THE EU'S EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY ACTION IN A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

Recommendations Report

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Preface

Democracy faces tremendous challenges across the globe. The number of global crises and conflicts affecting democracy have multiplied over recent years: from the 2008 global financial crisis to the Covid-19 pandemic; and from the climate emergency to the energy and nutrition crisis exacerbated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Geopolitical turmoil is both the cause and the consequence of an environment in which democracies are openly challenged. Democracy is also increasingly questioned from within, as citizens' demands evolve and governments face growing pressure to deliver. Governments must act swiftly to guarantee the fundamental rights of their citizens while tackling emerging political, economic, social and environmental challenges.

When facing these challenges, governments should identify and leverage the opportunities that coexist with them. This requires facilitating new forms of political participation and representation and new models of the social contract. The fourth edition of the Global State of Democracy from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) offers some pathways, which include reinforcing electoral integrity, empowering youth and strengthening civic education. Perhaps, above all, working together to find solutions to collective problems is more of a necessity than ever, both within and across national borders.

In this context, the European Union has played a significant and increasing role to uphold and support democracy around the world. International IDEA, which has a close partnership with the EU—a leading contributor to its work—knows this well. The EU is the largest donor to democracy globally, and a powerful voice and actor in promoting and protecting democracy. As Sweden chairs the Council of the EU in 2023, time is ripe to take stock of the achievements of the EU's external democracy policy, and to see how fit for purpose that policy is in this fateful moment for global democracy.

Sweden is well placed to accompany this effort—as a staunch supporter of multilateral efforts to promote democracy, including through International IDEA, of which Sweden is a founding member and the host country. Sweden also led the adoption of the Council Conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations during the last Swedish Presidency of the Council in 2009.

The Sweden EU-Presidency & the Democracy Agenda project is a great illustration of how democracy actors of different types can team up to maximize their impact and build positive synergies—and how International IDEA can support such collective efforts. With the support of Sweden, International IDEA led a comprehensive global consultation to formulate options to enhance the EU's external democracy work. The recommendations stemming from this project should inform EU decision makers, strengthen their democracy ambition, and facilitate the daily implementation of the EU's democracy agenda. This kind of triangular cooperation can only bolster our collective effort to uphold democracy globally.

Dr Kevin Casas-Zamora
Secretary-General, International IDEA

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

COHOM	Working Party on Human Rights of the Council of the European Union
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSO	Civil society organization
DEG	Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EEAS	European External Action Service
EOM	Election observation mission
EP	European Parliament
EU-CELAC	EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
EUSR	EU Special Representative
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GE-NDICI	Global Europe—Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
GONGO	Government-organized non-governmental organization
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences
HRD	Human rights defender
HR/VP	High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission
ICT	Information and Communications Technologies
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MFF	Multi-annual Financial Framework
MTR	Mid-Term Review
TED	Team Europe Democracy
UN	United Nations
YAP	Youth Action Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A determined and resourceful EU leadership, arguing for the protection and promotion of democracy, is needed more than ever.

Democracy is at a crossroads. Authoritarian trends can be seen in an increasing number of countries and the quality of democracies is declining worldwide (International IDEA 2022a). The Covid-19 pandemic served as a severe stress test of democratic governance. But democracies are also threatened externally. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is the latest threat, resulting in an escalation of geopolitical turmoil, both regionally and globally, the like of which has not been seen for decades. In this context, a determined and resourceful EU leadership, arguing for the protection and promotion of democracy, is needed more than ever.

The EU is one of the world's staunchest advocates of democracy. Over the last decade, given the political impulse generated by the 2009 Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, the EU has equipped itself with policies to uphold and promote democracy abroad. It has adopted ambitious democracy goals to pursue when engaging with external partners. However, major changes have affected the global democracy landscape in more recent years. Now that Sweden is taking the reins of the Council of Ministers again, in the first six months of 2023, the time is ripe to analyse the EU's external democracy action.

With the support of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, International IDEA led an analysis of the EU's external democracy policy during 2022. The Report looks at questions related to the relevance and coherence of the EU's external democracy policy in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment and pays special attention to the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy as a

guiding framework. The research consisted of a desk study, online surveys, in-depth interviews with more than 40 key EU democracy policy stakeholders, and regional dialogues with more than 100 civil society representatives from across the globe. Its findings and recommendations aim at bringing together those collective views to inform and inspire EU decision making on external democracy action. These findings show that the EU faces a critical choice. Confronted with geopolitical tensions and conflicts, the EU must strengthen its strategic autonomy and be a stronger geopolitical player. As the EU is revisiting its strategic interests, it needs to embed democracy at their heart and place the democracy agenda more squarely and centrally into its policies.

To do so, the EU can build on its positive track record as a democracy actor and on its achievements in upholding and supporting democratic transformations externally. Room exists, however, to improve its toolbox for democracy action, and to better align with the work of other democracy partners. New challenges—such as disinformation, polarization and digitalization—and increasing ones, such as inequality, social injustice and climate change, are shaping the democracy environment. Addressing them is first and foremost about political will. The Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, which is due in June 2023, will be an opportunity to consider how the EU can do so. Acknowledging the results of the implementation of this Action Plan could also be an opportunity to formulate political messages on democracy in the accompanying Council Conclusions. They should reflect the urgent need to defend and support democracy and lay the foundations for the next EU Action Plan.

The stakeholders consulted for this Report showed a strong consensus for the EU to give a new political impetus to its external democracy agenda. It should adjust its narrative on democracy to the new geopolitical situation and socio-economic realities, and bring a convincing message that democracy is the best political system to serve people and to deliver on political and socio-economic fronts in a sustainable and inclusive way. Importantly, the EU discourse should be turned into a reciprocal dialogue with partner countries, drawing lessons when its interests conflict with its values, and being humble—given its own internal challenges—when engaging on external democracy

As the EU is revisiting its strategic interests, it needs to embed democracy at their heart.

The stakeholders consulted for this Report showed a strong consensus for the EU to give a new political impetus to its external democracy agenda.

action. The EU should more vocally recognize its own internal challenges acknowledging the complexity of democracy action and favouring mutual understanding. This would reduce the risk of incoherent action by the EU and defuse the increasingly common 'us versus them' perception. Such a perception is detrimental to the EU's values and interests over the long term, and isolates democracies from the rest of the world.

This new narrative should be underpinned by a strong political stance to put democracy front and forwards, as a key driver, enabler and objective of all EU external policies.

This does not mean that the EU should be timid about its values. On the contrary, this new narrative should be underpinned by a strong political stance to put democracy front and forwards, as a key driver, enabler and objective of all EU external policies. This also means not refraining from being more assertive in owning its agenda, including in terms of political conditionality. Notwithstanding the important efforts made to mainstream democracy in the EU's external action, the EU should ensure that all its external policies and actors are now not just democracy-aware but also active democracy promoters.

To ensure that external policies and programmes are designed and implemented with that goal in mind, the EU should reflect on the need to devise an EU Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations. Democracy does not benefit from universally agreed standards as much as human rights do, nor from a multilateral framework that ensures the enforcement of such standards. As a political system, it encapsulates many aspects, as represented by International IDEA's Global State of Democracy attributes: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration, Participatory Engagement.[1] Although each of these attributes is necessary in any democracy, their exact form and shape can vary widely. Supporting democracy does not have to be prescriptive but can be sensitive to different contexts and focus on essential prerequisites. To do so, the EU would benefit from developing an integrated

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1   International IDEA's Global State of Democracy attributes (Skaaning 2022). The five main attributes include subattributes as follows: under Representative Government—Clean Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties and Elected Government; under Fundamental Rights—Access to Justice, Civil Liberties, and Social Rights and Equality; under Checks on Government—Effective Parliament, Judicial Independence and Media Integrity; under Impartial Administration—Absence of Corruption and Predictable Enforcement; and under Participatory Engagement—Civil Society Participation, Electoral Participation, Direct Democracy and Local Democracy.

and comprehensive conceptual framework on democracy that connects the many components at play in a democracy.

Finally, when designing and implementing its external democracy policy, the EU should ensure that the voice of all democracy stakeholders is systematically reflected. There is room to deepen the participation of civil society in democracy-related political and policy dialogues, in all stages of policy definition and execution, to improve the quality and effectiveness of the support that partners receive from the EU. Such collaboration, combined with a gender and youth responsive approach, could also feed into the design of the new Action Plan, creating a breeding ground for its implementation and ultimately contributing to the new EU narrative on democracy. The preparations of the new Action Plan could be organized through establishing democracy cohorts bringing together all interested stakeholders in a spirit of co-creation.

The EU should ensure that the voice of all democracy stakeholders is systematically reflected.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU'S EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY ACTION IN A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

1. The EU should build a new narrative on democracy.

Momentum exists to promote the EU's democracy agenda more actively. Democracy must be presented and defended as a universal aspiration, and as the best political system to serve the people and deliver on political and socio-economic expectations in a sustainable and inclusive way. When defining and promoting its new narrative on democracy, the EU should be humble and transparent, lead by example, defuse the perception of an 'us versus them' approach, and listen to its partners.

2. The EU should use democracy as a guide in all its external policies.

The EU should be more political in the pursuit of its external democracy agenda. Democracy and democratic values should be more consistently mainstreamed in external policies and action. The EU should develop a policy framework explaining

how it balances its democracy goals with its other interests. This framework should also describe how to intensify its collaboration with other democracies in bilateral and multilateral settings, and how it aims to encourage weak democracies and hybrid regimes towards democratic progress. All EU external policies and actors should not just be democracy-aware but actively promote democracy. The EU should also update and reinforce its toolbox for democracy action.

3. The EU should adopt an EU Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations.

The EU has so far never explicitly determined in detail what it means by supporting democracy abroad. It should get clear on what its external democracy action aims for and how its various democracy efforts come together in support of this. Such an Integrated Approach could focus on supporting and linking essential democracy prerequisites in a non-prescriptive and context-sensitive way. This would translate the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy into locally-tailored objectives and bring together all EU actors around common operational guidelines. EU action would benefit from a comprehensive democracy assessment framework to grasp the trends and help design calibrated responses in partner countries.

4. The EU should ensure that the design and implementation of its external democracy policy are more inclusive and more gender and youth responsive.

The EU would benefit from involving all democracy stakeholders intimately and systematically in the design and implementation of its external democracy policy and enlisting them in building its democracy narrative. Notably, this includes involving the voice of civil society more structurally across the board. To this end, the preparations for the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy could bring together all interested parties in a gender and youth responsive manner, and especially civil society, EU institutions and EU Member States, in one or more democracy cohorts similar to the cohorts established by the Summit for Democracy.

More specific recommendations can be found in Chapter 4 of the Report.

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Swedish Government tasked the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) with assessing the European Union's role in democracy building in partner countries (Bradley, Boubakri and Thompson 2009). Sweden, a long-standing supporter of democracy, wished to use its rotating presidency of the Council of the EU to attract more attention to this important issue, and the Report provided a knowledge base from which to develop an inclusive external democracy policy.

At the time, the EU approach to democracy with external partners was fragmented and incomplete. The EU supported what was then called 'democracy building' through two main avenues: election observation (via its Common Foreign and Security Policy); and support to good governance (via its development cooperation). The EU had no comprehensive policy framework defining, in a systemic manner, its approach to democracy in external relations. Nor did it act in an integrated way when executing its set of external policies or among the EU institutional actors in charge of democracy promotion. Unsurprisingly, consultations held at the time revealed that the EU was not perceived as a leader on democracy worldwide (Bradley, Boubakri and Thompson 2009). This was despite its own success internally, in bringing about peace and democracy on the European continent for more than half a century.

The next decade, however, marked a clear change of approach in external action and a new impetus for the related democracy

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agenda. Several significant institutional and policy developments unfolded within a few years. The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in 2009, allowed the EU to speak with a more unified external voice, including on issues pertaining to democracy. The creation of the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) post, assisted by the European External Action Service (EEAS), allowed some of the divide between the competences of the European Commission and the Council to be bridged. It also ensured better continuity in EU foreign policy, with the HR/VP and EEAS now chairing most of the Council configurations dealing with an external mandate. The political and coordination role of the EU Delegations in partner countries was also substantially strengthened. Besides these institutional changes, the EU also adopted a number of policy frameworks in which its commitment to democracy figured high. These included, notably: the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015; the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy, adopted in 2016; the new European Consensus on Development, adopted in 2017; and the renewed commitment to mainstream these democracy objectives in relevant geographic policies.

The conditions were thus met to broaden and improve the EU's democracy policy framework. Several steps were taken to that end. The Foreign Affairs Council adopted democracy support-focused Council Conclusions in 2009 and renewed the political commitment through Council Conclusions on Democracy in 2019. The EU adopted in 2012 the Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, to be implemented via subsequent Action Plans. Over the next few years, the country human rights strategies drafted by the EU Delegations and the mandate of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights were expanded to cover democracy. The Council also established a permanent Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM), overseeing the implementation of EU human rights and democracy policies worldwide. The political guidance and buy-in of EU Member States also increased over time, as illustrated by the adoption of the third Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020–2024). Its implementation became a shared responsibility between the EU institutions and the EU Member States. The launch in 2021 of the Team Europe Democracy (TED) global initiative by EU institutions and 13 EU Member States signalled an increasing drive for common objective setting and coordination of action.

With these new frameworks in place, the EU adjusted its policies and programmes to improve coherence and better reflect its democracy ambitions. One of the priority areas is election observation. Beyond observing on the election day, the EU takes an electoral cycle approach, including the deployment of Pre-election and Follow-up Missions. It works closely with domestic and international observers and seeks synergies between election observation and electoral support efforts. Recommendations from EU Election Observation Missions (EOMs) are increasingly factored into the EU's electoral support programmes. More broadly, the EU committed to a rights-based approach (Council of the EU 2014), putting human rights at the centre of its development cooperation. In addition, the Human Rights and Democracy thematic programme of the Global Europe – Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (GE-NDICI) now mirrors the priorities of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.

The EU also deepened its work with a variety of partners and topics associated with democracy. Gender issues played an increasingly prominent role in EU external relations, with the adoption of three Gender Action Plans (GAPs)—the latest one not only recognizing gender equality as a universal human right but also emphasizing the key role women's participation and leadership in politics plays in supporting democratic efforts (European Commission 2020a). The EU also acknowledged the central role of civil society organizations (CSOs), which are key components of and actors in democratic systems, and it committed to involve civil society in all dimensions of its external action (Council of the EU 2017). Most recently, the EU adopted a Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU External Action 2022–2027, which provides a policy framework for a strategic partnership with young people involved in EU external action and recognizes young people as an essential part of the EU's action on democracy (European Commission 2022).

The EU gradually realized that public diplomacy in general, and social media in particular, are key tools for engaging with external partners on democracy. Beyond its foreign and development policies, the EU also acknowledged that it had to promote its democracy agenda more consistently in all its external action. With its Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, it therefore committed to mainstreaming its human rights

With these new frameworks in place, the EU adjusted its policies and programmes to improve coherence and better reflect its democracy ambitions.

and democracy agenda into the relevant external policies. Sectoral policies, such as trade and investment, information and communications technology (ICT), defence, security, justice, migration and counter-terrorism, were now required to begin taking into account the EU democracy objectives, at least in theory.

The EU's priority gradually shifted from not simply promoting democracy but also countering democratic erosion and defending democracy where and when it can.

The level of ambition and the progress achieved in a decade was certainly impressive and had a resulting impact on the EU democracy narrative. Back in 2012, when the Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy was adopted, the EU proactively expressed its willingness to build and promote democracy abroad. It aimed to do so together with partner countries and without introducing new conditionality to its democracy support. But, paradoxically, these increased ambitions on external democracy coincided with democratic deterioration[2] across the globe. In 2012, 12 countries were facing democratic erosion, while 16 countries struggled with deepening autocratization. In 2021, these numbers reached 52 and 34 respectively (International IDEA 2022a). In that context, the EU's priority gradually shifted from not simply promoting democracy but also countering democratic erosion and defending democracy where and when it can.

This phenomenon initially took place outside the EU and was influenced by a considerable number of geopolitical crises with ramifications still in place today (e.g. the 2008–2009 financial crisis, the failure of the Arab Uprisings, the war in Syria and its related migration crisis, Brexit, escalating US–China competition and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2021 Afghanistan debacle, the annihilation of democratic aspirations in Belarus, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine). But democratic erosion also affected the EU internally, making it much harder for the EU to lead solely by example and forcing it to reflect on its internal/external democracy nexus. As a result, the EU has found itself increasingly questioned on its credibility as a promoter of democracy in the world.

