

Support for democracy through EU external policy

New tools for growing challenges

SUMMARY

The crisis of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism across the globe, compounded by the coronavirus pandemic, highlight the importance of taking a more strategic and autonomous approach to supporting democracy worldwide – an objective often balanced against other external policy aims until now.

Since the start of the current parliamentary term, the EU has reviewed its political guidance on democracy and human rights. It has adopted or is about to adopt important measures to strengthen support for democracy (including better monitoring and enforcement of relevant provisions in trade arrangements). The adoption of the new multiannual financial framework (MFF) and of a new development aid instrument bringing together all former external aid instruments provides new opportunities for better implementing EU funding and better exploiting the EU's leverage as a major provider of development aid. Digital challenges and the narrowing space for civil societies are among the priorities to be addressed. The challenge of engaging more difficult partners, such as China and Russia, has inspired calls to broaden the scope of a values-based agenda to other economic relations, such as investments.

These new measures complement an already broad and complex toolbox integrating various external policies. Using the enhanced powers in external affairs provided by the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU has set up extensive political and diplomatic dialogues to enhance partnerships beyond the more asymmetric, specific development assistance and trade leverage going back to the 1990s. While the EU has responded to violations of democratic norms by reducing aid and withdrawing trade preferences, it has consistently sought to build equal partnerships based on constructive and open dialogues, rather than use its economic and commercial traction in a coercive manner.

This is an update of a Briefing from [February 2018](#).



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Background: The crisis of democracy

The rise of authoritarianism and the crisis of democracy across the world over the past decade have made the EU's efforts to promote democracy ever more pertinent. Various democracy indices concur in showing that the number of democracies and the quality of democratic regimes have been steadily decreasing. Issues such as mistrust in institutions, political parties and politicians; dissatisfaction with the way democratic systems work; lack of political participation by citizens, particularly young ones; digitally driven disinformation; electoral manipulation; increasing economic inequality; irregular migration; and insecurity, have all undermined democracy. The coronavirus pandemic has only compounded this crisis, as many authoritarian regimes have used it as a pretext to consolidate their power, undermine accountability mechanisms and institutional checks, restrict the activities of political opponents and limit free media as well as crack down on civil society organisations. A [July report](#) by V-Dem found that while democracies were not completely immune to violations of democratic standards due to the pandemic, these occurred much more frequently in autocratic regimes. A [report by Freedom House](#), published in October 2020, also concludes that the pandemic has made the state of democracy and human rights in the world worse than before, 'exacerbating the 14 years of consecutive decline in freedom'. This negative impact will linger for years to come.

What is democracy?

With very few exceptions, all governments in the world, including one-party states, declare themselves democratic in the sense of being the legitimate expression of the will of their people as manifested through some form of elections.¹ In reality, however, many states do not meet even the minimum [international standards](#) for holding competitive elections. To these electoral aspects, democracy researchers usually add some other dimensions (most often a liberal component referring to respect of fundamental rights and the rule of law, or an egalitarian, participative and deliberative component²) to define a rich and comprehensive concept of democracy for which only a limited number of states in the world fully qualify. The [need](#) for such a richer concept linking together constitutional and liberal dimensions of democracy has become even more obvious with the rise of populism, nationalism and authoritarianism. It is questionable whether democratically elected governments that suppress or undermine fundamental rights,³ government accountability mechanisms and limits on power can still be considered democratic at all, just because they emerged out of competitive electoral processes.⁴

The UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) on the other hand have a relatively vague and general approach to the concept

EU concept of democracy

While the EU has not adopted a single specific definition of democracy, the following give an idea of its perspective.

Democracy: 'Though democratic systems may vary in forms and shape, democracy has evolved into a universal value. Democracy ensures that rulers can be held accountable for their actions. Governments with democratic legitimacy must deliver on the basic rights and needs of people or they risk losing legitimacy and public support.'

[Council conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations](#), 2009.

The EU explored a comprehensive concept of 'deep and sustainable democracy' in 2011 after the Arab spring, but has not renewed this reflection since.

Deep Democracy: 'Several elements are common to building deep and sustainable democracy and require a strong and lasting commitment on the part of governments. They include: free and fair elections; freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media; the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial; fighting against corruption; security and law enforcement sector reform (including the police) and the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces.'

Joint communication of the Commission and the High Representative, [A new response to a changing Neighbourhood](#), 2011.

of democracy. One of the targets of [SDG16](#) is to 'ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels', and includes commitments to promote the rule of law, but refrains from referring to any more specific democratic standards.

There is no explicit definition of democracy in either EU law or EU strategies and other policy documents. Under the Treaty, the EU is committed to respect international law and promote universal human rights as recognised internationally. In practical terms, the EU's stance is 'broadly liberal, but potentially open to accommodate a more pluralistic vision of democracy', according to [a literature review](#) on the topic.

