworks emphasised building "deep democracy" and introduced the "3 Ms": more money, mobility, and markets. As part of the so-called "more for more" approach, the EU aimed to increase financial support, market access, and mobility

[172] European Commision, "EU boosts humanitarian aid to Lebanon by €30 million, bringing total to over €100 million for 2024", Oktober 3, 2024,https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-boosts-humanitarian-aid-lebanon-eu30-million-bringing-total-over-eu100-million-2024-2024-10-03_en

[173] Carmen Geha, *People before politicians: How Europeans can help rebuild Lebanon,* 2021*,* European Council on Foreign Relations, https://ecfr.eu/publication/people-before-politicians-how-europeans-can-help-rebuild-lebanon/

[174] Rim Turkmani and Mustafa Haid, *The role of the EU in the Syrian conflict,* Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016, https://brussels.fes.de/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/Maerz_2016/FES_LSE_Syria_Turkmani_Haid_2016_02_23.pdf; Reinoud Leenders, *The Strange Case of the EU's Partnership as Lebanon is Ravaged by Israel's Machine of Death,* The Policy Initiative, October 10, 2024, https://www.thepolicyinitiative.org/article/details/400/the-strange-case-of-the-eu%E2%80%99s-partnership-as-lebanon-is-ravaged-by-israel%E2%80%99s-machine-of-death.

[175] European Commission, *EU-Tunisia Action Plan 2005-2010*. 2005, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tunisia_enp_ap_final_en.pdf

[176] Giorgio Bassotti, "Did the European Union light a beacon of hope in North Africa? Assessing the effectiveness of EU democracy promotion in Tunisia", *EU Diplomacy Papers College of Europe,* 6/2017, https://www.coleurope.eu/research-paper/did-european-union-light-beacon-hope-north-africa-assessing-effectiveness-eu

[177] European Commission, *8th EU-Tunisia Association Council – Joint Press Release,* 2010, Brussels.

[178] Ibid.

opportunities in exchange for Tunisia's commitment to reform.[179] Key changes involved strengthening conditionality and boosting civil society support, indicating a notable adjustment to the EU's democracy support strategy in response to Tunisia's transition.[180]

The adoption of the EU-Mobility Partnership with Tunisia was one of the outcomes of this change. However, despite the EU's stated commitment to inclusivity, its interactions with Tunisian civil society have been highly selective and exclusionary.[181] Consultations have primarily involved an unrepresentative part of Tunisian civil society, largely focusing on professionals based in Tunis while neglecting grassroots activists and those from the deprived interior regions.[182] This selective engagement has fuelled critical perceptions among civil society, including strong opposition from the influential Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT).[183] Similar to other post-revolutionary grievances in Tunisia,[184] these organisations argue that the EU's approach fails to align with the actual needs of the Tunisian population. They have called for the EU to adopt a more inclusive, consultative process that genuinely engages local actors, particularly on critical issues related to migration.

Although promising, this reorientation soon revealed a gap between the EU's pro-democracy rhetoric and its actual financial commitments: between 2011 and 2014, of the €475 million mobilised for Tunisia,[185] only €8 million supported civil society. From 2014 to 2020, the share of aid towards civil society did not improve much, with civil society only receiving 4% of total aid, ranking sixth among the twelve core democracy support categories.[186] This limited financial support contradicts the declared aim of supporting Tunisian civil society organisations and undermines the EU's credibility in stimulating civil society involvement.

Despite increasing deterioration of the state of democracy in Tunisia, especially since the death of President Beji Caid Essebsi in July 2019 and the inauguration of president Kais Saied,[187] the EU has noticeably reduced its emphasis on democracy. For example, the 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean references "democracy" only three times, reflecting a broader trend toward

[179] Stefania Panebianco and Giuseppe Cannata, "The Mobility-Democracy Nexus Betrayed: When the European Commission's Talks Fall Apart in the Mediterranean", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2024): 7–34, https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2024002

[180] Christian Achrainer and Michelle Pace, "Non-learning Within a Constellation of Communities of Practice: The Case of the EU and Its Democracy Support in the Arab World", *JCMS,* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13629;

[181] Ragnar Weilandt, "EU democracy projection in Tunisia: The case of civil society consultations", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2022): 198-217, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1883281

[182] ibid.