Given the changes described above, a reflection on the EU's external democracy policy is timely. As Sweden takes the reins

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2   International IDEA's Global State of Democracy initiative defines democratic backsliding as the gradual weakening of checks on government and civil liberties by democratically elected governments. It constitutes a form of democratic erosion or deterioration.

of the Council of the EU again in 2023, it approached International IDEA to lead a stakeholder consultation exercise, 14 years after the 2009 assessment. Several important democracy milestones mark the Swedish EU Council Presidency, taking place from January to June 2023, including the MTR of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 and the second Summit for Democracy (29–30 March 2023).

The objective of the Sweden EU-Presidency & the Democracy Agenda project led by International IDEA is to compile an analysis of the EU's external democracy policy, based on broad consultations with EU democracy stakeholders and civil society in EU partner countries. The project aims at acknowledging the progress and achievements made over the past decade, but also to identify shortcomings and formulate recommendations on policy adjustments and improvements. In defining the EU's external democracy policy, the project team included, notably: the relevant Council Conclusions on Democracy, the 2012 Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, as well as democracy objectives captured in thematic and geographic policies and democracy commitments stated in agreements with partner countries. To draw informed conclusions, the project team conducted a literature review, organized online surveys, interviewed 41 key stakeholders from the EU democracy community and organized 6 regional dialogues with civil society partners from the European Neighbourhood and the Global South (consulting 104 civil society representatives from 53 countries). More information on the project methodology can be found in Annex B.

> **The objective is to compile an analysis of the EU's external democracy policy, based on broad consultations with EU democracy stakeholders and civil society in EU partner countries.**

Figure 1. **Methodology**

6 Regional dialogues
104 civil society representatives
53 countries

41 Interviews
15 civil society and third-country informants
26 EU and Member States officials

2 Surveys
Survey 1. **18** EU Member States
Survey 2. All consulted stakeholders

To analyse the EU's external democracy policy, the Report first considers the continuing relevance of this policy in a fast-evolving international context and then looks into its coherence and alignment with the agenda of other key democracy actors. Special attention is paid to the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, given its central position in the EU's external democracy framework, and its Mid-Term Review in 2023. Based on the findings, the Report then closes with key conclusions and recommendations to inform EU decision makers and other partners about ways to optimize the EU's external democracy policy over the short and longer term.

Chapter 1

RELEVANCE OF THE EU'S EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY POLICY

1.1. GENERAL FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Overall context

Over the last couple of years, the global democracy landscape has been severely affected by several geopolitical crises, such as Covid-19, climate change and Russia's war against Ukraine, which have caused unprecedented political challenges, including a significant rise in the cost of living, a looming global recession and substantial migration flows. The interviews held for this project showed that different views coexist on the exact impact these crises have had on democracy worldwide. Some argue that the recent period has been a game changer for democracy. Covid-19 has had a tremendous impact on democratic institutions (International IDEA 2021a). This was felt not just during the peak of the pandemic itself—when human rights were curtailed around the world, elections postponed and executive powers enlarged—but afterwards as well. Covid-19 has left a mark on the functioning of democracy, in places where governments procrastinated on the restoration of democratic institutions, or where the perception of citizens on the robustness of their democratic institutions in the face of crisis was dented. Covid-19 has also had a considerable impact on democratic practices by changing the way people behave socially, and whether or not they engage in politics. Ultimately, democracy is a social activity that is shaped by human behaviours and interactions, which have been deeply affected by the pandemic. Covid-19 also exposed an increased number of people to fake news and disinformation, including conspiracy theories beyond the pandemic itself, bringing

Over the last couple of years, the global democracy landscape has been severely affected by several geopolitical crises, which have caused unprecedented political challenges.

new constituencies into play for extremists' agendas. Similarly, the war in Ukraine, by shaking the geopolitical order in Europe and forcing the West to push back against Russia, is also perceived by many as the end of business as usual. On the other side of the spectrum, some argue that, on the contrary, these changes are but the latest manifestations of deeper trends that have been in existence for nearly two decades. Democratic erosion, which has been on the rise continuously for years, has in fact been on the radar of democracy actors for a long time. In this view, the recent geopolitical crises would only be the consequence and the continuation of this process.

The EU and other powers are now rather looking at building, strengthening or reinforcing their strategic autonomy.

It is clear that Russia's war against Ukraine in particular has come as a shock, requiring fast, short-term responses. It will take time to understand the exact fallouts from these crises, but it is also clear that they have been accelerating factors for worrying trends. Throughout the globe, undemocratic forces are getting bolder (International IDEA 2022a). Overall, the time of relatively peaceful and prosperous globalization appears to be over. The time has gone when globalization was perceived as a way to build interdependence, which would naturally lead democracy to take over. The EU and other powers are now rather looking at building, strengthening or reinforcing their strategic autonomy.[3]

Impact on the EU's external democracy agenda
Faced with this new reality, the question arises on how this affects the EU's democracy agenda.

Since the eruption of Covid-19, the democracy versus autocracy narrative has resurfaced vividly. The performance of political regimes to address the pandemic and its consequences has been debated heatedly. While China initially seemed to outperform, this has recently been seriously reassessed. Democracies, despite a slow start, have managed, for now at least, to pin down the disease and tackle its socio-economic consequences while gradually lifting freedom restrictions (Knutsen and Kolvani 2022). The democracy versus autocracy narrative also came into play in the context of Ukraine, with Russia's war of aggression being seen by many as an open attack on democracy itself (European

3   See, for example, the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (Council of the EU 2022).

Council 2022). There, too, democratic regimes reacted swiftly and efficiently, guided by clear political will to counteract Russia's autocratic aspirations.

This black and white narrative can, however, be questioned as the current geopolitical situation might well be more complex and blurrier. In addition, the EU itself has not systematically stuck to its democratic ideals when coping with the immediate consequences of the war. For instance, it stands ready to turn to other autocracies in Northern Africa, the Caucasus or the Gulf to fill its short-term energy gaps. In that context, partners could very well see the EU democracy narrative as opportunistic when the EU selectively decides to promote particular values (or not), according to its needs and interests.[4] This might explain why some partners from the Global South did not automatically support the EU's position in the conflict. Understanding their needs and concerns is equally key. Otherwise, the promotion of such narrative risks antagonizing the world into two opposite camps and burning the remaining bridges between democracies and many of the weaker democracies and hybrid regimes.

The EU must factor in these realities in its external democracy policy. The mistakes of the past (e.g. strategic or economic dependency on autocracies) should not be repeated. It is in the interest of the EU to develop a long-term vision combining values, economic interests and geopolitical considerations. While short-term fixes will sometimes be unavoidable, they should not jeopardize the democratic values and commitments for which the EU publicly stands. Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine showed that democracy is not only a value in itself but an integral part of the solution to address these challenges. Over the long term, the sustainability of the EU's security, stability and prosperity objectives are intertwined with its democracy agenda.

Building on achievements
Consultations for this project showed that the EU's external democracy policy, developed over the past 15 years, has been successful but could be further improved.

It is in the interest of the EU to develop a long-term vision combining values, economic interests and geopolitical considerations.

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4 On this topic, see also Chapter 2 of this Report on the risk of double standards.

Overall, the EU is perceived as a credible and appreciated democracy actor.

Overall, the EU is perceived as a credible and appreciated democracy actor. Its ability to comprehensively address a wide range of cooperation fields (e.g. humanitarian, development, foreign policy, trade and investment) with external partners plays in its favour. The EU is one of the few foreign policy actors actively promoting a value-based agenda, with human rights and democracy at its core. The EU's relentless efforts to push for democracy globally are widely acknowledged and expectations are therefore high. In that sense, the EU can sometimes be a victim of its own success, democracy actors in partner countries demanding and expecting more from the EU. But all agree that the EU's commitment to democracy remains crucial at a time when democratic deterioration affects all parts of the world and the role of traditional democracy leaders (e.g. the United States) is being questioned, while autocratic forces (e.g. China, Russia) are getting more and more active and competitive in the geopolitical environment, joining forces on narrative building and attacking multilateral structures.

In that context, continued efforts in 'traditional' democracy support areas seem justified and should remain on the EU agenda. Given the recent cases of attacks on electoral integrity online and offline, support to elections and election integrity remain a priority. The EU's expertise in this domain is praised, with its ability to work with the entire range of electoral actors and support the whole electoral cycle. The positive role of the EU EOMs and of the EU development cooperation to build electoral capacities in partner countries is widely recognized. Such support should continue, given the importance of free and fair elections as a precondition for a functioning democracy. The EU is encouraged to continue promoting comprehensive electoral reforms and fostering the democratic roles of functioning parliaments and political parties.

Support to political parties is in fact a topic that many feel the EU overlooks, for historical reasons that are well known. In many regions of the world, political parties have lost (or never gained) their democratic legitimacy. This issue should be urgently addressed to ensure that political parties can play their essential part in a functioning democratic system. The EU could support programmes improving the level playing field for political parties (both incumbent and in opposition), support internal party

democracy to keep politicians accountable or offer capacity-building training to tackle the challenge of the emergence of new political leaderships. Closely related to this issue is the need to keep and increase support to parliaments. Some interviewees felt that such support has decreased over time, which would be counter-productive given the legislative, representative and accountability role that the parliamentary branch plays in a democracy. Developing EU guidelines on political parties and parliamentary support could therefore be welcome, since many identify the need for further EU resources in this area.

Other traditional topics directly affecting democracy remain of primary concern. These include the respect of human rights, in particular LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality (see also the dedicated section on gender in 1.2: Thematic focus). The interdependence between democracy and human rights is emphasized by many and the essential role of human rights defenders (HRDs) in promoting democratic values and defending democratic principles is clearly understood. In that regard, the EU commitment, tools and mechanisms to protect HRDs are valuable. But they could be used in a more proactive way to prevent rather than respond to crisis situations when individual HRDs are already in danger. The consultations showed that corruption and organized crime continue to be dangerous factors, weakening democratic systems in many regions of the world, and that efforts to counter them should be stepped up. In this light, support to impartial justice and accountable police remain crucial to fight systemic impunity. Likewise, the role of independent media in investigating scandals, relaying established information and keeping institutions in check is key, and the EU should pursue and deepen its efforts on this front.

New challenges and revised approaches
Across the globe, citizens face increasing disinformation, and this fuels polarization, the magnitude of which is unprecedented. This worrying trend was highlighted regularly during the consultations. Finding ways to canalize conflicting and opposing views is part of the essence of democracy. The EU's external democracy policy should invent innovative ways to promote and support inclusive institutions and processes. One way could be by focusing additional efforts on the local level, where political collaboration and consensus seeking sometimes continue to function when

Traditional topics directly affecting democracy remain of primary concern.

decision making at the national level has become paralysed due
to polarization. This offers opportunities for decentralization
processes and increased support to local authorities and other
local democracy actors. In this field, the EU is well equipped
since many of its Member States benefit from well-functioning
decentralized democracy systems, from which the EU can borrow
lessons learned in its external democracy support. Twinning
partnerships and exchange of best practices are examples that
could be replicated on a larger scale.

There is no one-size-fits-all model of democracy.

Even though no democracy can function without a set of
universally held democratic preconditions, there is no one-size-
fits-all model of democracy. Domestic actors are and should
be the primary drivers of democratic change and development,
and all agree that the EU should accompany rather than lead
democratic reforms. Such reforms should be tailored to
local needs. The EU could engage more with its partners and
democracy stakeholders to define how this plays out in specific
country contexts.

The EU may be missing a framework to capture the varying degrees of democracy progress or regression in given countries around the world.

While the EU has tools to work on democracy at the country level
(e.g. human rights and democracy country strategies, political and
policy dialogues, bilateral programming of funding instruments),
it may be missing a conceptual framework to capture the varying
degrees of democracy progress or regression in given countries
around the world. To that end, the EU should consider adopting
a comprehensive democracy assessment framework. Such
a framework, which distinguishes between distinct areas of
democratic governance at a granular level, would allow the EU to
monitor more narrowly where democratic regression or progress
takes place, and with what measures to respond to it. It should
not necessarily be made public given the diplomatic sensitivities
it could generate. But it would be a useful conceptual tool to
assist EU Delegations in responding to democracy trends in their
countries. It could, for example, inform and help to mobilize EU
efforts to defend democratic countries at risk of deterioration or
backsliding. Crisis instruments (e.g. the rapid response actions
pillar of the GE-NDICI) could be used in a proactive manner to
defend or even seize opportunities to promote democracy abroad.
The EU could also invest in further developing its early warning
systems to assess both conflict-related risks and democracy-
related threats. This could be done by establishing informal

networks of local democracy actors and/or by using open data
such as the Democracy Tracker developed by International IDEA
in 2022 (International IDEA n.d.).

While country-level action is key, the EU should not forget about
the multilateral order (e.g. the UN, Bretton Woods institutions).
As already stated, the world is becoming more complex and
volatile. The post-World War II order, based on human rights and
democracy, should reflect the new complex geopolitical reality
to maintain its legitimacy and effectiveness. If the EU and its
democratic allies are to be seen as credible democracy actors,
they should push for democratic reforms at the multilateral level
as well. The way the multilateral system functions is becoming
more and more problematic, since it appears unfair in terms of
both representation (e.g. in the UN Security Council) and treatment
(e.g. inequality in tackling debt issues across countries).

A new narrative

To guide the updating of its external democracy approach, the
EU should consider adopting and communicating a new narrative
on democracy. In various consultations for this project, the need
for this new narrative was often referred to. While democracy
actors have been on the defensive in the last few years, the time
has come to deliver a proactive and positive message about the
benefits of democracy as a universal aspiration.

Such a narrative should show the added value of democracy
as the best political system to sustainably serve the people.
Consultations showed that for democracies to be taken seriously
they must be perceived as benefiting populations. Focusing
on respect for the integrity of political processes (i.e. offering
a system to peacefully and fairly regulate the arrival to and
departure from power) is not enough. Democracy should also
be about the actual act of governing, being accountable and
delivering on the socio-economic agenda (e.g. job creation,
reduction of inequalities, welfare system). This new narrative
should argue that democracy is the best system to deliver long-
lasting solutions and sustainable remedies to socio-economic
challenges as demonstrated by research such as the Case for
Democracy (V-Dem Institute n.d.). By ensuring that the largest
possible number of stakeholders and views are part of the
decision-making process, democratic systems are in fact ideally

The EU should consider adopting and communicating a new narrative on democracy.

positioned to shape responses that are legitimate and inclusive. Reflecting diversity is at the core of a democracy's mandate and in this respect the EU should also emphasize that democratic systems offer rules for structuring fair political engagement (rules that must be respected and followed by all). However, equally important is the fact that democracy itself does not promote a given political agenda or a set of politically engaged values. It is essential that such a new narrative reaches out to all democratic and political actors, both liberal and conservative constituencies alike. It is only by combining these elements in a consolidated narrative that the EU and the wider democracy constituency will be able to convince populations about the relevance of democracy.

When promoting this new narrative, the EU should be humble, keeping in mind its internal challenges, the need to be transparent about its political and economic interests, and the fact that it could be accused of double standards (see also Chapter 2). Such a narrative should leave ample space for exchange and dialogue, since understanding the views and concerns of partners is essential. In that regard, people-to-people interactions should not be forgotten. The EU's democracy policy has mostly been a matter of institutions so far, but its ultimate beneficiaries—the citizens, whether within the EU or in partner countries—should also have their say and be able to present their views. There is certainly room to deepen such a dialogue.

An increased political role

Over the past decade, the EU expressed its willingness to become a bigger political player. The political European Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker, followed by the geopolitical European Commission of Ursula von der Leyen, served to illustrate the belief that the EU had to increase its political weight if it were to properly influence the international arena and defend its interests. The recent geopolitical developments proved them right. The EU's democracy agenda, being at the core of the EU's political project, could therefore not go unaffected.

There is room to increase the political leverage of the EU's external democracy policy.

The consultations for this project showed that the EU is not yet punching above its weight in the democracy field. There is room to increase the political leverage of the EU's external democracy policy. One might argue that being political requires toning down values to embrace realpolitik principles. This would be the

only way to avoid losing ground to other actors in an ever-more
competitive international environment. The opposite reading,
however, is more convincing. The end goal of being political is in
fact to promote one's vision and shape the world around one's
own key values. The war in Ukraine has put the spotlight back on
this reality. It has demonstrated without a doubt that the EU is first
and foremost a community of values. Standing by them is in fact
the very purpose for which the European Union was built.