The benefits of democracy

There is broad recognition for the inherent benefits of democracy in comparison with non-democratic systems of governance today. Democratic systems are also considered effective at generating wealth, avoiding extreme deprivation,⁵ and creating fairer opportunities for economic participation for all. This point of view is endorsed by the 2019 Council conclusions on democracy, which emphasise that 'The more democratic a system of government, the more inclusive and equal a society will be'. Economic [research](#) confirms that the countries with the higher levels of democratic institutional quality also display the highest levels of income and the lowest levels of inequality.

Moreover, democracies tend to avoid war with each other, according to the democratic peace theory.⁶ Democracies, provided they are inclusive enough, are also more likely to solve [internal conflicts](#) peacefully. The 2016 [Global Strategy](#) for the EU foreign and security policy described democracy as an indispensable aspect of 'resilient societies', i.e. societies able to 'reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises'. Democracy support is thus instrumental to helping partner countries enhance their capacity to withstand various crises, and therefore serves multiple purposes of EU external action, including peace and development.

Goals and principles

Legal basis in the Treaties

The legal foundations of the EU policy for external democracy support were laid down in the Treaties in the 1990s. The [Maastricht Treaty](#), which entered into force in 1993, established democracy promotion as a general objective of EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and EU development cooperation. The [Copenhagen criteria](#), adopted by the Council in 1993, made respect for democracy, human rights and rule of law one of the three key criteria for the accession of new members to the EU. The [Treaty of Lisbon](#), which entered into force in 2009, instituted democracy, alongside human rights and the rule of law, not only as a specific objective, but also as a guiding principle for all policies with an external relevance. In practical terms, this means that the EU has the obligation not only to design sectoral policies and actions to support democracy but also to mainstream democracy as a cross-cutting objective in all its external policies.

The strategic orientation of EU democracy support

This new approach inspired by the Lisbon Treaty first found expression in the Council [conclusions](#) of November 2009 on democracy support in the EU's external relations, adopted shortly before that Treaty's entry into force. The agenda for action on democracy support in EU external relations endorsed by these conclusions focused on an approach **tailored to local specificities**, and on dialogue and partnership with third countries. The EU was encouraged to play an assisting role in relation to local institutions, political actors, civil society organisations and other stakeholders, which were recognised to bear the ultimate **ownership** for democratisation. In its October 2019 [conclusions on democracy](#), the Council took into account new challenges that had appeared on the international scene. These covered the 'growing trend towards authoritarianism' (including the undermining of democratic processes and institutions through various strategies promoted by

autocratic regimes), low public trust in institutions and politicians, a shrinking space for civil society, increased violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and manipulation of online technologies for political purposes. Using the UN SDGs, particularly goals 10 ('Reduce inequality within and among countries') and 16 ('Promote peaceful and inclusive societies'), as its departure points, the Council recommends promoting democratic governance, increasing participation of women and youth, and reinforcing support for parliaments, political parties, civil society and the media. The potential of the digital environment should be better exploited for civic education, democratic participation, access to information online, as well as for respecting norms with regard to the virtual dimension of electoral campaigns and elections. The [new Strategic Agenda 2019-2024](#) of the European Council also reaffirms that the EU will continue to promote democracy externally.

Democracy is interwoven with EU external efforts to protect human rights. In line with the Lisbon Treaty, the 2012 [EU strategic framework on human rights and democracy](#) presented the EU's commitment to putting democracy and human rights at the heart of its international engagement with third countries and in international forums. It laid the foundation for three subsequent action plans on human rights and democracy (2012-2015, 2016-2019 and 2020-2023), outlining concrete actions to be undertaken by the EU in all relevant areas of external policy. While each plan has set different general priorities taking into account different growing challenges to democracy, they have all maintained a focus on core issues such as protecting fundamental freedoms and human rights defenders, and supporting an independent civil society. The [third action plan on human rights and democracy](#) (2020-2024) put forward by the Commission and the High Representative in March 2020 has the ambition to deliver 'a [new geopolitical agenda](#) on human rights and democracy', proposing EU responses to new challenges posed by the erosion of democracy, climate change and the digital transition. It has a broader focus on democracy than the previous plan, with a dedicated chapter on building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies, which, in addition to previous priorities, such as supporting the mass media and electoral elections, presents a list of actions on 'promoting responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making'. It aims to promote active citizenship and participation in public and political life, particularly for women and youth, as well as the development of political party systems.

