

STUDY

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EU strategy to face narratives against democracy – with a focus on the external dimension



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ABSTRACT

A surge in autocratic governance has become increasingly threatening to global politics, having gathered momentum over the past two decades. This autocratic wave continues to evolve, becoming ever more complex and diverse as it unfolds. Hence, the shifting dynamics driving this wave need to be fully understood and disaggregated if the European Union (EU) is to design effective responses. Democratic strategy needs not only to hold at bay severe repression, but also to engage with the ideas and narratives that underpin autocracy's apparent appeal. Accordingly, this paper draws on historical and contemporary writings that present various arguments against democracy. After unpacking the different components of this autocratic wave, EU responses over recent years are assessed, looking at how these relate to pro-authoritarian narratives. It finds that the EU has improved many elements of its policies during this time but still needs to tailor its strategies to the ideational aspects of anti-democratic trends.

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List of abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DEG	Election Coordination Group
EED	European Endowment for Democracy
EU	European Union
GHRSR	Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy Institute

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Executive summary

An ongoing autocratic surge has been gathering momentum for well over a decade and continues to threaten democratic norms in every region of the world. This wave of autocratisation is not only powerful but also complex and multi-faceted. If part of this wave is seen as flowing directly from straightforward repression, another aspect seems to reflect marked advances in anti-democratic narratives and their conceptual appeal. This paper presents an assessment of European Union (EU) democracy support policies alongside a summary of concepts being proffered by democracy's challengers.

Writings critical of democracy appear to have gained traction in recent years as anti-democratic ideologues map out narratives and theories which speak against open, pluralist politics. These writings contain clear lines of continuity from earlier ideas, associated with both classical and 19th century democratic sceptics.

This paper extracts and summarises five themes from these writings: the call for expert-based rule; a critique of liberal individualism; democracy's alleged failure to ensure security and order; faith and identity-based rule; and the need for firm governance to deal with crises.

While such writings have become more numerous in recent years, contemporary narratives are still overwhelmingly in favour of democracy. Flagged up here are some of the most prominent works from recent years that defend democracy and, crucially, suggest how democratic practices must evolve to push back and lessen the appeal of autocracy.

The current autocratic wave is rooted in various causal factors. Some resonate with the concepts developed by anti-democracy ideologues while also reflecting a broader range of dynamics. This paper assesses the connection between such anti-democratic writings and the real-world drivers of autocratisation; in doing so, a notable albeit not perfect overlap is detected.

For some years, EU policy-makers have been mindful of this autocratic movement, with the Union extending and refining its toolbox of international democracy support accordingly. However, notwithstanding many significant improvements, European policies have not yet been fully adjusted to take on board the kind of conceptual ideas being promoted by the challengers to democracy. Hence, a closer alignment is needed between the EU's democracy toolbox and the ideational appeal now underpinning anti-democratic narratives.

1 Introduction

A surge in autocratic governance has become increasingly powerful in global politics, as it has gathered momentum over the past two decades¹. While this trend is extensively analysed, the autocratic wave continues to evolve, becoming more complex and varied as it develops and unfolds. The shifting dynamics driving this wave need to be fully understood and disaggregated if the European Union (EU) is to design effective responses.

Even if democracy still commands widespread support globally, its functions are causing increasing frustration amongst citizens². Furthermore, there is widespread agreement among analysts and practitioners that the democratic model is in trouble. However, there is less consensus on *why* people are so disenchanted with their democracies³. Debate progressively focuses on the rise of populism and the far-right but deeper underlying issues also need to be examined to explain why authoritarian governance appears to be gaining in appeal⁴. The recent retreat of the United States of America (USA) from democracy further reinforces narratives against democracy and reduces support for democratic norms globally⁵.

This paper suggests how the EU can better understand and respond to these trends. It argues that a multi-layered approach is essential in trying to make sense of this autocratic wave, which is driven by a number of economic, identity-based, technological, international and tactical factors, whose related weight differs across states⁶. There are different types of autocratic dynamics within the broad authoritarian trend. For instance, in some places, autocracy has embedded itself through brute repression⁷. Elsewhere, populations seem to have become more open to autocrats' claims that they are better able to deliver positive outcomes than democracies.

It is argued here that a sharper EU democracy strategy is needed to deal with these two strands: to be able to hold autocracies' severe repression of their societies at bay but also to engage with the ideas and narratives that underpin autocracy's apparent appeal. To this end, the paper draws on historical and contemporary writings that have presented different arguments against democracy. After unpacking components of the autocratic wave, the paper assesses EU responses over recent years.