When engaging on democracy externally, the EU should consider
being transactional to increase its leverage and reflect on how
best to use conditionality of funding to pursue its democracy
objectives. This mental shift, which was initiated recently, has not
historically been part of the EU's way of working. It will take time
before the entire set of external policies are shaped accordingly
(see also Chapter 2 on democracy in trade and other sectoral
policies). The debate among pro- and anti-conditionality partisans
is far from being closed. The EU already uses conditionality to
some extent, such as the newly introduced conditionality for
regional funds, or conditionality in the enlargement policy, in
the European Neighbourhood or via budget support. The EU
could boost positive conditionality in the area of democracy in a
'more for more' approach. Such an approach was, for example,
developed in the Neighbourhood region and could be replicated
for the rest of the world. The cushion of unallocated fund in the
GE-NDICI could be used as a performance reserve to top up
support when countries perform well democratically (whether
that is in terms of results achieved or trends). In case countries
do not reach their democracy objectives, the extra funding could
return to the common pot or be reallocated to civil society as a
way to address government deficiencies. Negative conditionality
should not be excluded a priori either. In case of major democratic
setbacks, the EU should not shy away from taking its political
responsibility and use the full range of its policies to respond
to autocratic moves. This has been done in certain cases (e.g.
Myanmar or Sri Lanka), which demonstrates that it is not out of
the EU's reach.

An EU Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations

To optimize its work and impact, the EU should adopt an
Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations.

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The EU has so far been reluctant to explicitly determine what it means by supporting democracy abroad. Some EU officials referred to a fear that such an exercise could be divisive both internally and when engaging with partner countries. This could also be a reason why the EU has until now primarily tackled democracy through a human rights lens. Democracy does not benefit from globally agreed standards the way human rights do. In such a context, using human rights as a starting point for democracy work seems a valid approach. However, although human rights and democracy are intertwined and interdependent, they do not exactly cover the same scope.

Representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration and participatory engagement are essential attributes of a functioning democracy.

While human rights and democratic aspirations are universal, democracy can take many shapes and forms. Recent protests with people risking their freedom or lives for more democracy in autocratic countries such as China, Iran and Myanmar illustrate that democratic aspirations can be dormant for years but will emerge at some point when people have the courage to stand up for their freedoms. There are essential conditions to functioning democratic systems. Human rights are essential, but democracy goes one step further by defining the systemic nature of a given political regime. Representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration and participatory engagement are essential attributes of a functioning democracy (International IDEA 2022a). Working on democracy, therefore, implies partnering with a multitude of stakeholders—that is, individuals but also civil society at large, as well as local, regional, national and international public institutions, and the private sector.

Adopting an Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations does not mean adopting a rigid and prescriptive approach. An Integrated Approach could focus on essential democracy prerequisites, but as long as the EU does not determine what external democracy action implies, it will be difficult to achieve its democracy goals and ensure that all its efforts come together optimally. Consultations for this project in fact demonstrated that the EU often approached democracy through a single topic and failed to address democracy comprehensively, in the whole. As a result, important democratic components were overlooked, and this risk is likely to increase with the broadening number of topics democracy is now expected to affect (e.g. social justice, digitalization, climate change). Many,

including EU officials, therefore expressed the need for a more comprehensive EU lens that brings together all matters pertaining to democracy. To that end, the EU should adopt EU Guidelines on Democracy as a practical tool guiding the daily operationalization of its democracy objectives. This would certainly not result in the EU ending all its interactions with external partners that were less than perfect democratic actors. It will obviously have to continue engaging with those at times to work towards greater democratic governance. But identifying more sharply what its end goal entails would greatly facilitate its daily democracy work.

The EU should adopt EU Guidelines on Democracy as a practical tool guiding the daily operationalization of its democracy objectives.

1.2. THEMATIC FOCUS

Throughout the consultations for this project, some thematic topics clearly emerged. They include fairly new themes in the democracy agenda (the green agenda and digitalization), as well as some more traditional cross-cutting issues (such as gender and youth) that, nevertheless, remain of paramount importance. All of these topics are captured in the current EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy but to a different extent.

Climate change

The impact of climate change and the green transition have increasingly been topics of interest, including to the EU (European Parliament 2022). They are, for example, captured in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, in its section 1.2 entitled Empowering People. Seen from a democracy perspective, the EU lens, however, is mostly focusing on human rights and on how climate change will impact socio-economic rights, such as access to water and sanitation, food or health. The wider impact of climate change on democratic systems, or the reverse—the impact of systems of governance on the management of the climate crisis—seem to be overlooked, which is not surprising given the novelty of the topic. The direct link between climate change and democracy is in fact still largely unexplored, and understanding how such a global phenomenon will concretely affect political models will take more time and analysis (Lindvall 2021). Once the reflection is launched, however, it is clear that its impact on democracies will be substantial and multifaceted. The expected increasing number of conflicts,

The wider impact of climate change on democratic systems, or the reverse—the impact of systems of governance on the management of the climate crisis—seem to be overlooked.

The EU should develop new democratic tools to make climate change a grassroots issue.

hazards, disasters and displacements will primarily affect the most vulnerable and will put pressure on the basic mechanisms of democracy (e.g. electoral processes, functioning justice systems or basic social services delivery). The very core of democratic states might be questioned if they are unable to perform their essential functions effectively. Together with its partners, the EU should thus develop new democratic tools (e.g. participatory processes) to make climate change a grassroots issue by showing localized consequences, and then ensure that these expected challenges are addressed peacefully and sustainably. As stated in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, 'Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level' (UN 1992: 2). Democracies seem therefore better equipped to deal with inclusive climate change adaptation. Investing in the linkage between democracy and climate change would also ensure that people were empowered to seize the opportunities of the green transition rather than just suffer from climate change. Lastly, older and consolidated democracies, which have greatly contributed to climate change in pursuit of their own developmental benefit, should use a democratic approach to international collaboration on emission reductions. To be seen as both a credible democracy and climate actor, the EU should in fact deliver on the multilateral front as well.

Digitalization is a game changer, which could have a substantial and long-lasting impact on democratic systems and practices.

Digitalization

Digitalization, which is a key priority of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, was identified as an even larger topic in all regions covered in the consultation than in 2020. Digitalization is a game changer, which could have a substantial and long-lasting impact on democratic systems and practices. But, first and foremost, it is a vehicle for change, rather than a value-based driver of change. Negative consequences are numerous and well known, ranging from Internet cuts, disinformation and online polarization to the instrumentalization of digital tools for surveillance and repression by autocratic forces. The toxic role of Russia and China in this respect was mentioned in consultations for this project on several occasions. On the positive side, digitalization can be used as a powerful tool to promote and strengthen democracy, in particular to address the representativity crisis faced by many democracies. It can offer new opportunities to access remote areas and disfranchised populations, engage

with citizens and include them in discussions and debates on a daily basis. It is therefore essential that digitalization is shaped by democratic values and norms, in terms of the management of digital infrastructure, the respect of private data and the delivery of trustworthy information. In many parts of the world, the EU is seen as a role model for these issues, with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) being the prime example of what the EU can achieve as a norm-setter. When engaging with external partners in the digital field, the EU should support not only ICT infrastructure but also the democratic creation and distribution of content. Investing in civic digital literacy is also a must to train critical and enlightened citizens. To achieve these goals, the EU should facilitate and build on the mutual exchange of best practices. This concerns lessons from both the EU as the world's largest digital regulator, and the many thriving local democracy initiatives (e.g. in European cities). Moreover, the EU increasingly stands to learn from its global partners—for instance, through countries dealing with mass foreign online interference or countries that possess large civic ICT skills, such as in its Eastern Neighbourhood and Asia. This deserves to be further explored.

Youth

Promoting the role and inclusion of youth in decisions that affect them is a cross-cutting priority of the EU. It is also referred to in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 but mentioned only three times in the document—unlike gender, which is referenced 26 times. Involving youth in discussions on solutions to all major issues that currently shape the world is only logical, given that upcoming generations will be the ones primarily affected by urgent priorities such as climate change and conflict recovery. Across the globe, youth has been disproportionally impacted by Covid-19, in terms of not only their social life, education and economic opportunities but also their civic freedoms and democratic participation. The EU has identified youth as a clear political priority but the modalities to implement that priority remain somewhat unclear. This point was notably raised in the online survey addressed to EU Member States, where a third of respondents could not determine whether youth was properly mainstreamed in the EU's external democracy policy (see Figure 2). The EU has launched some limited attempts so far—for example, through the establishment of Youth Sounding Boards in its development cooperation policy or, internally, by associating youth with the Conference on the Future

The EU has identified youth as a clear political priority but the modalities to implement that priority remain somewhat unclear.

of Europe. In that context, the adoption of the YAP (European Commission 2022) is a welcome development. The YAP explicitly states that it is drawing on the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy with regard to the participation of young people in public and political life (European Commission 2022: 2). However, it is the implementation that will show whether that link has been properly made. The intention to consult with youth organizations, in terms of having political dialogue between the EU and partner governments or in the programming for EU funding instruments, is a concrete illustration of the EU's positive intentions. But the implementation of the YAP will require an internal cultural shift to make sure that these consultations are meaningful, mutual and reciprocal. They should also go beyond the usual topics related to youth (such as education and sports). The introduction of youth checks to assess the impact of all external EU regulation could be a way to ensure increased representation and participation. All efforts to mainstream youth will have been in vain if youth is not empowered to be and become a proper democratic actor. Beyond institutional considerations, investing in education and creating economic opportunities are essential to empowering youth and to facilitating their democratic participation, including in political processes (e.g. in political parties).

Figure 2. **Youth as a policy priority is properly mainstreamed in EU external democracy policy and in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024**

Fully agree ● Agree ● Neither agree nor disagree
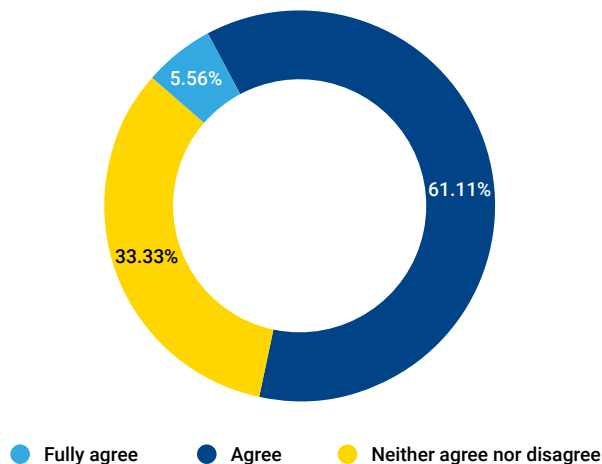
Source: International IDEA, Survey to EU Member States, 2022.

Gender

Gender equality and women's empowerment is another key cross-cutting priority of the EU. Contrary to youth, gender has benefited from a policy framework that has been established for longer, with three GAPs adopted since 2010. In the last 13 years, the EU has in fact deployed tremendous efforts to mainstream gender in its external action and is recognized by many as a leader on gender issues. The third EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III) is a very operational document with specific indicators and clear benchmarks to meet. While democracy is not the main focus of GAP III, the active participation of women and girls in politics, governance and electoral processes—in order to achieve a functioning democracy—is explicitly mentioned (European Commission 2020a: 15) and action to reach it is identified (European Commission 2020b). This is an essential democracy topic, since women's political participation and gender equality continue to lag behind globally (International IDEA 2019). Consultations for this project confirmed these observations and demonstrated that the EU action on gender in the democracy field is recognized and appreciated. In authoritarian regimes, gender can be a non-controversial entry point for democracy reforms. Often thanks to EU support, substantial progress has been achieved in certain partner countries with the adoption of legal frameworks to protect gender equality and women's rights (e.g. via constitution-building or deployment of technical assistance to develop national gender strategies). The priority should now lie with the actual implementation of those rights. Far from narrowing, the gap between men and women in terms of democratic inclusion has actually widened in recent years, since women in politics were disproportionately affected by Covid-19 (International IDEA 2021a). The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 states that 'gender mainstreaming will be applied to ensure that all measures of this Action Plan are gender responsive' (Council of the EU 2020: 9). But, contrary to GAP III, it does not introduce timelines and benchmarks to measure progress. It could therefore use GAP III as a source of inspiration to set tangible goals and monitoring instruments for women's participation in politics. The implementation of the two Action Plans should also cross-fertilize.

The EU has in fact deployed tremendous efforts to mainstream gender in its external action and is recognized by many as a leader on gender issues.

Chapter 2

POLICY COHERENCE AND ALIGNMENT OF DEMOCRACY ACTION

Stating that the EU is a complex actor is a truism, but the EU's complexity affects its external democracy policy. A myriad actors and policies shape and implement the EU's democracy agenda. Beyond policy relevance, this Report looks at how the separate components of EU democracy action come together and analyses whether the approaches of the actors responsible for its implementation adequately align with each other.

The EU is a value-based community with democracy at its core.

The EU is a value-based community with democracy at its core (Treaty on European Union, article 2). These values legally shape and guide its international action (Treaty on European Union, article 21). The EU's commitment to democracy is thus in some way reflected in all external policies, as well as in international agreements with external partners. But the EU's external democracy agenda is first and foremost captured in the 2012 Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy (Council of the EU 2012) and subsequent EU Action Plans. The third EU Action Plan (2020–2024) is a strategic document listing key priorities. However, it is not a plan for action benefiting from dedicated implementation tools, and instead needs to be translated into relevant external policies. The EU Action Plan in fact explicitly states that it 'sets the level of ambition and defines the priorities of the EU and its Member States in this field in relations with all partner countries. Human rights and democracy will be promoted consistently and coherently in all areas of EU external action (e.g., trade, environment, development, counter-terrorism)' (Council of the EU 2020).

To what extent is the EU's external democracy agenda turned
into an operational reality? Are all EU actors coherently and
consistently implementing it? To answer these questions, one
must briefly look at the implementation of the EU's external
democracy policy itself before examining the roles and
democracy mandates of EU institutions, EU Member States
and civil society.

2.1. COHERENCE OF EU EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY POLICY

Coherence of EU external democracy policy around the globe
Before examining the issue of coherence from a policy
implementation perspective, a step back is needed to look at the
values versus interests angle. Regardless of the tools available,
political will is a precondition for any EU action on democracy to be
successful. The political will to promote values can be fuelled or
hindered by strategic interests. In this respect, the EU is sometimes
accused of promoting its external democracy agenda selectively.
This is not a new accusation, but it has gained momentum with
Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, the EU handled the
subsequent refugee crisis from Ukraine very differently from
the Syrian one in 2015—which did not go unnoticed in partner
countries. In several dialogues organized for this project, civil
society representatives spoke of double standards. The EU is
sometimes perceived to use the democracy narrative when it suits
its geopolitical goals (e.g. in Ukraine), while ignoring these values
when they do not serve its short-term economic and security
interests (e.g. when securing energy deals with autocracies).

To counter that perception, the EU should not use its democracy
arguments too gratuitously. Democracy advocacy is an
instrument that can easily blunt if used inconsistently, without
action or consideration of its impact. In addition, the Western
interventions in Iraq in 2003 or in Libya in 2011 are still very much
present in people's minds. Although they were autocratic states
which clearly trampled on citizen rights and democratic values,
some external audiences still treat those interventions as major
cracks in what they consider to be a Western democracy agenda.

The EU is sometimes accused of promoting its external democracy agenda selectively.

External partners, do not blame the EU for pursuing its own interests, as long as it can explain how they balance with its democracy aims over the long term.

This rather bleak picture should certainly not result in the EU's ambitions on democracy being dismissed. Instead, the EU should be transparent when pursuing its strategic interests and acknowledge how and why they conflict with its democracy agenda. Consultations with stakeholders for this Report show that external partners, including CSOs, do not blame the EU for pursuing its own interests, as long as it can explain how they balance with its democracy aims over the long term. This is a well understood and accepted fact in a fierce and competitive geopolitical environment. Simply, the EU should more openly and transparently own these contradictions and acknowledge when its democracy agenda is being hampered by them. Rather than facing the arguments about double standards, the EU should turn the discussion into what a multifactored approach entails—that is, admit the fact that each situation and interaction might differ and that the interaction between values and interests might require adjustment. But to do so, it needs a clearer framework that places democracy solidly among its other interests, instead of ad hoc decisions that are seen to call for democracy one day and abandon it the next. This admission should also go hand in hand with efforts to build strategic autonomy and embed democracy in the EU's strategic interests. Such an approach would properly fit into a new narrative as described in Chapter 1 (see 1.1: General findings and considerations).

Efforts and commitment of EU democracy teams is particularly appreciated and acknowledged.

Perception of EU institutional democracy actors

Overall, the efforts and commitment of the democracy teams in the EEAS and the European Commission are particularly appreciated and acknowledged. But their resources remain constrained, particularly from a human resources perspective. In the EEAS democracy division, for example, only a handful of officials work on democracy issues beyond the specific topic of elections. These democracy teams are in charge of implementing the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. Chapter 3 of this Report provides a deeper analysis of this policy document and suggests avenues to boost its implementation. A couple of more general points can be made here, however.