EU instruments in support of democracy

Political and diplomatic action

Political and diplomatic action mainly centred on dialogue is the EU's first line of action. EU high-level bilateral meetings and the high-level summits organised with geographic groups of countries address political aspects and result in political guidance and strategies, including on democratic priorities. For example, the fifth EU-African Union Summit of 2017 adopted a [joint declaration](#) proposing an equal political dialogue aimed at enhancing democracy. The European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU delegations on the ground facilitate dialogue with national authorities and civil society, organise democracy-related events and awareness-raising campaigns, issue statements aimed at improving democratic standards, design EU strategies on human rights and democracy at country level, and protect human rights defenders. Even if it does not have a dialogue specifically dedicated to democracy assistance,⁷ the EU addresses rights that are crucial for democratic societies, such as the freedoms of expression, assembly and association, in its human rights dialogues with partner countries. In 2019, the EU held [human rights dialogues](#) with 39 partner countries, and with regional groupings such as the African Union. In addition, regular political dialogues established by cooperation and association agreements of the EU with third parties often also address issues relevant to democracy (as in the case of the meeting of the [EU-Egypt Subcommittee on Political Matters, Human Rights and Democracy](#) in 2019). These dialogues help the EU and its partners to clarify how they [conceptualise](#) democracy and to address reciprocal concerns, but their effectiveness generally remains [disputed](#) and depends on the EU partners' availability to engage seriously and not just mimic dialogue.

The EU considers that communicating its policies and values more effectively would complement its work in promoting democracy and human rights. The 2019 Council conclusions on democracy recommend 'to strengthen promotion and public communication on the value of democracy as a global and universal public good'. To this end, public diplomacy and [strategic communication](#) are now being systematically included in the EU's external action. For example, the EU institutions and specifically the EEAS East StratCom Task Force deploy [efforts](#) to battle [disinformation](#), which to a large extent is intended to undermine democratic systems and the idea of democracy itself.

Election observation

The EU is one of the leading international organisations in the field of election observation. The EU has sent electoral observation missions (EU EOMs) and provided electoral support to partner countries, overseeing⁸ over [160 elections](#), most of them in fragile countries, since 2000. EU [electoral assistance](#) complements election observation and consists of technical or material support to the electoral process and bodies, and more specifically help in establishing or reforming the legal framework, provision of voting materials and equipment, help in the registration of political parties and voters, support to NGOs and civil society in areas such as voter and civic education, and training of local observers. It extends to the whole electoral cycle and helps to implement EU EOM recommendations. Since 2010, the EU has provided electoral assistance to more than [90 countries](#). EU missions have contributed to increasing trust in electoral processes and reducing the potential for post-electoral violence and conflicts.

Democracy conditionality

Beyond these direct political interventions in favour of democracy, the EU has significant leverage through several of its external policies. **EU enlargement** policy applies the [Copenhagen criteria](#), which place political requirements on candidate states: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities. The European Commission undertakes regular screening of the way these democratic standards are respected by the candidate states, an approach that has been considered very effective over the years. However, recent developments in some candidate states have led to [calls](#) for more effective application of this conditionality. In response to these trends, in its 2020 communication on '[Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#)', the Commission highlights the need for Western Balkan countries to deliver credible reforms on democratic institutions, rule of law and fundamental rights in order to strengthen their EU accession perspective. Respect for democratic standards in Turkey – the largest candidate country – has raised numerous concerns, as highlighted in the Commission's (latest) [2020 report](#). The EU's leverage on the country has decreased significantly. EU funding for Turkey from the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2014-2020 has been [diminished](#) or [redirected](#) to civil society, in response to the situation in the country.

EU trade and development policies incorporate human rights and democracy conditionality, under a clause that has been present in the political cooperation agreements signed by the EU since the 1990s and is also indirectly applicable⁹ to free trade agreements. It states that democracy and human rights are 'essential elements' whose breach by one party would entitle the other to take restrictive measures or even suspend the agreement. The EU has concluded agreements containing such a clause with non-democratic regimes, such as [Cuba](#)¹⁰ (provisional application since 2017) or [Kazakhstan](#) (signed in 2015, but not yet applied) and Vietnam (1995). This suggests that the clause is not [intended](#) to set a minimal benchmark for democratic norms but to open a space for dialogue and serve as an emergency brake when the situation deteriorates significantly.

So far, the 'democracy clause' has only been activated in relation to development cooperation, in the context of the Cotonou Agreement (2000) or its predecessor, the Lomé IV Convention (1995) in sub-Saharan African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, in response to serious political crises such as flawed elections, coups d'état or breaches of the rule of law. Cooperation and aid have generally been restored after positive developments.¹¹ Most recently, in 2016, the EU activated the

clause and cut its development aid to the Burundi government in reaction to the political and human rights situation in the country. In such cases, the EU redirects its aid to independent civil society organisations and other stakeholders. The new [post-Cotonou Agreement](#) between the EU and the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, for which negotiations were finalised in December 2020, is expected to preserve this conditionality.