[183] Bassotti, *Did the European Union light a beacon of hope in North Africa?*; Betty Rouland, *Redistributing EU 'burdens': The Tunisian perspective on the new Pact on Migration and Asylum*, 2021, ASILE Project, https://www.asileproject.eu/redistributing-eu-burdens-the-tunisian-perspective-on-the-new-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/

[184] Anna Khakee and Sarah Wolff, "EU democracy projection in the Southern Mediterranean: A practice analysis", *Mediterranean Politics,* vol. 27, no. 4 (2022): 419-434, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1883283

[185] Bassotti, *Did the European Union light a beacon of hope in North Africa?*

[186] ibid.

[187] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021: Tunisia*, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2021

securitisation.[188] This shift became particularly apparent following events such as the 2015 terrorist attacks and the assassination of opposition leaders,[189] after which the EU increasingly prioritised security cooperation with Tunisia's government,[190] sidelining civil society actors who were central to the revolution.[191] This security-oriented approach is also reflected in initiatives which emphasise migration governance and border control, such as the Mobility Partnership Facility (MPF), the Partnership Framework (PF), and the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Tunisian Government.

Noticeably, the MoU also does not reference democracy.[192] Again, the EU's emphasis on migration control and border security has faced widespread criticism, especially from local civil society organisations in Tunisia who have consistently argued that inadequate reception systems and "systematic violations of migrant rights" reveal fundamental flaws in EU-supported initiatives.[193] The 2023 MoU has been particularly contentious, with the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) alongside other international CSOs highlighting the memorandum's disregard for human rights and its potential to exacerbate violence and racism against migrants in Tunisia.[194]

Civil society criticism has also extended to several other key aspects of the EU's foreign policy, particularly regarding pressure on Tunisia to advance the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and the EU's stance on the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. These issues threaten to undermine the EU's democracy support efforts, as Tunisians increasingly question the EU's motives and alignment with regional interests. Regarding the EU's position on Israel, public support for European powers and the U.S. has sharply declined, while favourable views toward Iran have risen.[195] Some civil society organisations have been observed to reject Western funding as a protest against the perceived "unprecedented alignment".[196]

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[188] Tanja A. Börzel, "EU democracy projection: Does the EU practice what it preaches?", *Mediterranean Politics,* vol. 27, no. 4 (2022): 553-562, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1915738

[189] Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria et al., *The EU-Tunisia privileged partnership: What next?*, 2018, European Institute of the Mediterranean, https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-eu-tunisia-privileged-partnership-what-next/

[190] Julius Dihstelhoff and Katrin Sold, *The Carthage Agreement under scrutiny,* 2016, *C*arnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2016/11/the-carthage-agreement-under-scrutiny?lang=en

[191] Amel Boubekeur, "Islamists, secularists and old regime elites in Tunisia: Bargained competition. In Dynamics of transformation, elite change and new political orders", *Mediterranean politics,* vol. 21, no 1 (2016): 1-16, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081449

[192] Tineke Strik and Ruben Robbesom, "Compliance or Complicity? An Analysis of the EU-Tunisia Deal in the Context of the Externalisation of Migration Control", *Netherlands International Law Review*, vol.7, no.1 (2024): 199–225, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40802-024-00251-x

[193] EuroMed Rights, *Call for Tunisia to respect its international commitments and for the establishment of an effective asylum system,* July 5, 2019, https://euromedrights.org/publication/call-for-tunisia-to-respect-its-international-commitments-and-for-the-establishment-of-an-effective-asylum-system/

[194] FTDES, *Mémorandum UE-Tunisie : l'Union européenne approuve les rafles, les expulsions illégales et la violence à l'encontre des migrants*, July 20, 2023, Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, https://ftdes.net/fr/memorandum-ue-tunisie-lunion-europeenne-approuve-les-rafles-les-expulsions-illegales-et-la-violence-a-lencontre-des-migrants/

[195] Ahmed Driss, *Tunisians' positions on Gaza war*, 2023, EuroMeSCo https://www.euromesco.net/publication/tunisians-positions-on-gaza-war/

[196] Ibid.