The role of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights is commended. As an experienced and senior diplomat, the EUSR has direct high-level access to governments in partner countries. Their work, reporting and relentless efforts to push for

the human rights and democracy agenda globally are praised. But various interviewees for this Report also acknowledged that the EUSR has to work within a restricted structure and with limited staff. Increasing the resources available to the EUSR's office in the area of democracy could be considered, particularly to provide more thematic expertise (e.g. on digital issues). Doing so should, however, not result in creating a de facto separate democracy entity, as it is key that the EUSR maintains close relations with the EEAS services, in particular the geographical directorates. The option of establishing a EUSR solely dedicated to democracy is not universally considered positive. Some believe this would be a good way to give more visibility to democracy and lighten the workload of the EUSR on Human Rights. Others feel that this would rather create an artificial split between democracy and human rights issues, while possibly revealing that the democracy file has very little traction with international partners. However, to aid in the promotion of democracy, in terms of communication and awareness, it would be useful to add the words 'democracy and governance' to the official title of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights.

One way to enhance the focus on democracy could be to systematically include democracy and governance as a stand-alone point on the agenda of the EU Human Rights Dialogues with partner countries to ensure that, beyond human rights, democracy is discussed in its systemic dimension. These dialogues are extremely valued but, despite some recent attempts to revise their format, continue to be perceived as a one-way street. They should be made more reciprocal to show that the EU is not lecturing but willing to discuss its own challenges and to learn from its partners. Efforts should also be made to involve civil society in a more comprehensive manner. The current practice of consulting CSOs in both Brussels and partner countries prior to a Human Rights Dialogue is commendable. In the Republic of Moldova, selected CSOs could attend the actual dialogue as observers. Having civil society attend at least parts of the deliberations, and expanding them with democracy CSOs, could be discussed with partner governments. In addition, debriefing the consulted CSOs, which is done in Brussels after each dialogue, should be systematized at the EU Delegations level. Regular exchanges with local actors should be maintained to track the implementation progress in between two rounds of the dialogues.

One way to enhance the focus on democracy could be to systematically include democracy and governance as a stand-alone point on the agenda of the EU Human Rights Dialogues.

EU Delegations are the primary EU actors assessing the democracy status and challenges in every partner country.

The role of EU Delegations in preparing these dialogues is crucial, since they are the primary EU actors assessing the democracy status and challenges in every partner country. For such an objective to be reached, the understanding and use of local languages is essential. Interviewees also felt that EU Delegations should carry out more thorough analyses of democracy issues. This could be facilitated by the adoption of democracy development plans. EU human rights and democracy country strategies do already exist, but they can vary in quality greatly from one country to another. Their operational nature can also sometimes be questioned. In many instances, people underlined the continuing divide between the political and operational sections of the EU Delegations. A fruitful cooperation between them is often conditioned by the personalities of the individuals in charge. Structural solutions should therefore be envisaged (e.g. by establishing a regular working group uniting all staff dealing with democracy issues in the Delegation). More generally, the link between the local political dialogue and the EU projects implemented in the country is still not fully made. Many consider that the political dialogue should more proactively influence and shape the EU development cooperation portfolio, so that EU democracy objectives can be effectively translated into action. Finally, EU Delegations could strengthen their relationship with and benefit more from the European Parliament as an important external democracy actor. The number of visits by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to partner countries could be increased, and these could be used more strategically: to pass strong political messages on democracy, to project the EU democracy model(s) and to show how democracy works within the EU.

The European Parliament has in fact historically been a strong advocate of democracy in EU external policies.

Although it has an institutionally modest role in foreign policy, the European Parliament has in fact historically been a strong advocate of democracy in EU external policies. The first Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights was, for example, created by an European Parliament initiative in 1994. The European Parliament plays a critical role in approving the budget for external action but can also adopt tough political stances (e.g. through parliamentary resolutions). The possibility to divide the roles and have an EU institutional actor being critical and vocal on democracy is actually welcomed by the other EU institutions. The European Parliament has other key instruments to actively shape the EU's external

democracy policy, including: inviting partner country ambassadors for hearings in front of relevant parliamentary committees, MEPs chairing EU EOMs, and parliamentary delegations intended to maintain relations with parliaments of non-EU countries, with regions and with international organizations. This last could be more systematically used to deepen peer-to-peer contacts on democracy issues, building on initiatives such as the Inter-Pares Parliaments in Partnership—EU Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments, or organized in the framework of the European Parliament's Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) (European Parliament 2019). In that regard, combining the European Parliament's democracy work with one of the national parliaments of the EU Member States should be explored further, as this is an area that has been overlooked. It could also be considered as a way to expand DEG's mandate, especially its geographic scope of supported partner countries' parliaments, and to reinforce its resources. Finally, the EEAS and European Commission should make sure they regularly inform the European Parliament of their respective democracy work. In this regard, the establishment of a strategic dialogue among institutions is considered a positive development but has not yet reached its full political potential, with discussions remaining more technical in nature.

Going beyond the usual democracy suspects

As previously mentioned, the implementation of the EU's external democracy policy is not the sole responsibility of the EU thematic actors and services in charge of human rights and democracy issues. Democracy should be mainstreamed through the entire spectrum of EU external action, meaning that all EU actors should own and implement the EU democracy agenda. To this end, training on democracy mainstreaming in external policies should be implemented across EU institutions, targeting staff that do not traditionally handle democracy files, such as geographical services and officials working on trade or security matters. Courses on democracy should also be introduced in the European Diplomatic Academy to equip current and future generations of diplomats with the relevant conceptual and practical tools to internalize the democracy agenda. When promoting the EU's external democracy agenda, it is important to not only preach to the converted but also target a broader constituency beyond the usual democracy suspects.

When promoting the EU's external democracy agenda, it is important to not only preach to the converted but also target a broader constituency beyond the usual democracy suspects.

This should start by ensuring better mainstreaming of democracy in the EU's external funding instruments, in particular in the GENDICI. With the enhanced geographization of EU instruments, the bulk of funding is in fact channelled through geographical envelopes rather than thematic ones. It is thus key that democracy appears high in the list of geographical priorities. One way to do this is by developing a democracy-based approach to all EU programmes, the way the EU adopted a rights-based approach in its development policy. Some initial sectoral attempts have already been made, with the *Democracy and Digitalisation Handbook* being a concrete example of how this could be done at working level. This Handbook in fact 'looks at the impact of digital technology on democratic institutions while implementing international cooperation and development projects' (Wagner, Ferro and Gsenger 2022: vii). Developing such a systematic approach to ensure that all EU programmes are democracy friendly and aware would be a sure way to promote democratic values and mentalities.

The EU should use democracy to politically guide all its external policies.

Beyond EU programmes, such an approach could be replicated to all EU external policies. The lack of coherence among these policies continues to be highlighted by external democracy partners. The EU trade policy is, for example, often seen as contradicting its democracy agenda. To address this coherence issue, the EU should use democracy to politically guide all its external policies. With such an approach, democracy is encapsulated in all aspects of EU foreign policy, whether that is security, development or trade. The political impetus that such a steer could provide would make a difference, given that the technical commitment to mainstream democracy (e.g. through the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy) has had limited success in other areas of EU external policy.

Trade is becoming an even more important component of the EU's foreign policy.

While some progress has been achieved, there is in fact ample room to better reflect democracy priorities in sectoral EU external policies. Trade is becoming an even more important component of the EU's foreign policy, with the graduation of many partner countries and the phasing out of development cooperation. New trade agreements now include a human rights clause, which covers democratic principles. The Directorate-General for Trade, together with the EEAS, also makes, when relevant, human rights impact assessments to inform decision making in trade matters.

The Directorate-General for International Partnerships regrettably does not take part in these exercises and could be more systematically included. In addition, the EU could use the leverage that these clauses offer more regularly and systematically. The Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+), for example, contains references to international conventions that need to be certified by the UN. They could be a good entry point for the EU to push for democratic reforms in partner countries. More generally, trade agreements could include a dedicated democracy clause based on a comprehensive country situation assessment, using information collected on the ground (by EOMs, EU Delegations and Member States etc.), thus ensuring more accountability on democracy commitments from both sides. According to the European Commission (European Commission 2021), the new trade strategy should support the EU's open strategic autonomy and take a more assertive approach to the defence of EU values. In this context, the EU could very well consider measures to scale back trade agreements whenever democracy in partner countries erodes.

The translation of democracy objectives in other sectoral policies was not the main focus of this Report and would deserve further study. Some initial thoughts can, however, be formulated briefly. The security and defence agenda detailed in the Strategic Compass (Council of the EU 2022) makes limited reference to democracy, except for outlining the intention to develop an EU toolbox to address and counter foreign information and manipulation, as stipulated in the European Democracy Action Plan. Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations also have an important role to play in respecting and promoting democratic standards. EU support, notably provided through the European Peace Facility, should be guided by democratic principles to ensure that the training and capacity building provided to partner countries' security forces is fully in line with EU values. Humanitarian aid, though apolitical in nature, should also be guided by basic democratic considerations to avoid its politicization by a few autocratic elites and to set the foundation for resilient and fair societies that are best positioned to tackle natural and human-induced catastrophes. The interconnection between democracy and the green agenda is covered in 1.2: Thematic focus.

EU CSDP support, notably provided through the European Peace Facility, should be guided by democratic principles.

EU policy coherence should also be achieved by building stronger synergies between the internal and external democracy agendas.

The internal/external democracy nexus

EU policy coherence should also be achieved by building stronger synergies between the internal and external democracy agendas. Because of the internal democratic challenges of some of its Member States, the EU increasingly struggles to lead by example. The internal situation is thus directly affecting the EU's external agenda, forcing it to address democracy in its external relations in a much more humble manner. The EU should not, however, use recent geopolitical developments to justify it either overlooking the internal democratic weaknesses of some of its Member States, in an attempt to create internal unity, or opening its doors to candidate countries that would not meet the democratic standards set by the Copenhagen criteria. As a matter of fact, the EU could be much more vocal about its own internal rule of law mechanisms when engaging with external partners. The EU has substantial tools to monitor the state of democracy internally (e.g. reporting from EU Member States, the conditionality regulation for the EU budget), and it could showcase these to demonstrate that it applies its democratic principles at home as well. Such openness, if done well, can be a sign of democratic strength and credibility. In addition, the EU can cross-fertilize from both internal and external democracy agendas. It can use its internal market regulations to shape the wider democracy landscape—as it did with GDPR—but could also draw on its external democracy experience to replicate successful initiatives within its own borders—for example, reproducing some of the activities of the European Endowment for Democracy within the EU. In that context, further synergies could be built when implementing the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and EU internal democracy initiatives (the European Democracy Action Plan and the newly announced Defence of Democracy package). While some cross-referencing is made in the respective Action Plans, their implementation seems to be taking place independently, despite the obvious links between them (e.g. on foreign interference in internal democratic processes).

2.2. WORKING AND ALIGNING WITH OTHER ACTORS

EU Member States

While EU Member States continue to run their own bilateral relations (foreign policy, development cooperation, humanitarian aid, etc.), they should as much as possible align their national goals with EU objectives and should not contradict the EU policies and messages. Coherence between the EU and its Member States in terms of political messaging is fundamental, to help democracy actors support EU policies in their in-country debate. In the democracy field, values and commitments, including the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, are binding and should be co-owned by EU Member States (see Chapter 3 on the buy-in of EU Member States to the EU Action Plan).

The EU's and Member States' approaches to democracy policy implementation should be coordinated and aligned, also at the communication level. So far, the record has been mixed. The recent Team Europe Democracy (TED) initiative has been set up to partly address this. While alignment, coordination and joint communication work well on the ground in some countries, elsewhere the EU and Member States can be competing, and their messages can be contradictory. In the consultations for this project, it was mentioned that EU Member States are regularly tempted to leave it to the EU to defend the value-based agenda, while they focus on prioritizing their own national interests. Although partner countries understand that the EU is a self-standing partner, which manages trade, substantive funding and a wide array of other relevant policies in different regions, coherence between EU and Member States democracy policies is fundamental for the credibility of the EU as a whole. The EU should be able to make full use of its economic and market tools and leverage, when engaging with partner governments. In some cases, the divisions between EU Member States have incapacitated EU institutions from using the full potential of the EU toolbox.

Coordination on the democracy file could be improved, at both Brussels and local levels. In the post-Lisbon reality, the EEAS chairs the relevant EU Council Working Parties, and the leeway for EU Member States to influence the agenda is limited. In addition,

Coherence between EU and Member States democracy policies is fundamental for the credibility of the EU as a whole.

given the increasing number of crises around the world, the EU Political and Security Committee is much less able to look at long-term foreign policy issues but is overwhelmingly dealing with short-term crises and operational decisions. Democracy, which requires strategic thinking and long-term approaches, increasingly suffers as a strategic priority. The EU's internal democracy agenda is not addressed in the Political and Security Committee despite the importance of the internal/external nexus for the credibility of EU policies.

Whether coordination is optimal or not mostly depends on diplomats for the EU and for Member States and their culture of cooperation in the country concerned.

Coordination between EU institutions and EU Member States on the ground is crucial for the EU to have an impact. Whether coordination is optimal or not mostly depends on diplomats for the EU and for Member States and their culture of cooperation in the country concerned. Strengthening information sharing and synergies between EU Member State embassies and the EU Delegations on the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, as reflected in the local EU human rights and democracy country strategies, could be improved by introducing a biannual (or more frequent) agenda item focused on EU Action Plan activities at the regular meetings of Political Councillors. EU Delegations should also consult EU Member State embassies when setting priorities for democracy support in partner countries locally. The input of EU Member State embassies in this regard has been very limited so far. Timelier coordination on joint initiatives and demarches on human rights and democracy matters would also be appreciated. Joint country analysis could be strengthened by sharing intelligence, input and feedback, building on the EU Member States' bilateral expertise. More could also be done in terms of pooling resources. EU Member States could complement EU democracy initiatives by leading some democracy events, programmes or projects and alleviate EU Delegations' tasks.

Overall, the TED initiative is positively received but is still at an early stage for implementation.

The TED initiative was developed as an opt-in opportunity to work with EU Member States invested in democracy support. Overall, the initiative is positively received but is still at an early stage of implementation. Its effectiveness and added value are yet to be assessed. So far, only a handful of Brussels-based democracy actors are familiar with TED, which is much less well known externally. Since the priorities for democracy support still stem from the historical experience of each EU Member State, TED is an

opportunity to strengthen communication, share experience, better learn from each other and agree on a division of labour to maximize the use of EU and EU Member State resources. TED should, however, not be an exclusive club of EU Member States having a specific history of handling democracy issues. The door should remain open to all interested countries, regardless of their national expertise on democracy support. TED could also offer an additional platform to exchange and secure the buy-in of EU Member States in the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. But it should not be used as a parallel structure for EU Member States to monitor and secure EU democracy funding managed by the European Commission. European Parliament representatives could be involved in the work of TED to ensure further coherence in the implementation of EU democracy action. Lastly, in many cases, TED priorities coincide with those of non-EU donors, such as Japan, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom or the USA. There is therefore space to regularly involve non-EU democracies in TED, through a TED+ approach.

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Civil society

The EU committed to involve civil society in all dimensions of external action in its 2017 Council Conclusions (Council of the EU 2017). It reaffirmed the central role of civil society as a key component of and actor in democratic systems and as an essential promoter of democracy and the rule of law. Civil society should feature prominently in all partnerships. Engagement with CSOs is to be mainstreamed in all external instruments and programmes and all areas of cooperation. Stakeholders consulted for this Report largely commended the EU's commitment to partner with civil society, notably in the framework of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. But the mainstreaming of EU engagement with CSOs has not been taking place consistently in all regions and policies. The EU's and EU Member States' approaches to civil society should be coherent, including at the local level in partner countries. The EU country roadmaps for engagement with civil society, launched in 2013, have now been elaborated for most of the partner countries. But these roadmaps have not yet become high-profile documents used jointly by the EU Delegations and Member States.

Stakeholders consulted for this Report largely commended the EU's commitment to partner with civil society.

One of the goals of the EU is to allow meaningful and structured participation of CSOs in dialogues on policies and funding

There has been a visible shift in the EU's approach to civil society to better acknowledge the wide array of roles that civil society plays.

priorities at country level, engage civil society in political and policy dialogue, counter the shrinking space for civil society and provide flexible financial support to empower civil society as a democracy actor, enhancing its legitimacy in the eyes of individual governments. There has been a visible shift in the EU's approach to civil society to better acknowledge the wide array of roles that civil society plays. Overall, the EU is moving in the right direction with more resources and flexibility being provided. At the same time, the speed of structural changes affecting civil society is much faster than the average EU reaction period. The EU institutions managed to react promptly to the developments in Belarus and Ukraine, but devising new systemic solutions takes more time. Yet EU engagement with civil society remains too donor driven. The support provided should be contextualized and have a 'do no harm' approach. Due to its role, civil society is often targeted, and its operational space is curtailed by governments. Where the situation allows, the EU and civil society could discuss new approaches to prevent or minimize such a backlash against civil society and to facilitate better cooperation with governments on democracy issues. Meaningful engagement with civil society on the design of EU democracy support priorities could be improved by going beyond the traditional civil society partners. The EU should not only engage urban and like-minded actors, but should also reach out to religious groups, trade unions, rural constituencies and other important societal actors.