A [more direct conditionality](#) applies to EU direct budget support, which is part of EU development aid. Payments to a country can be suspended, cut or postponed if its political, human rights or rule of law situation worsens, whether the democracy clause is activated or not, in line with EU financial rules (Article 236 of the [EU Financial Regulation](#)). It was, for example, suspended for [Mozambique](#) in 2016, on grounds of massive corruption in the highest echelons of power.

The EU has never activated the democracy clause in bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs). The recent conclusion of the [FTA](#) with Vietnam, a state with a narrow political space (officially a one-party state) and with important restrictions on freedom of association, assembly and expression, reinforces the interpretation that the clause¹² showcases the EU's preferences for [dialogue](#) rather than the hard use of conditionality.¹³ [Critics](#) have pointed out, however, that conditionality could have been more effective if used ex ante before the conclusion of this agreement. On the new investment agreement with China, the Commission has continued the [same soft approach](#) of pushing the country to subscribe to international norms, e.g. on forced labour.

The Commission pursues [stronger enforcement](#) of trade and sustainable development (TSD) provisions in free trade agreements, an objective long defended by the European Parliament. While not directly relevant to democracy, better compliance with ILO norms, such as on the [freedom of association](#), can have potentially beneficial effects on political reform and opening.¹⁴

The EU's [unilateral trade preferences](#) (generalised system of preferences, GSP) contain a similar clause allowing their withdrawal in cases of serious and systematic violations of human rights, including civil and political rights as defined in the relevant UN conventions. Since the establishment of the system, the EU has activated the conditionality four times. In the first three cases – Belarus, Myanmar and Sri Lanka – the stated grounds were not related to democracy, but the political situation played a background role in all three. The fourth case refers to the partial withdrawal in August 2020 of preferences to Cambodia under the EU scheme for least developed countries, on [grounds](#) listing civil and political rights as the key concerns. Under the GSP, the EU has established a 'positive conditionality' approach (GSP+), providing trade incentives to 'economically vulnerable' developing countries that ratify and comply with an extensive set of international conventions, including human rights conventions. It publishes biennial reports that highlight both areas of recent progress and areas where progress is still needed. The recent establishment of a new [complaints mechanism](#) publicly accessible to anyone who wishes to draw attention to non-compliance with international norms listed under the EU GSP could significantly strengthen EU monitoring.

For its neighbours south of the Mediterranean, which are covered by a specific framework for cooperation, the [EU Neighbourhood Policy](#) (ENP), the EU introduced a 'more for more' principle in the aftermath of political uprisings there in 2010. EU has stepped up its assistance to those countries that are carrying out effective reforms in respect of democratisation and the rule of law. While this approach has arguably been applied to [Tunisia](#), the best performing democracy in the region, the EU's engagement with other countries in the region, such as Egypt, has been [criticised](#) for side-lining the promotion of democracy in favour of stability. In February 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative presented a [new Agenda for the Mediterranean](#), a vision for a renewed partnership with the region. The agenda continues the incentive-based approach already applied to the region, according to which EU support will be adjusted to progress in making reforms, in particular on governance and the rule of law. It puts an emphasis on institutional reform and judicial independence, women's and youth's participation in decision-making, EU cooperation with civil society, and respect for democratic norms in the governance of the internet and social media.

The EU can leverage its potential for supporting democratic advances or reacting to democratic backlashes by withdrawing its macro-financial assistance (loans or grants provided by the EU to partner countries experiencing a balance of payments crisis). For example, in light of the deteriorated rule of law and democracy in Moldova, the Commission [decided](#) in 2018 to put on hold payments under the macro-financial assistance and EU budget support.

EU international cooperation and development aid for good governance and civil society

Supporting democracy and good governance is a key priority of EU international cooperation. Numerous partnership and cooperation agreements enshrine cooperation on democracy and human rights in specific chapters. The new Post-Cotonou Agreement lists democracy and human rights in first place among the general objectives of the new partnership (according to [information available](#) on the text of the agreement). The EU also supports cooperation on democratic objectives in international fora. Among the elaborate partnerships the EU has set up with various UN agencies, its [partnership](#) with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) supports it in promoting democratic governance and the rule of law all over the world. The EU has also developed special cooperation with the Council of Europe on issues related to democracy and human rights, being the main funder of numerous [common measures](#).