On the other hand, while the EU presents the DCFTA as a key step in strengthening EU–Tunisia relations, many Tunisian civil society groups view it as detrimental to the country's political and economic autonomy.[197] There is a widespread concern that the agreement will exacerbate the already precarious livelihoods of Tunisians, particularly in the context of ongoing shortages of essential goods and rising food prices, and thus exacerbate growing public frustration over the worsening economic conditions.[198]

Crucially, while the EU's approach contributes to widespread disillusionment and a loss of legitimacy among the population, who view EU support as limited or ineffective in addressing urgent economic concerns, the growing economic hardship also undermines Tunisia's democratic process. Since many Tunisians associate democracy with economic provision and stability, about seven out of ten people now perceive democracy as leading to poor economic outcomes, instability, and indecisiveness.[199] As such, the deepening economic crisis risks eroding public support for democracy.

Despite this risk, and despite the EU's neglect of democracy and its shift in priorities—particularly its focus on border security and migration management—Tunisian support for democracy remains strong, although cautious. The belief in democracy as the only viable system has increased by 15 percentage points among Tunisians between 2016 and 2020,[200] with eight-in-ten affirming that despite its problems, democracy is their preferred political system. While democracy may be seen as imperfect, it is still regarded as the desired system.[201]

Policy recommendations

The three case studies underscore how the EU's foreign policy risks alienating key democratic actors in partner countries. This alienation arises from both procedural and substantive aspects of EU interventions. Procedurally, the EU's approach tends to favour cooperation with those in power, often sidelining democratic voices in the process. Substantively, EU actions frequently fail to resonate with people's lived experiences and concrete aspirations. Too often the EU's foreign policy aligns more closely with authoritarian regimes than with the communities it aims to support.

In what follows, we conclude with four recommendations for how the EU can regain trust and legitimacy among populations in third countries.

[197] Youssef Cherif, *Has the EU failed democratic Tunisia?,* 2021, Carnegie Europe. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/12/has-the-eu-failed-democratic-tunisia?lang=en&center=europe; Weilandt, "EU democracy projection in Tunisia".

[198] Ishac Diwan, Hachemi Alaya, and Hamza Meddeb, *The buildup to a crisis: Current tensions and future scenarios for Tunisia*. 2024. Carnegie Middle East Center. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/the-buildup-to-a-crisis-current-tensions-and-future-scenarios-for-tunisia?lang=en&center=middle-east

[199] Arab barometer VIII, *Tunisia Report*, 2024, retrieved from https://www.arabbarometer.org

[200] Arab Barometer, *Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa*

[201] Arab barometer VIII, *Tunisia Report*, (2024) p. 3.

1. Prioritise democracy

The three case studies collectively reinforce the argument for prioritising democracy as a central pillar of the EU's foreign policy. Unlike other foreign policy objectives, democracy is perceived to be one of the EU's most attractive qualities. As such, democracy is a core source of legitimacy for the EU in the eyes of the recipients of its foreign policy initiatives. While the EU has gradually deprioritised democracy in various policy documents, it is in the EU's self-interest for democracy to take a central stage.

2. Balance the EU's discourse to emphasise its democracy ambitions

Given that the EU must negotiate its foreign policy interventions with authorities whose commitment to democracy is often questionable, and in light of its adherence to the principles of ownership and alignment, it is important to recognise that EU foreign policy interventions may not always foster democratic consolidation. In other words, while the EU may struggle to reconcile its commitment to democracy with other foreign policy priorities, engagement with authoritarian regimes inevitably risks undermining local democratisation efforts in favour of competing objectives. Even seemingly "innocuous and routine ways" in which pro-democracy states engage or cooperate with repressive regimes can help sustain these regimes.[202]

This inherent contradiction between prioritising democracy and facing the potential adverse effects is a significant challenge, but one that should be addressed as proactively as possible. A key first step in mitigating these negative effects is for the EU to openly and honestly acknowledge and assess the potential harm its policies may have on local democratisation processes, and to share such assessments with local stakeholders. Given the often-critical stance of civil society and democratic actors in partner countries, this transparency may not immediately lead to mutual acceptance. However, it would represent an essential step toward rebuilding trust, providing an opportunity for both the EU and local stakeholders to openly discuss mutual concerns and underlying rationales, fostering better understanding. Such openness could pave the way for alternative solutions, encouraging a collaborative approach based on shared democratic values and a more effective commitment to supporting local democratisation despite systemic constraints.