The EU should learn from developments in Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba or Ukraine, including on out-of-country civil society and diaspora support. Working more with diaspora groups and exiles has been recommended during the consultations. The issue, however, merits further discussion as there is very little guarantee that diaspora members will eventually return to their countries of origin. Over the long term, civil society in exile might face a depletion of talents, due to fatigue and detachment from the needs of the home country. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, a country with a highly empowered and powerful civil society, is a next-level challenge for the EU. As commented by the stakeholders for this Report, the war changed the operational perspective in the country, as well as the context for donors, and marked the end of many assumptions about civil society support (e.g. on mechanisms for distributing support, on supporting largely volunteer-based initiatives originally funded by private

means, on prioritizing ownership, on preserving human capital).
It has been increasingly difficult for donors to draw the line
between the war effort and democracy support.

Civil society's role in policymaking and implementation should
be balanced. Giving civil society influence in the progress
assessment of government reforms should not unnecessarily
slow down the process. But credible views from civil society
should be reflected. The EU has been pushing partner
governments to involve civil society in some regions more than in
others, depending on how complex the relations with the EU have
been. The EU could support spaces of mutual learning among
civil society to exchange best practices on democracy in the spirit
of the initiatives it supported in the Neighbourhood. More topical
dialogues and regular dialogues between CSOs are also needed.
The EU could define priorities for such meetings. Bringing civil
society closer to local governments would also be very useful;
this nexus needs better emphasis.

Figure 3. **The EU institutions sufficiently engage with civil society in Brussels on the
implementation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020−2024**

Legend:
- Fully agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
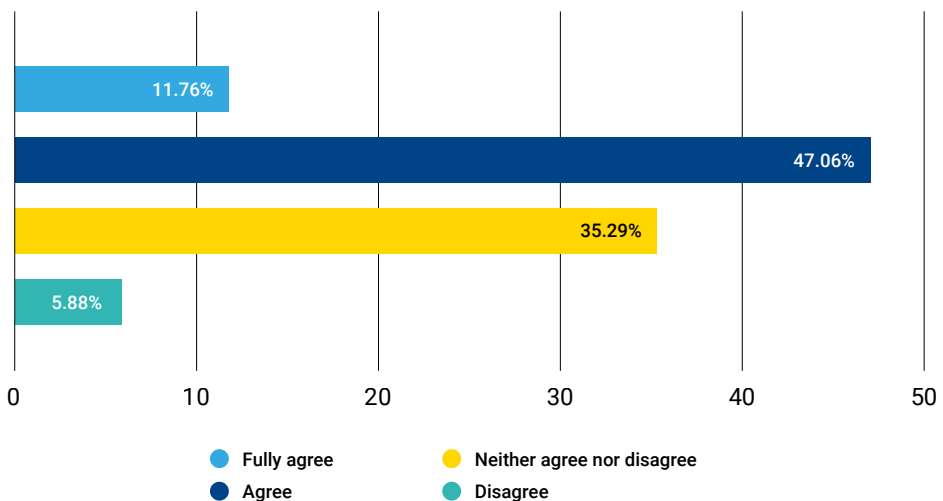
Source: International IDEA, Survey to EU Member States, 2022.

EU Member States could strengthen civil society involvement by organizing regularly a structured dialogue with civil society on the issues pertinent to democracy, at the level of the EU Council Working Parties or at the level of the Political and Security Committee. Such a dialogue has been neither systematic nor formalized so far. The European Parliament could also give more prominence to civil society, allowing CSOs to provide input not only during regular hearings but also more frequently during the plenary debates.

Several issues that are not new to the debate (Youngs 2022)—on EU funding modalities—have been mentioned during the consultations for this Report: the need to further support local and grassroots CSOs, a broader provision of core support, and the support through indirect means to informal civil society. The introduction of sub-granting has not completely solved the challenge of the EU reaching local and grassroots groups. While the EU transferred most of the risks to the organizations providing sub-granting, its risk-aversion approach has changed only slightly. Local civil society actors struggle to compete with international CSOs and often end up being hired by them to provide the actual grassroots outreach for a fraction of the overall funding available. Where direct funding is not possible, the EU should support civil society more regularly through indirect means. Informal movements cannot get direct funding from the EU, partly not to undermine their own credibility. But they can be supported by accessing EU civil society dialogues, exchanging experience and linking with other networks and forums. Broadening the use of core support to foster the development of CSOs, including setting up new organizations, should be considered. One lesson learned from the Covid-19 pandemic is that many CSOs are in dire need of developing and implementing effective risk management matrixes and procedures. These coping strategies are essential to ensure strategic preparedness of CSOs and guarantee the sustainability of their action over the long term. The EU has started providing core support to local CSOs through intermediaries (European Endowment for Democracy and framework partners in the Eastern Neighbourhood) and could consider introducing this funding modality more broadly. Out of the donors also providing such support, Sweden is considered by the CSOs consulted for this Report a role model, providing core support and peer-to-peer CSO support and pursuing a less bureaucratic approach to

awarding funds and reporting requirements. Some aspects of its approach could be replicated at the EU level, as it allows civil society to grow and set its own agenda.

Beyond the provision of core support, the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations also devised and tested other innovative ways to support civil society in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. These included giving premiums for sub-granting, devising new funding strands to support small grassroots CSOs, working increasingly in local languages and allowing for sub-granting procedures in local languages. All these measures could be incorporated into a structural approach to civil society support and taken up by other Directorate-Generals, namely Directorate-General for International Partnerships. During the democratization process, it is in fact crucial to get funding to local CSOs, to substantially lower the administrative costs of EU grants implementation, and to provide core support. To implement these measures coherently would require strengthening the EU Delegations globally and further improving the local intelligence gathering on the civil society environment and actors.

Providing funding to government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) undermines the legitimacy of the EU as an honest democracy broker in partner countries. This issue should be addressed by increasing the transparency of selection procedures and funding. A set of criteria to identify a GONGO or a CSO pursuing objectives contradictory to EU democracy objectives should be developed in cooperation with civil society. Incorporating such a set of criteria into the EU funding guidelines would also help civil society umbrella organizations deal with the membership of such organizations. Civil society focal points at EU Delegations should be trained on the matter.

During the democratization process, it is in fact crucial to get funding to local CSOs, to substantially lower the administrative costs of EU grants implementation, and to provide core support.

Chapter 3
ASSESSMENT OF THE EU ACTION PLAN ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

The EU Action Plan is a key document intended to demonstrate the EU's commitment to human rights and democracy and to maintain visibility on these important issues.

3.1. OVERALL ASSESSMENT

The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 is a very clear and comprehensive document covering many issues, from traditional human rights and democracy concerns (e.g. abolition of the death penalty and accountable institutions) to contemporary challenges (e.g. digitalization). It is a key document intended to demonstrate the EU's commitment to human rights and democracy and to maintain visibility on these important issues. For civil society, it is an important advocacy tool to keep the EU accountable on its human rights and democracy action.

It is worth pointing out that the sequencing that led to the adoption of this third EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy was particularly favourable. The 2019 Council Conclusions on Democracy set clear guidelines for the drafting of the democracy component of the Action Plan. Once adopted in 2020, the Action Plan could in turn shape the programming of the EU's external action instruments covering the period 2021–2027. This is, of course, true for the human rights and democracy thematic programme of the GE-NDICI that mirrors the EU Action Plan. But it also generated a positive momentum to shape other funding programmes. With these fresh priorities in mind, thematic services actively participated in the programming of geographical envelopes, when the processes of geographization and co-creation were taking place for the first time.

The EU Action Plan also has the ambition of bringing together EU Member States. It does so not only by setting an agreed EU position on what the democracy agenda should be, but by involving EU Member States in its implementation. The online survey addressed to EU Member States for this Report showed that the EU Action Plan is well known among the respondents dealing with democracy portfolios in capital cities. Most agreed that this policy document is in fact jointly implemented between the EU institutions and Member States (see Figure 4). Most respondents also agreed or fully agreed that the priorities spelled out in the EU Action Plan and in the EU Member State policies are well aligned, although it does not necessarily follow that the implementation of these policies is done coherently. The majority of respondents also agreed that the EU Action Plan serves as a guiding document for their country's foreign and cooperation policy in the democracy field (see Figure 5). However, the more in-depth interviews and dialogues with country-level stakeholders offered different opinions in this respect.

The EU Action Plan also has the ambition of bringing together EU Member States.

Figure 4. **The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 is jointly implemented by EU institutions and EU Member States**

- Fully agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
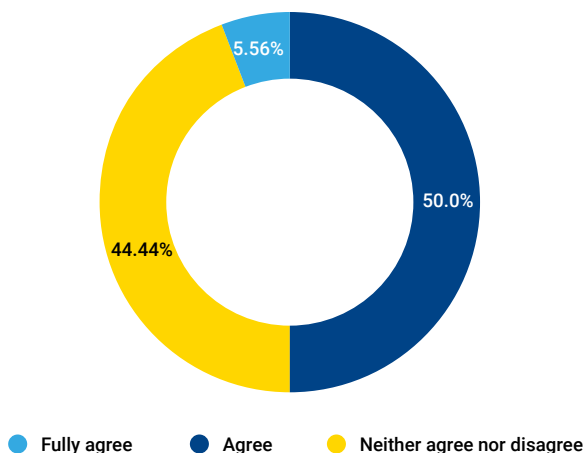
Source: International IDEA, Survey to EU Member States, 2022.

Figure 5. **The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 serves as a guiding document for the formulation and implementation of Member States' external democracy policy**

- Fully agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
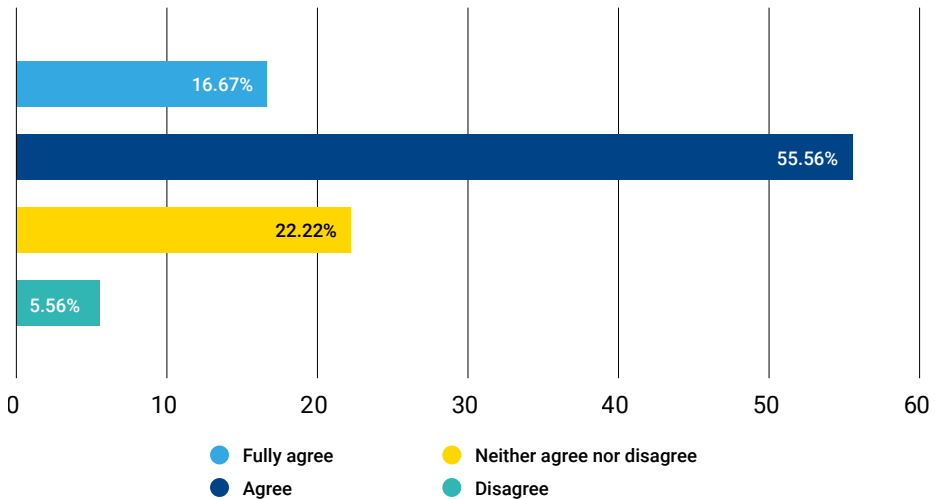
Source: International IDEA, Survey to EU Member States, 2022.

The democracy component of the EU Action Plan has clearly become stronger over time.

Even if the prime focus of the EU Action Plan remains human rights, this third iteration is the first one having a dedicated chapter on democracy, with relevant parts on democracy also spelled out in other chapters. The democracy component of the EU Action Plan has clearly become stronger over time. The democracy-related part of the current document is directly translating the 2019 Council Conclusions, demonstrating the political importance of such an exercise. The way democracy is addressed in the EU Action Plan, however, is not entirely consistent: it is mostly covered in Chapter 2, but the topic of justice is for example tackled in Section 1.5. Some further reflection on the conceptual design of the document could be useful (on this topic, see 4.2: Specific recommendations for strengthening the EU democracy toolbox, in this Report).

More generally, the assessment emanating from the project consultation indicates that the EU Action Plan does not develop a strong political narrative (except to a certain extent in the Foreword and Introduction). It does not set clear objectives to reach in order to change the global state of human rights and

democracy over a 5- to 10-year horizon. It is rather seen as a shopping list, where various EU actors can pick and choose their areas of action according to their own assessments and priorities. But the EU Action Plan is not considered an operational document either, as GAP III can be seen for gender (see the dedicated section on gender in this Report, in 1.3: Thematic focus). Contrary to its two predecessors, the third EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy does not have defined benchmarks, specific timelines or identified lead services for each given topic. This might be intentional, given the attempt to make the human rights and democracy agenda more political and inclusive. But the Action Plan should then fully embrace its strategic nature rather than lingering in between.

Finally, it appears very clearly that the EU Action Plan is little known or used as a tool by stakeholders beyond the traditional actors working on EU external democracy policy. In the Eastern Neighbourhood (whether in the Eastern Partnership region or in the Western Balkans), there is even a feeling broadly in existence that the EU Action Plan does not apply to the region. This might be because of the undefined nature of the document or because the EU candidacy and accession process has its own objectives and benchmarks. One should therefore consider avenues to increase the visibility of the EU Action Plan beyond a relatively narrow group of Brussels actors and to bridge the gap between the strategic level in Brussels and the operational one outside of the EU. One option could be to adopt democracy guidelines like the human rights guidelines that have been produced over time. Such democracy guidelines should be a practical tool to advance the EU's external democracy agenda and to provide instructions on the daily operationalization of the EU Action Plan. Such a proposition could be assessed in the framework of the Mid-Term Review of the EU Action Plan or during the design of its successor.

The EU Action Plan is little known or used as a tool by stakeholders beyond the traditional actors working on EU external democracy policy.

3.2. INPUT FOR THE MID-TERM REVIEW OF THE EU ACTION PLAN

The MTR of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 is carried out by the EEAS, which closely works with the European Commission and the Member States and consults civil society when preparing its assessment. The process is expected to conclude in June 2023 with the adoption of a Joint Staff Working Document by the Council.

An inclusive consultation process would not only enable the gathering of input but would also contribute to raising awareness of the EU Action Plan.

From a procedural perspective, interviewed stakeholders all expressed their interest in participating in this exercise. The importance of including civil society in the MTR was underlined by several Member States. As a matter of fact, an inclusive consultation process would not only enable the gathering of input but would also contribute to raising awareness of the EU Action Plan and ensuring proper buy-in for the MTR results. EU Delegations and EU national embassies should be fully involved in the MTR, which would also be a way to increase their ownership during the next implementation phase of the EU Action Plan. Responses to the online survey made for this Report indicated that several Member States plan to consult their national CSOs (see Figure 6) as well as their embassies, when making their assessment of the implementation of the EU Action Plan. In this regard, many expressed the need to jointly identify tangible indicators, so as to be able to go beyond a mere qualitative assessment. Such an assessment should be done globally even in countries where, for democracy reasons, the EU does not engage with the authorities. The assessment should also involve actors working beyond the human rights or democracy policy in the narrowest sense, as a means to assess the impact that the EU Action Plan has had on different policy areas, such as trade or security. When publishing the results of the MTR, it will be important to demonstrate how consultations in headquarters and locally have concretely shaped the review process.