Mainstreaming democracy in development policy

In development policy, support for and promotion of democracy are seen as a [central priority](#). The EU [considers](#) that a country's democracy record should have a direct impact on the 'programming, modalities and channels of aid, and on the reviewing of direct budget support'. The 2017 [European consensus on development](#) recognises the tight link between democracy and development, calling democratic societies with accountable institutions 'preconditions' for sustainable development. The EU has been moving away from a classic donor-beneficiary relationship to one based on partnership and recognition of the ownership of partner countries, which are encouraged to identify opportunities for EU assistance in the area of democracy and human rights themselves.

Figure 1: EU ODA for governments and civil society: disbursements in million euros (yellow) and share in total EU ODA (grey)

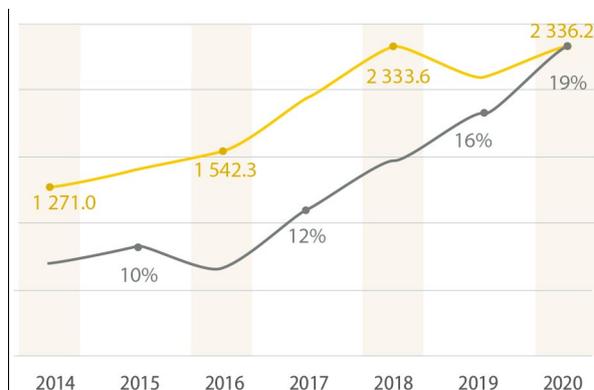
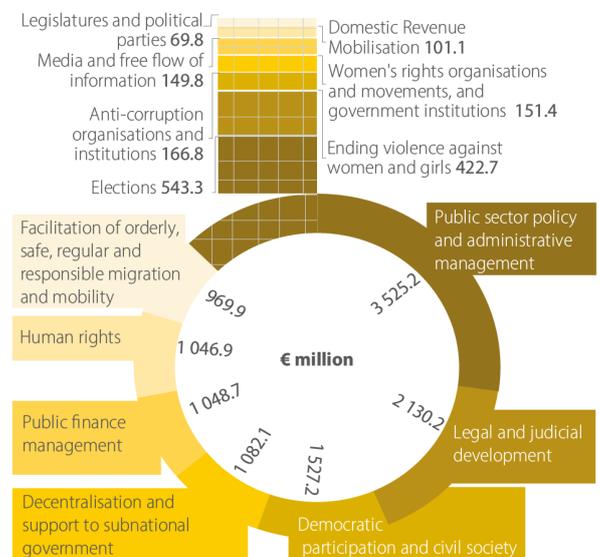


Figure 2: Share of sectors in EU development aid for governments and civil society (2014-2019)



Source: [EU Aid Explorer](#), data downloaded in February 2021; data for 2019 and 2020 may be incomplete.

The EU has provided important financial backing to this cooperation. Over 2014-2019, a relatively small share of total EU development aid for governance was allocated directly to support for democratic processes and actors, including legislatures and political parties, democratic participation and civil society, elections and freedom of the media (see Figure 2 above). Most of the remaining funds were dedicated to increasing governments' effectiveness in areas such as public policy and public administration management, legal and judicial reform, management of public finances, the fight against corruption, and decentralisation. While the relevance and impact for democratisation of these measures to support governance in a broader sense, particularly in authoritarian regimes, remains disputed among researchers, it should be noted that they are broadly aligned with most of the targets of UN SDG 16,¹⁵ to which the EU is committed. Roughly two thirds of EU governance aid in [2014-2019](#) was channelled through third countries' governments.

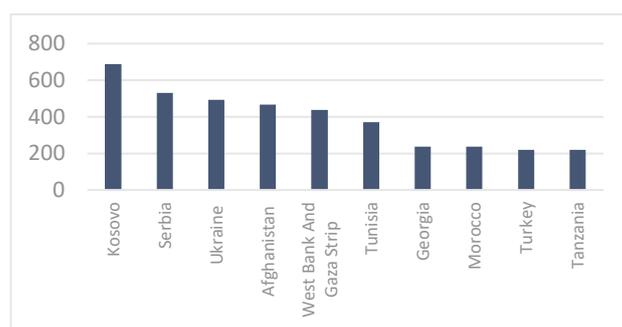
Figure 3 shows that the biggest beneficiaries of EU governance aid in the 2014-2020 MFF were mainly located in the Western Balkans and the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Looking at the World Bank's [governance indicators](#)¹⁶ for these countries for 2014-2019 (excluding the West Bank and Gaza), only Ukraine has made progress, albeit quite limited, across all areas covered by the World Bank. Turkey (a country for which the EU has significantly cut this type of aid) has experienced regress across all areas, while the others have recorded both progress and regress in different areas, without significant improvements overall.

The new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) instrument for the 2021–2027 period, which brings together all EU external aid instruments, is expected to continue to assign importance to support for democracy. According to the [draft NDICI proposal](#), as amended by the Council, democracy and human rights, including gender equality and women's empowerment, should be mainstreamed throughout the NDICI's implementation.