3. Strengthen "joint learning" on democracy

The EU's interventions in these three case studies reveal a significant disconnect between its policies and the lived realities and aspirations of local communities. Local stakeholders frequently feel alienated from the EU's objectives, which results in contestation rather than collaboration. This disconnect is further compounded by the EU's selective and exclusionary engagement with stakeholders, often limiting consultation to a narrow set of voices. For the EU to genuinely understand and align with local perspectives on democracy and justice, it must actively include a broader array of stakeholders and take seriously how these actors define the issues at stake and the solutions they envision. If the EU is to engage in joint learning on democracy, what is essential is not only to gain more knowledge about the other, but to engage in knowledge creation with and from the other.

However, adopting such a collaborative approach demands a willingness to engage in critical self-reflection. Yet, as noted in academic literature, this is often lacking. The EU fails to sufficiently learn

[202] Nic Cheeseman and Marie-Eve Desrosier, *Learning to Do No Harm to Democracy in Engagement With Authoritarian States.* Carnegie Europe, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/03/learning-to-do-no-harm-to-democracy-in-engagement-with-authoritarian-states?lang=en&center=europe

and adapt its policies due to a lack of critical reflection on the assumptions behind the EU's strategies.[203] For example, Western policymakers tend to adopt a Eurocentric view, defining democracy from their own perspective rather than that of the countries they target. They frequently assume that liberal democracy is a universal aspiration and focus on protecting it as a global standard,[204] especially when it appears under threat.[205] However, democratic theory underscores that "democracy" is an inherently plural and context-dependent concept, not universally defined by a single model. For example, whether examining democracy in East Asia,[206] the Middle East,[207] various African regions,[208] or Latin America,[209] Ethnographic scholarship underscores that the meaning of democracy is often deeply rooted in local contexts and cultural norms. African conceptions, for instance, are argued to be more collective in orientation rather than individual, and to emphasise concrete economic and social rights rather than abstract political rights. In fact, as argued by one prominent African scholar: "[i]f African democracy follows the line of least resistance to Western liberalism, it will achieve only the democracy of alienation".[210]

4. Uphold and protect international law and its institutions

A recurring source of the EU's perceived illegitimacy is its ambivalent stance towards alleged Israeli war crimes in Gaza and Lebanon. While the EU has rightfully and consistently condemned and acted upon Hamas' war crimes on October 7, it has often failed to apply the same standards to Israel's military actions, which the International Court of Justice has suggested may amount to genocide. This inconsistency not only undermines the EU's credibility as a normative actor, but also weakens its broader commitment to upholding international law and human rights.

To maintain or regain legitimacy in the eyes of the Global South, the EU must apply the same standards as it has done with the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and unequivocally and publicly condemn Israeli authorities' war crimes. Additionally, the EU should take a stronger position in support of the institutions guaranteeing international rule of law. For example, given that in June 2023 the EU adopted Council Conclusions reaffirming its "unwavering" support for the International Criminal Court (ICC),[211] the EU should more explicitly support and defend the role of the ICC in the situation of Palestine, especially since the ICC, its officials, and those cooperating with it have been subject to

[203] Achrainer and Pace, "Non-learning Within a Constellation of Communities of Practice"; Vandeputte, "Suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility"

[204] Milja Kurki, *Democratic Futures: Re-Visioning Democracy Promotion* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[205] Jonas Wolff, "From the Varieties of Democracy to the defense of liberal democracy: V-Dem and the reconstitution of liberal hegemony under threat", *Contemporary Politics,* vol. 29, no. 2 (2022): 161-181, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2096191

[206] Yun-han Chu et al. *How East Asians View Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

[207] Larbi Sadiki, "Towards a 'democratic knowledge' turn? Knowledge production in the age of the Arab Spring", *Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 20, no. 5 (2015): 702-721, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2015.1081461

[208] Frederik Schaffer, *Democracy in translation: understanding politics in an unfamiliar culture* (Cornell University Press, 2000)

[209] Laurence Whitehead, "Alternative Models of Democracy in Latin America", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2010): 75-87, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004236318_003

[210] Claude Ake, "The Unique Case of African Democracy", *International Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 2 (1993):244, https://doi.org/10.2307/2621592

[211] Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on the International Criminal Court on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Rome Statute,* 2023, Brussels.

intimidation by Israel and the United States.[212] Such support and defence should include a clear commitment from EU member states to adhere to the court's decisions, such as fulfilling arrest warrants and avoiding non-essential contact with individuals sought by the ICC.

[212] "ICC prosecutor calls for end to intimidation of staff, statement says", *Reuters,* May 3, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/icc-prosecutor-calls-end-intimidation-staff-statement-says-2024-05-03/

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