Figure 6. **Are you planning to consult civil society at the national level to feed into preparation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 Mid-Term Review?**
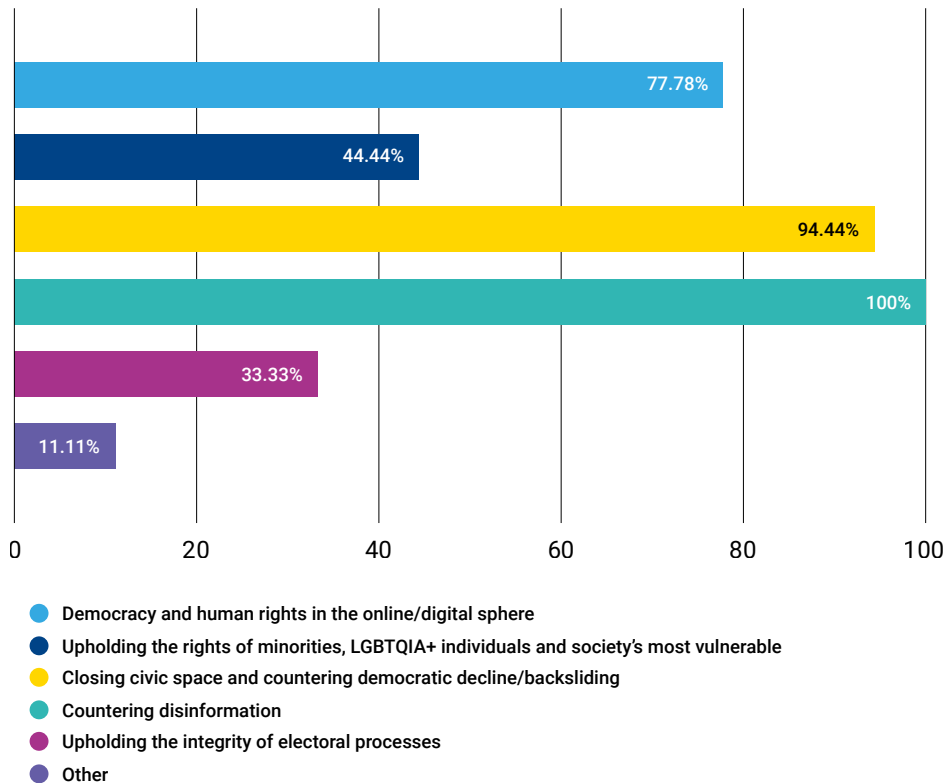

33.33%

66.67%

● Yes   ● No
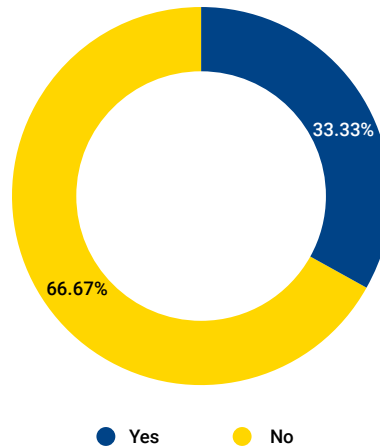
Source: International IDEA, Survey to EU Member States, 2022.

Based on the consultations and the survey of EU Member States for this Report, three main expectations can be formulated about the substance of the MTR.

First, the MTR should outline steps to step up the implementation. Specific areas where implementation might be lacking or lagging behind should be highlighted and suggestions for remedies should be identified. But, more importantly, given the limited implementation time left (18 months before the end-of-term review), the MTR should identify a restricted number of priorities and set a clear timeline for achieving them. Based on the project regional consultations and Member States survey, the following top priorities emerge: disinformation; countering democratic backsliding and the closing of civic space; and safeguarding democracy and human rights in the digital sphere (see Figure 7). The EU is seen globally as one of the driving forces of digital transformation, including countering digital surveillance, repression, disinformation and digital challenges to electoral processes. The EU is also considered best positioned to promote and support initiatives in the area of digital alphabetization, media literacy and digital security. These areas should therefore benefit from special attention. Prioritizing should not mean that

other topics are abandoned, but that special focus, attention and resources are placed on those particular areas, in recognition of the urgency of those thematic needs, and also to demonstrate the impact of EU efforts. Additional work to mainstream youth should also be deployed, since this thematic topic has been identified as lagging behind (see also the dedicated section on youth in 1.2: Thematic focus).

Figure 7. **To which thematic areas should the EU pay more attention during the second phase of the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 and beyond?**

- 🔵 Democracy and human rights in the online/digital sphere
- 🔵 Upholding the rights of minorities, LGBTQIA+ individuals and society's most vulnerable
- 🟡 Closing civic space and countering democratic decline/backsliding
- 🟢 Countering disinformation
- 🟣 Upholding the integrity of electoral processes
- 🟣 Other

Source: International IDEA, Survey to EU Member States, 2022.

Second, the Council Conclusions adopting the MTR should be political in their messaging. This would be a way to address the democracy narrative gap identified in this Report and the fact that the EU Action Plan does not cover the latest geopolitical events, in particular the war in Ukraine. When adopting the document, the Foreign Affairs Council should engage in a high-level discussion about the EU's external democracy policy. The Council Conclusions should also provide guidance on the preparation of the next Action Plan, reflecting the urgency of joining forces to develop new democracy action in a world where democracy is under attack, and link the process to the MTR of the EU financial instruments. They can also call for the convening of a European Summit for Democracy. This opportunity should be seized to mainstream democracy support further into the programming documents of the financial instruments. The EEAS and European Commission's horizontal democracy teams, in particular, should be structurally involved in the MTR of the GE-NDICI regional and country Multi-annual Indicative Programmes.

Third, the MTR should outline the process for the preparations of the next EU Action Plan. Setting up democracy cohorts to bring together all interested parties, and especially civil society, EU Member States and the European Parliament, could be an innovative and inclusive way to prepare the ground for the adoption of the next human rights and democracy guiding document. Such groups would make proposals for joint action in the face of global democratic regression. It could ensure the buy-in of and a smooth coordination among interested democracy stakeholders by preparing a zero draft of the document.

The Council Conclusions adopting the MTR should be political in their messaging.

The MTR should outline the process for the preparations of the next EU Action Plan.

3.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT EU ACTION PLAN

The drafting of the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy will most likely start in 2024, just a few months after the MTR of the third iteration. Given the magnitude of the challenges to democracy that lie ahead, which this Report has contributed to identifying, the next EU human rights and democracy policy document should be a politically ambitious

The next EU human rights and democracy policy document should be a politically ambitious document setting out an updated narrative on democracy and on EU action in the changing global context.

document setting out an updated narrative on democracy and on EU action in the changing global context. In this respect, when adopting its fourth Action Plan, the EU might even consider updating its 2012 Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy. This would be a signal that the times are not just business as usual. It could also be a way to distinguish the strategic vision and objectives from the more day-to-day operational aspects.

Regardless of the policy formats retained, some initial recommendations can already be drawn with regard to the structure, timeframe and content of the next Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. In 2020, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy proposed to move the implementation of the issues pertaining to the Action Plan to qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU. The HR/VP could again formally invite the Council of the EU to make such a proposition the European Council in line with article 22(1) of the Treaty on European Union.

In terms of philosophy and structure, the next Action Plan could approach democracy differently. The third Action Plan has a dedicated democracy chapter and democracy aspects outlined in other parts of the document. The logic underpinning the fourth Action Plan should be a reverse pyramid, starting at the top with democratic systems and going down to the level of individual rights, since such rights can only be enforceable in a functioning systemic environment. In that vein, a preamble should start by detailing what democracy entails and which are its prerequisites. The preamble should also make a strong reference to the internal/external democracy policy nexus and emphasize how synergies will be built between the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the European Democracy Action Plan. Finally, the rule of law, as the evident bridge between democracy and human rights, should be more explicit and should be added to the title of the new Action Plan.

The timeframe of the new Action Plan should be reviewed to consider synchronizing it with the programming cycle of the EU financial instruments. Such an alignment would ensure that democracy is better reflected as a key priority, including

in geographical instruments, and that democracy-related thematic priorities are not overlooked. As previously mentioned, the preparations for the next Action Plan will most likely overlap with the MTR of the EU's external funding instruments, foreseen to be in 2024. It is unlikely that extra funding will be available to support new priorities outlined in the next Action Plan. But the new philosophy of the next Action Plan (i.e. defining systemic democracy priorities in which individual rights are embedded) could already be reflected when readjusting funding instruments and designing new programmes. Practically, the new Action Plan could run until the end of the current 2021–2027 Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF)—that is, for the three-year period 2025–2027. The following Action Plan could then be fully synchronized with the MFF—developed for seven-year timeframes with synchronized MTRs, or have a shorter time span. Two Action Plans would then be adopted in the course of the MFF—that is, at 4+3 years. Such an adjusted timeframe would also facilitate co-creation, by ensuring the closer involvement of the EEAS human rights and democracy divisions in the programming exercise, steering the delivery on the political ambitions of the new Action Plan.

In terms of content, new issues might arise in the next two years that cannot be identified at this point. Maintaining the flexibility to incorporate new priorities as they arise is, in fact, always needed. The next Action Plan should therefore have regular waypoints to ensure that topical and substantive issues can be taken on board. It is, however, already clear that new topics for the democracy field will remain on the agenda for the years to come (e.g. disinformation, countering democratic backsliding, closing the civic space, and safeguarding democracy and human rights in the digital sphere). As it currently stands, the EU Action Plan seems to cover all the major democracy items, and consultations did not identify any crucial missing elements. But certain thematic areas should be strengthened (gender, youth and civil society, as well as media support, support to political parties, parliamentary strengthening and anti-corruption). The EU should also pay more attention to inequality as a major negative trend affecting democracies all around the globe.

The next EU Action Plan should therefore have regular waypoints to ensure that topical and substantive issues can be taken on board.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On 24 February 2022, the European democracy landscape was hit by a conflict that would have major geopolitical consequences worldwide. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine came as a wake-up call for the EU, reminding it that its values-based model was not only questioned but also under threat. The EU was swift in providing support to Ukraine and taking a clear stance in the conflict. The EU's wider discourse on democracy also shifted to embed values at the heart of its strategic interests more pronouncedly. The dust needs to settle before it is possible to conclude definitively whether the war in Ukraine is a gamechanger for the EU's democracy agenda. But one thing is already clear: the EU stands at a crossroad.

Russia's war against Ukraine could be considered the last link in a bigger chain of events that have affected and undermined democracy over the past few decades.

Russia's war against Ukraine could be considered the last link in a bigger chain of events that have affected and undermined democracy over the past few decades. The Covid-19 pandemic led to the restriction of fundamental freedoms in most, if not all, countries across the globe (International IDEA 2021a, 2021b). Both the rise in populism and democratic erosion continue: the number of backsliding countries (seven) remains at its peak, and the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism is more than double the number moving towards democracy. As of the end of 2021, nearly one half of the 173 countries assessed by International IDEA are experiencing declines in at least one subattribute of democracy (International IDEA 2022a). On top of these phenomena now come new issues—such as increased polarization, disinformation, digitalization and climate change—that also question the relevance and functioning of democracy.

Perhaps paradoxically, these undemocratic or questioning trends came at a time when the EU's ambition for democracy worldwide substantially expanded. Throughout the last decade, the EU has adopted a series of policy frameworks and tools to promote democracy externally in a more consistent and proactive fashion. This is undoubtedly good news for democracy. The EU remains a highly appreciated democracy actor across the globe and has at its disposal a substantial external democracy acquis, on which it can build. There is, of course, always room to improve the technical democracy toolbox, and this Report makes recommendations in this respect.

But given the threats that democracy is facing globally, addressing the challenges that lie ahead is first and foremost about political will. Recent geopolitical events have taught the EU that it must build up its strategic autonomy, so as not to rely on unpredictable and unreliable autocratic forces. But achieving political and economic independence is first and foremost a means to pursue a vision and promote values. The world unfolding in front of our eyes will increasingly be exposed to different, competing governance models. The EU must now decide to what extent it will defend and promote a democratic system of governance abroad. Human rights are and should remain fundamental EU values, but they are only one of the attributes of the more comprehensive system of governance that democracy offers. Democracy, as an all-encompassing and values-based political system, is the model of governance that Europe should embody in the new world order.

To promote such a model, the EU should adapt to the new geopolitical reality and build a new narrative on democracy that squarely promotes it as a universal aspiration, but that is humbler, more tailor-made to local realities in partner countries and more fact-oriented. Democratic regimes are no longer desired only for the principle of equal participation in public decision making, but also for their ability to deliver. The EU should thus demonstrate that democracies can act and achieve results. Such a narrative would show that the EU is ready to engage in a reciprocal dialogue with external partners. It has as much to learn as it has to share. But this does not mean that the EU should be timid about its values. On the contrary, it should be more assertive in owning its democracy agenda, and it should not shy away from

Throughout the last decade, the EU has adopted a series of policy frameworks and tools to promote democracy externally in a more consistent and proactive fashion.

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using political conditionality when the democracy principles it stands for are being assaulted.

All actors and all external policies should not only be democracy-aware but also become active democracy promoters.

Pursuing this new narrative successfully means implementing it coherently. This could start with the EU bridging the gap between its internal shortcomings and its external ambitions. In the external field specifically, and notwithstanding the tremendous work achieved by EU external democracy stakeholders, time has now come for democracy as a policy priority to reach the entire constituency of decision makers and practitioners in charge of the EU's external action. In this respect, the EU should use democracy to politically guide all its external policies. All actors and all external policies should not only be democracy-aware but also become active democracy promoters. The Mid-Term Review of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the design of its successor could be the first steps to reaching that goal.

To capture the fast-changing developments that have occurred in recent years, the EU should adopt an Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations. The scope for democracy action has in fact broadened to cover not only political processes (typically elections) but also new areas such as socio-economic justice, climate change or digitalization. The EU should not attempt to come up with a single rigid definition of democracy, since democracy as a system can take many different forms and shapes. But it could agree on prerequisites for democracy (e.g. representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration, participatory engagement) and explain how EU support to these democracy pieces can come together in an optimal way while allowing for diversity in solutions. The EU could also introduce a comprehensive democracy assessment framework as an internal tool to capture and respond to the varying degrees of democracy progress or regress in partner countries.

The EU could consider engaging democracy stakeholders with the design and implementation of its external democracy policy in a more structured and inclusive manner.

Finally, to fine-tune further its democracy vision and approach and to demonstrate the need for collective action, the EU could consider engaging democracy stakeholders with the design and implementation of its external democracy policy in a more structured and inclusive manner. Given the key role CSOs play as democracy actors, the voice of civil society could be better considered. This could take place in Brussels (e.g. in dialogue with

the Council of the EU or the European Parliament) or at the local level (e.g. via the Human Rights Dialogues). Innovative ways to fund, support and work with civil society could also be further explored, taking into account the recent experiences gathered in the Eastern Partnership countries. To be more inclusive, the preparations for the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy could establish democracy cohorts similar to the system put in place by the Summit for Democracy. Such cohorts should bring together all interested parties, and especially civil society, EU Member States and the European Parliament. Such an approach would not only feed into the content of the document but also create a breeding ground for its implementation. In addition, it could contribute to the formulation of the new EU narrative on democracy and build bridges among stakeholders, ensuring in this way that the voices of all global democracy actors are properly taken into account.

Such an approach would not only feed into the content of the next EU Action Plan but also create a breeding ground for its implementation.

4.1. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU'S EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY ACTION IN A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

Based on the consultations and input from a diverse group of EU and non-EU stakeholders, the following recommendations are made to help adjust the EU's external democracy action to the new geopolitical reality. They constitute a list of ideas to inspire EU democracy policymakers.

1. The EU should build a new narrative on democracy.

Momentum exists to promote the EU's democracy agenda more actively. Democracy must be presented and defended as a universal aspiration, and as the best political system to serve the people and deliver on political and socio-economic expectations in a sustainable and inclusive way.

The EU should be clear about its support for **democracy as a universal aspiration** and counter the autocratic fallacy of democracy being a Western model. To demonstrate this, it should collaborate with other democracies, as well as democratic actors in non-democracies, from all parts of the world.	The EU should **be humble and transparent**, keeping in mind that it can quickly be accused of double standards. The EU's credibility would benefit from openly acknowledging when its own strategic interests conflict with its democracy agenda and defining a framework for how to deal with such situations.
The EU should **lead by example**, address its internal challenges and be more vocal about its own internal democracy and rule of law mechanisms when engaging with external partners.	The EU should **defuse 'us versus them' perceptions** (democracies vs. the rest), which ultimately risks antagonizing weaker democracies and hybrid regimes.
The EU should **listen to external partners** and see democracy promotion as a two-way street, fine-tuning its new narrative in a mutual dialogue.	The EU should actively **demonstrate and communicate that democracy is the best political system to deliver** for its citizens.

2. The EU should use democracy as a guide in all its external policies.

There is room to improve the coherence of the EU's external democracy policy and its political backing. In this new geopolitical reality, all EU policies and actors should not just be democracy-aware but actively promote democracy.

The EU should **be more political when pursuing its external democracy agenda** and make better use of available tools to this end.

The EU should **use conditionality more systematically and coherently** when pursuing its democracy agenda (see 4.2: Specific recommendations for strengthening the EU democracy toolbox).

The EU could **reflect this new political approach in its next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy**, which would be an integral part of all external policies.

The EU should **introduce a democracy-based approach to development cooperation**, similar to the existing human-rights-based approach, as a working methodology, putting democracy at the centre of EU external action and programmes. The EU's trade policy and negotiations should also become more democracy sensitive.

The EU should **develop a policy framework explaining how it balances its democracy goals with its other interests**. This framework should describe how to intensify collaboration with other democracies in bilateral and multilateral settings, and how it aims to bring forward weak democracies and hybrid regimes towards democratic progress.