The [NDICI](#) will continue to provide dedicated funding for democracy and human rights. The **Human Rights and Democracy thematic programme** within the NDICI thematic component largely continues the mission of the [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights \(EIDHR\)](#), established in 2007. The thematic programme preserves the EIDHR's specific features: i) the advantage of not requiring the consent of third countries' governments for funding measures; ii) its broader geographical scope compared to other EU external financial instruments, covering almost all of the world's countries with a problematic human rights and democratic situation; and iii) its capacity to address sensitive human rights issues. However, the budget of the thematic programme will remain small in relative terms. Parliament was able to obtain a small increase in funding (€200 million) in the trilogue negotiations. Up to 25 % of the thematic programme will be available for election observation missions. The other programmes within the thematic component, particularly on civil society organisations and on stability and peace, will contribute directly or indirectly to strengthening democracy. The **NDICI geographic component** focuses on good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, among others. The **'emerging challenges and priorities cushion'** (funds not yet allocated and reserved for emergency situations) is intended to enable the EU to react rapidly to crises, including those related to democracy and human rights.

According to the current [state of affairs](#), the NDICI will uphold conditionality on democracy and human rights – an objective defended by the Parliament during the negotiations. As regards

Figure 3: The largest recipients of EU ODA for governments and civil society in the world, 2014-2020 (€ million)



Source: EU Aid Explorer.

neighbourhood countries, the commitment to building deep and sustainable democracy, the rule of law and human rights will influence the type and amount of EU aid. Budget support will be based on commitments to universal values, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and could be cut if these are violated, in line with existing EU financial rules. Civil society and democracy organisations [have called](#) on the EU to reinforce the role of democracy support within the NDICI, by giving budget support only to democratically elected governments subject to effective parliamentary control.

The [European Endowment for Democracy](#), an independent private law foundation supported jointly by the EU institutions and 23 EU Member States, is another effective tool for providing funding to struggling local champions of democratic change in the European Neighbourhood. Very flexible in its financing (beneficiaries do not need to be registered organisations), it adapts to local circumstances so as to avoid restrictions from authoritarian governments.

Sanctions

The EU has adopted a range of [targeted sanctions](#) (including travel bans and asset freezes) against persons and entities responsible for the commission of serious human rights violations or who undermine democracy or the rule of law (such as in [Venezuela](#), [Nicaragua](#)). Until recently, these sanctions were [adopted](#) exclusively on an ad-hoc and a country-by-country basis. In December 2020, however, the EU adopted a human rights sanctions [mechanism](#) enabling it to apply targeted sanctions whenever and wherever needed. Sanctions under the mechanism will focus exclusively on human rights, but in practice those who commit reprehensible violations of human rights often are political decision-makers or senior bureaucrats poised to preserve their hold on power.

The role of the European Parliament

The Parliament has developed, in close cooperation with other EU institutions, its own tools for providing support to democracy in the world. It cooperates with parliaments in third countries to help them enhance their institutional capacity through inter-parliamentary dialogues and training to their members and staff. Since they started in 2014, these activities have included countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood, accession countries from the Western Balkans, some African countries and the Pan-African Parliament. The Parliament has been [observing elections](#) for over 30 years either as part of EU EOMs or of OSCE observation missions. The Parliament is consulted by the EU High Representative on the identification and planning of EU EOMs. The missions are always headed by an MEP and include a parliamentary observer delegation. The Parliament has built a reputation as a conflict mediator in parliamentary settings. The [Jean Monnet dialogue](#) for peace and democracy, named after one of the founding fathers of the European Union, brings the EU's experience in encouraging dialogue for the purpose of consensus-building to weigh on divisive issues among parliamentary factions in EU neighbouring countries such as Ukraine, North Macedonia and Serbia. A study on the topic¹⁷ has found that 'The comparative advantage of the EP in democracy support is its political perspective and ability to work 'peer to peer' with other parliamentarians'.

The [Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group](#) (DEG), established in 2014, plays a central role in organising these activities and in providing political guidance and supervision. It is composed of [15 members](#), including the chair of the Sub-Committee on Human Rights and the Parliament's Vice-President responsible for human rights and democracy. The DEG has developed a comprehensive approach to democracy support aimed at ensuring that relevant activities are linked to the electoral cycle in order to strengthen their coherence and complementarity. Each year the DEG adopts a work programme that details the Parliament's activities with external partners in the area of democracy support and elections. It proposes to the Parliament a limited list of priority countries, mainly from the EU neighbourhood, as beneficiaries of extensive parliamentary capacity support. It also defines thematic priority activities related to pre- and post-election matters, parliamentary mediation and dialogue, and human rights.