The EU should **update its democracy toolbox** (see 4.2: Specific recommendations for strengthening the EU democracy toolbox).

3. The EU should adopt an EU Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations.

The EU has so far never explicitly determined in detail what it means by supporting democracy abroad, although it would help. Determining more clearly what its external democracy action aims for and how its various democracy efforts come together, without being prescriptive, would help with moving the EU's democracy agenda forward.

The EU could **detail in its next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy what an Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations should entail**, and use this new approach as a foundation, from which to shape its human rights and democracy action.

The EU could **introduce a comprehensive democracy assessment framework** as an internal tool and use it to capture the varying degrees of democracy progress or regress in partner countries. This could help the EU to fully grasp the democracy trends in partner countries and design calibrated responses.

The EU could **adopt EU Guidelines on Democracy** as a practical tool to advance the EU's external democracy agenda and to provide instructions on the daily operationalization of its democracy policy documents.

4. The EU should ensure that the design and implementation of its external democracy policy are more inclusive and more gender and youth responsive.

The EU would benefit from involving all democracy stakeholders intimately and systematically in the design and implementation of its external democracy policy, and enlisting them in building its democracy narrative. Notably, this includes involving the voice of civil society more structurally across the board. One way to ensure this could be to establish democracy cohorts to engage in the preparation for the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.

The EU should **guarantee the structural inclusion of civil society voices in EU democracy policymaking and implementation**, by involving them in its relevant political and policy dialogues on democracy in a more systematic manner, and by revising its civil society support modalities to strengthen the democratization functions of civil society organizations.

The EU could **set up thematic democracy cohorts to prepare for the next EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy**. These cohorts would bring together all interested democracy parties, and especially civil society, EU Member States and the European Parliament in a way that would guarantee broad ownership.

4.2. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE EU DEMOCRACY TOOLBOX

To the EU

- Use more systematically and coherently positive conditionality in a 'more for more' approach in relation to democracy performance. If the objectives are not achieved, the extra funding could be reallocated to civil society. In case of major democratic setbacks, the EU should not shy away from using negative conditionality to suspend its funding or its trade agreements.

- Systematize further democracy training of EU staff at headquarters and in EU Delegations, including in geographical services. Democracy courses should also be included in the curriculum for the European Diplomatic Academy.

- Ensure the proper linkages between the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the democracy components of the EU Gender Action Plan III and of the Youth Action Plan in EU External Action.

To the EEAS and European Commission

- Increase the staff of the Democracy and Electoral Observation Division working on democracy issues beyond the specific topic of elections reflecting in particular on the intertwinement of democracy and the rule of law.

- Increase the staff and resources available to the office of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights to provide more thematic expertise on democracy, including digital democracy. To enhance communication and awareness of the role and the promotion of democracy, it would be useful to add the words 'democracy and governance' to the official title of the EU Special Representative.

- Address the divide between the political and operational sections of the EU Delegations by establishing a standing working group convening all staff dealing with democracy issues.

To the EEAS and European Commission (cont.)

- Develop further the early warning mechanisms to assess not only conflict-related risks but democracy-related threats. This could be done via the informal networks of local democracy actors and by using open data, such as the Democracy Tracker developed by International IDEA in 2022 (International IDEA n.d.). Consider proactively using the EU's 'rapid response' pillar of the Global Europe—Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (GE-NDICI).

- Make sure democratic principles are guiding EU support provided through the European Peace Facility to ensure that the training and capacity building delivered to partner countries' security forces is fully in line with EU values.

- Use the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+) as an entry point to push for democratic reforms in partner countries. EU trade agreements with partner countries could include a dedicated democracy clause based on a comprehensive country situation assessment.

- Systematically include democracy as a stand-alone point on the agenda of the EU Human Rights Dialogues with partner countries. Push for better involvement of local CSOs in these dialogues. Make sure all types of stakeholders, including CSOs working on democracy, are part of the preparatory consultations for the dialogues.

- Systematically consult EU Member States' embassies when setting EU priorities for democracy support locally, including through Team Europe Democracy (TED) on the ground. Regularly involve embassies of non-EU democracies in TED, through a TED+ approach.

- Strengthen the relations between EU Delegations and the European Parliament. The visits of Members of the European Parliament to partner countries could be multiplied and used more strategically to pass strong political messages on democracy.

- Use the mechanisms to protect human rights defenders in a more proactive way to prevent rather than respond to crisis situations.

To the EEAS and European Commission (cont.)

- Broaden the engagement of civil society in the design of EU democracy support priorities, by going beyond the traditional civil society partners and reaching out to religious groups, trade unions, rural constituencies, and other important societal actors that lack access to the international community.

- Systematize the innovative ways of supporting civil society tested by the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations in the Eastern Partnership

countries across all EU funding instruments, more specifically provision of core support, new funding strands to support grassroots CSOs, and working increasingly in local languages, including within sub-granting procedures.

- Develop a set of criteria to identify government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) in cooperation with civil society and incorporate such a set of criteria into the EU funding guidelines.

To EU Member States

- Participate in the TED initiative regardless of respective national expertise on democracy support.

- Use TED as an additional platform to exchange data and perspectives on democracy and challenges posed by the new geopolitical reality.

- Strengthen information sharing and synergies between EU Member States' embassies and the EU Delegations on the democracy agenda. Introduce a biannual (or more frequent) meeting dedicated to the implementation of the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.

To the European Parliament

- Use the newly established strategic dialogue to push for democracy issues.

- Expand the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) mandate, especially its geographical scope of providing support to partner countries' parliaments, and reinforce its resources.

- Combine and better coordinate the European Parliament democracy work with the work of national parliaments in the EU Member States.

- Give more prominence to civil society, allowing democracy CSOs to provide input not only during regular hearings but also more frequently during the plenary debates.

To the Swedish EU Council Presidency 2023

- Use the political weight of the EU Council Presidency to build consensus between EU institutions on the recommendations outlined in this Report.

- Encourage high-level discussions on the EU's external democracy policy.

- Propose to introduce a structured dialogue with civil society on the issues pertinent to democracy at the level of the EU Council Working Parties or the Political and Security Committee.

- Push for replicating and systematizing successful Swedish civil society support modalities within EU democracy support.

Recommendations on the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy Mid-Term Review and on the next Action Plan

• Make sure the Council Conclusions adopting the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy Mid-Term Review are political in their messaging, to reflect the political urgency of today's state of democracy. When adopting the document, the Foreign Affairs Council would do well to engage in a high-level discussion about the EU's external democracy policy. A European Democracy Summit could be considered.

• Identify a restricted number of top democracy priorities and set a clear timeline to achieve them within the limited implementation time left after the Mid-Term Review of the Action Plan is concluded.

• Mainstream democracy support further into the programming of the financial instruments during the preparations for the next Action Plan.

• Set up a series of EU-wide democracy cohorts, copying the model of the Summit for Democracy, to bring together all interested parties and especially civil society, EU Member States and the European Parliament into the preparations for the next EU Action Plan under an inclusive approach that reflects the urgency and need for collective action. The adopted work plans of Summit for Democracy cohorts can be used as an input to the debate on the new Action Plan.

• Synchronize the timeframe of the next Action Plan with the Multi-annual Financial Framework, to ensure that democracy priorities are properly reflected in EU funding instruments.

• Propose to move the implementation of the issues pertaining to the next Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy to qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU, in line with article 22(1) of the Treaty on European Union.

Annex A
REGIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

During the months of September and October 2022, six regional dialogues were organized: 1) Sub-Saharan Africa (p. 74), 2) Asia and the Pacific (p. 76), 3) Eastern Europe (p. 78), 4) Middle East and North Africa (p.80), 5) Latin America and the Caribbean (p. 82), 6) Western Balkans (p. 84). Overall, 104 representatives of local CSOs from 52 countries participated in the dialogues (of which 47 were female and 57 male).

Figure 8. **Regions covered by the consultations**

- Latin America and the Caribbean
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Middle East and North Africa
- Eastern Europe
- Western Balkans
- Asia and the Pacific
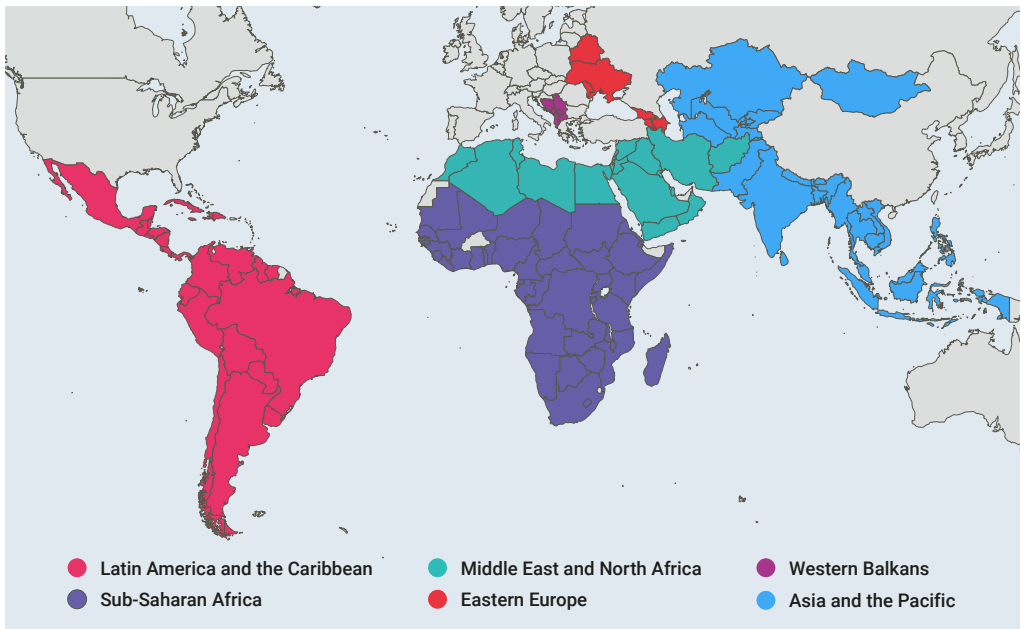
Sub-Saharan Africa

Over the last five years, the continent has witnessed a decline in the number of democratic systems, with 45 per cent of the population now living in hybrid regimes (International IDEA 2022a). The quality of democracy is also impacted by increasing insecurity, attempts at reversing the presidential term limits, contested electoral outcomes and an increased role for the military in regime transitions. Despite the negative trends and the low democratic performance satisfaction, the vast majority of the African population has an aspiration for democracy (Mattes 2019).

The EU is still perceived to be a pro-democracy ally.

In the regional dialogue for this project, democracy was praised as a model of governance with functioning institutions and processes that deliver in terms of security and social justice. While competing undemocratic models are being promoted in Africa, the EU is still perceived to be a pro-democracy ally that should stick to its values when engaging with partner governments. However, this requires unifying the democracy and economic development agendas, showing that investing in key infrastructures and services can be done without compromising democratic values, contrary to what supporters of strong authoritarian leadership argue. The EU should also put the digital and green topics higher up its democracy cooperation agenda with Africa. Climate change is still not seen as a grassroots issue, even though it creates or worsens conflicts, primarily affects the most vulnerable segments of the population and can weaken democratic institutions. Participatory mechanisms that involve citizens and local authorities could be instruments to address climate-related issues peacefully and sustainably. Digital tools could also be used to enhance citizens' participation in decision making. Achieving gender equality is essential for a truly democratic society, and a broader mobilization on this topic is key to bring change in society (e.g. to tackle gender-based violence). This also requires institutions, processes and laws to ensure that gender equality is designed in a strategic, trans-partisan, inclusive way. Africa registered positive examples of legislative provisions to promote women's participation and representation in politics but more could be done to implement these rights. The large segment of African country populations that are young is seen as a key driver for democracy in the continent. However, if unemployment and social inequalities are not properly addressed, this could easily lead to growing disenchantment, apathy or even

However, this requires unifying the democracy and economic development agendas.

resentment against young people's democratic aspirations and make youth more easily exploited by violent groups.

Considerations for the way ahead

- The EU should keep investing in state capacity building in Africa, supporting the development of well-functioning democratic institutions that have the tools and capacities to effectively implement policies and deliver on citizens' basic needs.

- To stress the universality of democracy aspirations, the EU should build on already existing African democracy tools (e.g. the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance) and use these regional commitments when engaging with African parties, even in terms of conditionality.

- The EU should support gender equality strategies that promote women's participation in politics. This could be done through trans-partisan councils of women promoting quotas, legal provisions for representativity in election lists or parties, and norms to target the violence against women politicians.

- African youth should be empowered to become a democratic actor by being an active observer of government policy implementation through youth checks.

- On climate governance, the EU should work mainly on cross-border programmes that involve local and marginalized communities, promote transnational cooperation and local participative democracy.

- To seize the digital revolution's potential for democracy, the EU should ensure that national governments act upon their commitments to guarantee access to the Internet and use the EU's own digital regulatory experience to support democratic digital rules in Africa. The EU should also support digital solutions to associate citizens in the co-construction of public institutions and services (e.g. participatory decision making or budgeting).

Asia and the Pacific

Asia and the Pacific is a highly diverse region. Nearly half the population live in authoritarian regimes that are solidifying. Of the half that live in a democracy, almost 85 per cent experience weakening or backsliding trends, including in high- and mid-performing democratic states. Common elements of this erosion are the rise of ethno-nationalism, military intervention in political processes, and growing polarization (International IDEA 2022a).

The diversity of EU policies—including trade and development—facilitates its engagement with authorities on democracy issues.

In the regional dialogue for this project, the EU as a democracy actor was overall perceived positively. The diversity of its policies—including trade and development—facilitates its engagement with authorities on democracy issues. In this regional context, a 'do no harm' approach is all the more relevant to ensure that EU sectoral policies do not contradict its democracy objectives and engagement with civil society democracy actors. The EU is perceived to be one of few actors effectively supporting democratic pluralism, alongside the traditional topics of electoral integrity, fighting against corruption, and gender. However, the EU could risk losing ground given the increasing competition of other geopolitical actors, such as China and Russia. Participants in the regional dialogue also felt that civil society on occasions missed opportunities to cooperate and create coalitions with other democracy actors; new alliances of civil society and political parties could be supported, including through funding, to work together throughout the whole electoral cycle. Shrinking space for civil society is endemic across the region, boosted by legislative changes adopted by many governments (for example, bans on foreign funding, stricter tax auditing). The restrictions on freedom of expression and media integrity are key components of democratic erosion in the region (International IDEA 2022a). Digitalization is a key topic for which the EU is often seen as a legislative role model and its multilateral approach can be beneficial for the Asia and the Pacific region. But the EU should pay particular attention to the fact that autocratic governments can use the digital agenda as an excuse to surveil and repress government opponents and civil society.

Considerations for the way ahead

- The Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+) played a very important role in the promotion of democracy, but the EU can be much more influential in supporting democracy with the leverage through trade and economic investments agenda. The current clauses on human rights standards in trade agreements can be strengthened and broadened so that they better facilitate democratic accountability. The EU should also consider space to include a compulsory democracy clause in every trade agreement, based on comprehensive country assessment.

- The EU needs to communicate, including on its views on democracy, more proactively and in local languages; the region has become a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns and the EU must increase its outreach to both the public and decision makers to refute disinformation.

- To this end, the EU should, among other steps, also strengthen collaboration with prominent universities in the Asia-Pacific region.

- The EU should have direct dialogue with local communities and support them through localized strategies with long-term perspectives. These strategies should aim at building resilient local democracy actors and local governments working on the ground to build democracy that is rooted in local issues.

- The EU should expand its democracy support in Central Asia and provide more direct financial support to local democracy actors, especially in countries with repressive regimes.

- The EU should use its strength as a global digital regulator and use this to support digital legislation that is pro-democracy. It should help to prevent national legislation being used for digital surveillance and repression, and ensure that legislation is adopted in line with democratic principles and procedures.

Eastern Europe

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) covers six countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The Covid-19 pandemic put a strain on fledgling democracies in the EaP region, aggravating pre-existing concerns, such as the weak rule of law, insufficient accountability of executive branches vis-à-vis legislatures and fragile media freedoms (see International IDEA 2022b). In Belarus, the authoritarian regime violently suppressed the protests after the falsified presidential elections in summer 2020 and decimated almost all pro-democracy actors in the country. The 40-day war over Nagorno Karabakh in September 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan brought further challenges for democratic governance in Armenia and worsened the already bleak situation of civil society in Azerbaijan. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is a key watershed moment for the whole region and its relations with the EU. Acknowledging the country's resilience and assessing positively the level of preparedness for starting the EU accession process, including the quality of democracy and the functioning of democratic institutions, the EU fast-tracked the candidate status for Ukraine in June 2022. It did so for Moldova as well and recognized the European perspective of Georgia.

The EU is perceived to be a major driver of democratic transformation in the region.

The regional dialogue for this project showed that the EU is perceived to be a major driver of democratic transformation in the region and that the EU accession process is an opportunity to incentivize further democratic reforms. However, there is room for improvement and alignment of its sectoral policies with its democracy agenda. A reinforced policy towards the region, based on clear benchmarks and support for democratic reforms aimed at bringing the countries closer to the EU are key to developing democratic resilience and popular support for reforms in Eastern Europe. Implementation of democratic reforms must be a multi-stakeholder process, involving both governments and civil society and other democracy actors. The EU can push for change but should let the domestic actors own the process and bring about results. Flexible forms of EU civil society support have been piloted in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Still, it is necessary to broaden the scope of EU assistance to civil society to provide direct support to non-traditional actors and grassroots organizations. The green agenda is still largely underdeveloped or poorly implemented in the region. The European Green Deal is

seen as a potential model to follow. However, EU assistance in knowledge transfer and capacity sharing is needed to strengthen the capacities of democratic institutions in this field and ensure their legitimacy. The digital agenda is considered a vehicle for democratic change, but it should prioritize addressing the issues of disinformation and security that are direct threats to democracy. Moving ahead, the EU's support to connect digitalization with democracy in Eastern Europe should be a two-way street. As a global rule-setter, the EU has a lot to share but has also a lot to gain from the digital expertise and capacities developed in the region to defend democracy, notably in the context of the war in Ukraine.

As a global rule-setter, the EU has a lot to share but has also a lot to gain from the digital expertise and capacities developed in the region to defend democracy.

Considerations for the way ahead

- The EU should review the Eastern Partnership policy and architecture incorporating clear and tangible indicators on democracy performance into the EaP implementation roadmap for post-2020 priorities, namely in the investment pillar of the multilateral policy.

- The EU could adopt a staged accession process for Moldova and Ukraine, allowing them to move from one stage to the next when sufficient democratic progress is achieved but also backwards in the process if the country's democracy regresses. The quality of democracy should come as the first criterion and should not be overlooked for geopolitical considerations.

- The EU should create a reasonable timeline and milestones for the accession of candidate countries so that enlargement fatigue of their population does not undermine the process of democratic reforms implemented within the EU accession process.

- The EU should socialize the government representatives of the candidate countries to the EU democratic meeting culture; their representatives should be involved in EU high-level meetings, as well as in selected meetings of EU Council Working Parties and EU agencies where it does not pose a security risk and is an added value. Such experience would contribute to building impartial administration as one of the attributes of democracy.

Considerations for the way ahead (cont.)

- The deepening autocratization of Belarus and Azerbaijan should be the top concern for the EU when devising policies towards these two countries. The presence of an autocratic state in its immediate Neighbourhood has demonstrated the security impact on the EU, as Belarus has become a proxy aggressor and poses a major security risk to the EU. Deepening autocratization in Azerbaijan should be reflected in the EU's negotiations and text of the new Partnership Agreement in the form of stronger commitments to democratic reforms. The EU should adopt a clearer approach for its dealing with the country premised on these commitments.

- Spending on youth is low relative to their demographic representation in the EaP countries. The EU should increase its support to youth as drivers of democratic change and convince the partner governments to invest more, considering a 50/50 approach or at least incentivize an increase in national-level investments in youth policies and youth.

Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa region is one of the most authoritarian in the world, counting only three democracies—of which two (Iraq and Lebanon) are fragile and declining. Governments are perceived to be unresponsive to the needs of large segments of their population, and they do not refrain from curbing civil liberties to hold their grip on power and resources. After a decade of turmoil, kicked off by the Arab Uprisings, protests against this reality continue and are accompanied by a growing demand for democracy from the grassroots level, in terms of both good governance and social justice (International IDEA 2022a).

The EU was not perceived as being a key political player which has an impact on its leverage when pursuing its democracy agenda.

In the regional dialogue for this project, the EU was not perceived as being a key political player like other big actors (such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, USA), which has an impact on its leverage when pursuing its democracy agenda. The EU was seen as sometimes struggling to define a unified and consistent agenda to address some of the ongoing conflicts in several countries in the region. The war in Ukraine was mostly apprehended through the lens of its economic impact on the

countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Civil society representatives from the region acknowledge the efforts that the EU is making to connect with them, especially via structured dialogues. However, the heavy decision-making process, and the complex intertwining of interests among EU policies and actors, makes it difficult for them to assess the real impact of their democracy engagement. A more coherent and consistent approach from the EU and its Member States, and a rethinking of the toolbox used for democracy support in the region, could help boost domestic efforts for democratization. This entails having more targeted and better-communicated country priorities and recognizing that some countries (especially in the Gulf) might possibly follow a different pace and adopt different modalities to establish their own democratic system. Addressing the increasing socio-economic inequalities and delivering social services is also essential for local populations to consider democracy as a credible political system. The technical democracy assistance provided by the EU is appreciated but should be accompanied with more civic education support. To this end, the EU could complement its work on civic education with a focus on increasing capacities of ministries of education and ministries of youth. EU democracy support should in fact not only focus on institution building but should also shape democratic behaviours at the grassroots level. In this respect, youth is seen as a key asset to build new spaces for democratic change, provided that relevant opportunities are offered for young people to become actors and leaders of this change.

The technical democracy assistance provided by the EU is appreciated but should be accompanied with more civic education support.

Considerations for the way ahead

- Despite Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU should maintain its efforts in peace and democracy building, conflict resolution or recovery in countries such as Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen.

- The EU could better link its democracy agenda to its efforts to reduce inequalities and improve the socio-economic conditions of the most vulnerable segments of the population.

- The EU democracy approach to the region, which is one of the toughest in which to achieve democratic progress, could be more political, applying conditionality more often and devising long-term strategies to support democracy actors.

Considerations for the way ahead (cont.)

- The EU should focus on democratic civic education, supporting, for example, CSOs that work on citizens' empowerment through the knowledge of their rights and obligations.

- The EU should increase its support to youth as drivers of democratic change in the region and facilitate the emergence, training and empowerment of new democratic elites.

- The EU should replicate in the Union for the Mediterranean framework the modalities of its engagement with civil society in the Eastern Partnership. A systemic approach to the cooperation of public institutions, civil society and media would strengthen the implementation of the Union for the Mediterranean agenda.

Latin America and the Caribbean

The state of democracy in the region is clouded by the global geopolitical context affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, a hard-hitting recession and the commercial tensions between the USA and China. After the 2006–2007 democratic peak that led to an expansion of the economy and social rights, these processes have been abruptly stopped and a third of democracies in the region are now experiencing democratic decline (International IDEA 2022a).

The EU is perceived as a mediator and an honest broker for democracy.

The regional dialogue for this project stressed that the region suffers from an exacerbation of polarization in all segments of the public sphere. This spills over in increasing violence and growing anti-rights and anti-system populist movements. Overall, the trust in democratic institutions at large (governments, parliaments, justice, media) was assessed as low. In many countries, the system of checks and balances is floundering or openly questioned. Many political parties have lost their legitimacy and are often seen as perpetrating a cartel mentality or serving the private interests of a few elites. The democratic space and electoral phase are dominated by a 'winner takes all' mentality regardless of electoral system in place, which further increases the risk of political polarization. The space for civil society to operate in is shrinking, while the freedom of the press and the work of human rights and environmental activists and

defenders are endangered. Despite this gloomy picture, there are some positive attempts at reinvigorating democracy and creating new, shared, democratic rules (e.g. Chile, Colombia). Overall, the EU is not seen as a mere donor but rather as a leading investor and trade partner. The EU in fact engages with Latin America and the Caribbean as a political actor but it could better use its clout as a role model in terms of rules setting, especially in the digital and environmental fields. In some cases, the EU is also perceived as a mediator and an honest broker that can support democratic success stories, as in the case of Colombia. To counteract the growing foreign interference of propaganda and disinformation from other global actors, the EU should position itself as an equal partner and ally in a rules-based and inclusive global order. Given the current geopolitical reorientations, democracy is seen as a good foundation for closer relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean, and should be the basis for the discussions during the upcoming summit with the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (EU-CELAC) in 2023. To strengthen this image further, the EU could step up its visibility in the region, more openly showcasing its democracy success stories in a dialogue of equals.

Given the current geopolitical reorientations, democracy is seen as a good foundation for closer relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Considerations for the way ahead

- The EU should continue to support the integrity of electoral processes. An area that particularly needs to be addressed is the high levels of electoral violence, both online and offline, that have risen further due to disinformation and polarization.

- The EU should promote inclusive participation mechanisms (including Indigenous populations) at the national and local level to increase trust in democracy across all sectors of society.

- The EU should support political parties as actors and organizations to ensure that they can play their democratic and representative role to the fullest.

- The EU should work on capacity building and training for politicians on the interlinkages between democracy and new ICT and digital topics, including in the legislative area where the EU is considered a global rules setter.

Considerations for the way ahead (cont.)

• The EU should keep its green conditionality in economic relations with Latin American and Caribbean countries and link it with its democracy assistance agenda. Through such linkages, environmental and climate activists who are often endangered would also be better protected.

Western Balkans

Despite three decades of international support and an intensified, structured EU accession process in the last 20 years, democracy is not faring significantly better in the region. Montenegro, Serbia and, as of mid-2022, also Albania and North Macedonia are candidates for EU accession with official negotiations opened. Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted the status of candidate country under the condition of further reforms in October 2022. Kosovo applied for EU membership at the end of 2022. The new milestones of the enlargement process in the region are connected to the changing geopolitical and strategic context, namely Russia's war against Ukraine. The EU has been seeking alignment with the partner countries on stability and security aspects, including sanctions against Russian entities and individuals, and the newly established European Political Community.

The EU seems to be losing popular support, as well as its transformative power, in several countries of the region.

The regional dialogue for this project highlighted that the Western Balkan countries face different levels of democratic challenges. Serbia clearly stands apart as a hybrid regime, with a high concentration of power and weak political and media pluralism. The EU seems to be losing popular support, as well as its transformative power, in several countries of the region, particularly with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and with the disinformation campaigns that followed. In the Western Balkans, the EU approach to democracy is often seen as technical and can be overshadowed by the more influential political engagement of other actors. Overall, the perception of the EU as a democracy actor varies from one country to another; the high level of support in several countries (e.g. Albania, Montenegro), however, should not be taken for granted, as popular support can quickly crumble with media landscapes that remain fragile. Together with other international partners, the EU should devise a systemic approach to democracy in the region, complementing

the focus on important single issues such as justice reform, access to justice, or elections. Certain topics also deserve more attention: the fight against corruption, political polarization and concentration of power, disinformation and foreign influence, organized crime and infiltration of political parties, and the curbing of access to information. The deteriorating environment for civil society was identified as a regional trend. CSOs in several countries also signalled a weakening commitment from the EU to cooperate with them on the EU accession agenda.

Considerations for the way ahead

- The EU should clearly define the timeline for EU accession, together with a merit-based system related to democratic reform. If the milestones of the timeline are too distant, it could be used by different forces to further mainstream Euroscepticism.

- The EU should include the Western Balkan partners in the work of the EU Council at a high level and continue the good practice of organizing high-level summits in the region (as with the 2022 EU–Western Balkans summit in Tirana). Discussions on democratic development should be a regular point on the summit agenda. EU Council Presidency can organize meetings after the official EU Council ministerial meetings to discuss with partners the points of common interest engaging partners more closely with the EU democratic culture.

- The EU should involve Western Balkan partners in additional EU programmes and initiatives. The initiatives and programmes led by line Directorate-Generals should in particular be used more strategically. Further involvement of public officials would contribute to building an impartial administration as one of the attributes of democracy.

- The media landscape varies from fragile to largely government-controlled across the region. The EU should provide greater support to media literacy, media pluralism and freedom as a way to promote democratic development and fight disinformation.

- The EU needs to devise strong strategic communication on quantitative and qualitative progress of democratic reforms and support provided within the EU accession process framework.

Considerations for the way ahead (cont.)

- To support the progress evaluation and strategic communication, the EU would benefit from introducing a comprehensive democracy assessment framework to grasp trends and help design calibrated responses in partner countries.

- Involving civil society in democracy work remains a must; the EU should recommit to substantive dialogue with genuine CSOs in the countries where the engagement declined and provide a feedback loop after consultations so that the CSOs can follow up. Under the new Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, the EU should upscale localized support and support to grassroots CSOs.

Annex B
METHODOLOGY

This Report, developed within the project Sweden EU-Presidency & the Democracy Agenda, is a contribution to the 2023 Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU. To support Sweden in its aim to increase the focus on democracy in the EU foreign policy agenda, the Report conducts an analysis of the EU's external democracy policy and action.

As guiding EU democracy policy documents, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 and the 2019 Council Conclusions on Democracy lie at the core of this assessment. However, as the EU's external democracy policy is mainstreamed into the multifaceted, multi-method and multilevel dimensions that characterize the EU's external action, other external policies (such as the EU's Neighbourhood policy) and initiatives (for example, Team Europe Democracy) were also considered relevant for a comprehensive assessment.

The Report adopts a comprehensive understanding of democracy combining a general assessment of procedural and institutional aspects with a more targeted focus on specific issues, which are also reflected in the five priorities of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024. The Report zooms into the cross-cutting issues of gender, youth, digital and green transitions, and support to civil society.

To assess the EU's external democracy policy and action, the project research investigated its relevance, its coherence and its alignment with other democracy partners. To that end, the views

of relevant stakeholders (e.g. EU decision makers, EU Member States, civil society in EU partner countries) on these aspects were collected. The project assessment also aimed at identifying possible gaps in the EU's external democracy toolbox, in terms of both thematic coverage and available instruments.

The input for the Report was gathered through qualitative research methods and was based on four pillars: (a) a desk study; (b) semi-structured interviews with key informants; (c) surveys; and (d) regional consultation dialogues with civil society representatives.

a. Desk study
    Key documents, including both primary EU sources and secondary sources, were analysed. An indicative list can be found in the references and further reading sections. The desk study informed the project design and allowed the deeper understanding of thematic topics and perspectives on EU democracy policies. As well as the Report, the desk study also informed the assessment questions and the stakeholder mapping.

b. Semi-structured interviews
    A stakeholder mapping identified key informants for the project. These included potential users of the data derived from the Report, democracy practitioners and experts in the EU and Member States, as well as regional organizations and CSOs and networks working in the democracy field. The project team interviewed 41 democracy stakeholders between August and November 2022, relying on a set of semi-structured questions.

c. Surveys
    During the months of July and August 2022, an online survey was addressed to EU Member States capitals through representatives in the EU Council Working Party on Human Rights. The survey comprised 26 questions on the level of ownership of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, its relevance within the current geopolitical context, and the alignment between EU and EU Member States' national policy priorities. Several questions were devoted to the Mid-Term Review of the Action Plan and

expectations regarding the preparation of the next iteration of the document. In total, 18 Member States submitted responses, which is a 67-per-cent response rate. The second survey was implemented in the course of January 2023, targeting the consulted stakeholders to test some of the project's key results.

d. Regional dialogues
   During the months of September and October 2022, six regional dialogues were organized: (1) Asia and the Pacific (1 September, online); (2) Middle East and North Africa (11 September, online); (3) Eastern Europe (29 September, Tbilisi); (4) Latin America and the Caribbean (10 October, online); (5) Western Balkans (20 October, online); and (6) Sub-Saharan Africa (27 October, Addis Ababa). Overall, 104 representatives of local CSOs from 52 countries participated in the dialogues (of which 47 were female and 57 male). Informants were identified through a mapping exercise of CSOs working either on democracy issues or on the identified cross-cutting issues. International IDEA's regional and country offices, EU Delegations, Open Government Partnership and regional civil society networks supported the mapping exercise and the selection of participants. Prior to the dialogues, informants were provided with preparatory materials to maximize their contribution in a structured and targeted manner during the participative and interactive consultations.

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About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

WHAT WE DO

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

WHERE WE WORK

Our headquarters are located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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The EU has traditionally been one of the world's staunchest advocates of democracy but major changes have affected the global democracy landscape in recent years. With the support of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, International IDEA led an analysis of the EU's external democracy policy during 2022 to inform the EU discussion on democracy during Sweden's 2023 Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The report looks at questions related to the relevance and coherence of the EU's external democracy policy in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment and pays special attention to the 2020–2024 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy as a guiding framework. The research consisted of a desk study, online surveys, in-depth interviews with more than 40 key EU democracy policy stakeholders, and regional dialogues with more than 100 civil society representatives from across the globe.