Policy outcomes

Policy related to democracy support has certain distinctive features that make any assessment of its results particularly difficult. Democratisation, whether positively or negatively, is influenced by multiple factors, EU support being only one of them. EU efforts in favour of democracy are complex and multidimensional and take place within a short timeframe,¹⁸ while democracy consolidation occurs over a longer period of time. The effectiveness of EU support for democracy, in particular of EU development aid, therefore remains a disputed issue among researchers.¹⁹

The need for more coherence of EU external policies is often pointed out as a rather problematic aspect. One [criticism](#) refers to the fact that the EU has privileged economic or security interests rather than uphold its values in its relations with partners, particularly south of the Mediterranean, both before and after the Arab Spring. Recent years have witnessed an even stronger [shift](#) towards stability, security and efforts to curb migration, to the detriment of encouraging democracy.

EU development and trade policies include a strong democracy conditionality, and aim to integrate democratic and human rights norms in their implementation, but there is no propensity to favour more democratic regimes in these policies. According to a study on the topic,²⁰ the EU provided 'one quarter of its development aid between 2013 and 2017 to authoritarian regimes and over half to hybrid regimes'. This is not necessarily surprising, since the [2030 Sustainable Development Agenda](#) applies to all countries in the world and its goals and targets are universal. Similarly, EU free trade agreements, most of which include a democracy clause, have a similarly balanced [distribution](#) among various types of political regimes in partner countries.

Outlook

The EU, given the democratic traditions of its Member States and the successful supportive role it played in democratisation processes during successive waves of enlargement in southern, central and eastern Europe, has gained an undisputed reputation as a force and a model for democracy, but its appeal has recently suffered because of internal problems, such as the UK's withdrawal, the rise of populism and nationalism, and issues related to [respect for the rule](#) of law in some of its Member States.

The dynamics of democracy in the world has changed a lot in the past decade and EU democracy support now faces strong headwinds. In the 1990s, EU external democracy support served to navigate the rising tide of democratisation. Since then, the EU's relative economic and commercial weight has been steadily decreasing, also due to Brexit. If in 2008 the EU had been the largest economic and trade bloc in the world, now it is the [second](#), both in economic terms (after the US) and commercially (after the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#) in the Asia-Pacific, which comprises 30 % of the world's population and GDP, and 28 % of global trade). The coronavirus vaccine [diplomacy](#) has added a new layer to the growing competition in development assistance with emerging donors, especially China, which do not make it conditional on respect for democratic standards. China's increasing economic clout, particularly in its region, threatens to make the EU

How to improve EU support for democracy

Recommendations for improving EU support for democracy do not propose to fundamentally reshuffle the existing EU instruments, but to apply them more consistently and effectively, based on a more political and strategic approach. They include:

- more adaptability to beneficiary countries
- 'more diverse institutional pathways and models'
- involvement with a broader range of partners
- making democracy support more central to EU external policies
- developing a new narrative
- more support for civil society, applying 'pre-emptive and innovative approaches' to evade restrictions imposed by authoritarian regimes
- adapting democracy support activities to the new forms of civic activism
- supporting civic education
- a more political approach to assistance
- increasing the EEAS and Commission capacities working on democracy support
- a common approach with Member States.

Source: [Godfrey & Youngs](#) 2019, [FES](#) 2020.

tools less effective, as has been the case with [Cambodia](#). Despite the EU's intensive engagement, the limits to its influence and the [difficulty](#) of upholding a principled approach based on values have become even clearer when it comes to dealing with powerful countries such as Russia. Calls, including from the Parliament, have urged the EU to broaden the economic scope of its values-based agenda, such as on resource imports (e.g. from [Russia](#)) or on [investments](#) (in the case of China).

At the centre of this new reality, the battle of narratives around the merits of democracy versus authoritarianism has taken on an impetus not seen since the end of the Cold War. While the financial crisis of 2008-2009 and the ongoing coronavirus crisis have severely affected many democracies, including in the EU, the disinformation promoted by authoritarian regimes tends to excessively amplify a narrative of democratic 'failure' against the background of authoritarian 'successes'. Much of this battle is now fought in the digital sphere, which provides effective channels of disinformation for authoritarian regimes. Countering this disinformation effectively – both internally and externally – as well as proposing a new democratic narrative and harnessing the [opportunities](#) provided by these technologies for democratic participation, will play a crucial role in this context.

Authoritarian regimes have become increasingly assertive internally and externally, making the provision of external assistance to independent civil society organisations more difficult. Yet, neither the rise of authoritarianism nor the pandemic-related restrictions have prevented people from protesting for political change, sometimes in entrenched authoritarian regimes like that in [Belarus](#). The EU has shown it is ready to step up its support for the democratic forces in this country.

A [window](#) of opportunity to improve transatlantic cooperation on democracy support has opened with the arrival of the new US administration in office. To capitalise on this, the Commission, together with the High Representative, adopted in December 2020 a new EU-US agenda for global change, which proposed to improve cooperation with the US in multilateral forums (as the US returns incrementally to them, one such example being the [UN Human Rights Council](#)) for the purpose of providing democracy assistance to regions such as Africa or the Middle East, countering a rising China, creating a transatlantic technology space among like-minded partners, based on regulatory democratic governance, and participating in a global summit of democracies.

MAIN REFERENCES

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Godfrey K. and Youngs R., [Toward a New EU Democracy Strategy](#); Carnegie Europe, September, 2019.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Brunei, Eritrea, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the Vatican do not hold general elections. Some other countries do hold general elections, but the power is *de jure* concentrated in a monarch.
- ² A number of indices assess the state of democracy in the world. The Economist Intelligence Unit, V-Dem, Freedom House all have their own index, and the [Polity data series](#) by the Center for Systematic Peace is yet another example.
- ³ Including individual and [minority rights](#), but also civil and political rights, such as [freedom of expression or assembly](#).
- ⁴ The term 'illiberal democracy', which is now in wide use, was [coined](#) in 1997 by foreign policy commentator Fareed Zakaria, to denote democratically elected regimes that 'are routinely ignoring limits on their power and depriving citizens of basic freedoms'. Other experts, such as the political philosopher [Michael Ignatieff](#), consider this concept a contradiction in terms, since such regimes undermine the very basis of democracy.

- ⁵ According to Nobel Prize winner and economist, Amartya Sen, no famine has ever taken place in a democratic system.
- ⁶ This theory dates back to the philosopher from the times of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, and is generally accepted and supported by empirical research.
- ⁷ This is an objective advocated by civil society, namely by the [European Partnership for Democracy](#), a network of European CSOs working on democracy assistance.
- ⁸ Either through electoral observation missions (EOMs) or through more limited electoral expert missions (EEMs). As of February 2020, [the database](#) of electoral observation missions indicated that EU had conducted 148 EOMs and 20 EEMs.
- ⁹ Many EU trade agreements refer to the clause in a framework agreement, while some include the clause in their text.
- ¹⁰ Cuba's agreement includes a unique reservation following the human rights clause: 'In the framework of their cooperation, the Parties recognise that all peoples have the right to freely determine their political system and to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development'.
- ¹¹ Zimbabwe is a partial exception, as cooperation has been reinstated, but [budget aid](#) has not, even after the change in power. The most recent sanctions have been adopted against Burundi, a country highly dependent on budget aid, which despite minor concessions, such as [freeing some political prisoners](#), has not bent to international pressure.
- ¹² The clause is contained in the [Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation](#) with Vietnam, but is applicable to the trade agreement as well, according to Article 17.18, as is the case in many similar situations.
- ¹³ When ratifying the agreement, the European Parliament described it as 'a reference point for the EU's engagement with developing countries', and stressed the need for Vietnam to become a partner in the advancement of human rights and democratic reform. See [European Parliament non-legislative resolution of 12 February 2020](#) on the draft Council decision on the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (06050/2019 – C9-0023/2019 – [2018/0356M\(NLE\)](#)).
- ¹⁴ Even if TSD provisions do not deal directly with human rights, multiple examples indicate that labour rights, such as the right to form unions, have a political relevance. Most recently, the transition in Sudan has proven that independent unions can be key figures in the democratisation process.
- ¹⁵ General development aid is considered by [Dutta et al., 2013](#), to have an 'amplification effect', making democratic regimes more democratic and autocratic regimes more autocratic, as it allows authoritarian regimes to deliver better public goods and services to the population while taking the credit for it. Other [authors](#) point out, however, that enhanced monitoring of foreign aid have deprived autocratic regimes of their ability to use it for patronage and have thus obliged them to initiate democratisation processes (e.g. in Africa in the 1990s).
- ¹⁶ These indicators assign a score between -2.5 and 2.5 on: control of corruption, government effectiveness, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, regulatory quality, rule of law, voice and accountability.
- ¹⁷ [EP democracy support activities and their follow-up, and prospects for the future](#)
- ¹⁸ See, for example, remarks in this sense made in the [EIDHR 2017 Evaluation](#).
- ¹⁹ For a literature review of academic arguments on the topic, see, for example, [What the EU should do for democracy support in Africa. Ten Proposals for a New Strategic Initiative](#), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2020.
- ²⁰ See K. Godfrey and R. Youngs, [Toward a New EU Democracy Strategy](#); Carnegie Europe, September, 2019.

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