It finds that, while the EU has improved many elements of its policies, pushing back against this authoritarian tide remains a struggle nonetheless. Sharper EU democratic responses also call for rethinking at a more conceptual level. This requires the EU to draw on analytical work around innovative forms of democratic practice. A different kind of democratic narrative is required,

¹ L. Diamond, '[Breaking Out of the Democratic Slump](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 31, No 1, 2020, pp. 36–50.

² Alliance of Democracies, '[Democracy Perception Index 2024](#)', webpage, nd.

³ Economist Intelligence Unit, '[Democracy Index 2024](#)', webpage, nd.

⁴ F. Fukuyama, C. Dann and B. Magaloni, '[Delivering for Democracy: Why Results Matter](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 36, No 2, 2020, pp. 05–19.

⁵ S. Levitsky and L. A. Way, '[The Path to American Authoritarianism: What Comes After Democratic Breakdown](#)', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2025.

⁶ T. Carothers and B. Hartnett, '[Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 35, No 3, 2024, pp. 24–37.

⁷ G. Ekiert and N. Dasanaik, '[The Return of Dictatorship](#)' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 35, No 4, 2024, pp. 177–191.

together with a 'case for democracy' that homes in on the current autocratic wave's specific features and the reasons why these have gained such strong momentum.

2 Methodological approach

This paper draws on qualitative data collection and analysis, supported by quantitative datasets and surveys. It combines official document analysis and in-depth interviews with policy-makers, EU officials, as well as individuals working for democracy support coalitions.

It reviews up-to-date literature and debates on critiques of democracy to improve understanding of the narratives that question democracy as a governance model and assess the relevance of these debates in the context of current political dynamics. The critique of democracy and the review of historical writings are presented to help unpack the foundations of current democratic scepticism.

The paper further reviews the EU's existing toolbox for supporting democracy. The overview draws on official EU documents, Council conclusions, democracy strategies, European Parliament reports, and external evaluations to understand what tools the EU has at its disposal and whether they are fit to meet current challenges. Conversations with EU policy-makers, as well as individuals working for international coalitions, further add to this assessment.

As such, the paper draws on four semi-structured interviews conducted in summer 2025, both in person and online, with EU officials working in the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament, and civil society.

In terms of quantitative analysis, the analysis draws on global surveys, such as the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute) dataset, the Economist Intelligence Unit and Freedom House annual reports.

3 Authoritarian ideas and arguments

The limits and vulnerabilities of democracy as a system of governance have long been a focus for scholarly discussion. The core norms are generally popular, and most regimes across the world seek to claim certain democratic characteristics, while governments falling short insist that their non-democratic rule is necessary⁸. Authoritarian leaders often try to 'maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance'⁹. They justify anti-democratic rule through issues linked to security, safeguarding sovereignty and the values or traditions of a particular country. At the same time, the 'technocratic dilemma' – democracy's ability to deliver the population's dual demands of performance and responsiveness – is becoming increasingly constraining¹⁰.

Some scholars also argue that it is the liberal aspects of democracy that are becoming increasingly contested, rather than its institutional practices¹¹. While democracy concerns the question of who rules, liberalism focuses on the limits of power designed to protect individual rights. This area has become the key focus of authoritarian-leaning governments across the world, many of which count as democracies. The Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, has shifted the debate by fostering

⁸ R. A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, Yale University Press: New Haven, USA, 1991, pp. 02–05.

⁹ S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, Broadway Books: New York, USA, 2018, p. 05.

¹⁰ Y. Mounk, 'The Undemocratic Dilemma', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 29, No 2, 2018, pp. 98–112.

¹¹ M. F. Plattner, 'Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 30, No 1, 2019, pp. 05–19.

the notion of ‘illiberal democracy’; this is disingenuous to the extent that such political projects generally extend beyond illiberal values to authoritarian institutional practices, thereby rendering obsolete the core characteristics of democracy.

Narratives against democracy have been forthcoming not just in outright autocracies. Populist and far-right politicians within democracies often accuse democracy of taking power from ordinary citizens and undermining common economic interests¹². Strikingly, current narratives pick up and develop non-democratic ideas that were also present in classical and 19th-century thinking. The arguments forwarded to buttress the current authoritarian wave help understand the dynamics at play and the kind of counter-responses needed. While a comprehensive study of these writings is beyond the scope of this paper, five themes that can be examined further can be usefully extracted from classical, 19th-century, and contemporary thinking (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Five dominant narratives against democracy

Theme 1	Rule by wise experts, technocracy and elite governance
Theme 2	Democracy is based on self-interested individualism that clashes with the general will and common good
Theme 3	Strong sovereignty and decisive authority are needed in emergencies and times of crisis
Theme 4	Opposition to liberal secularism
Theme 5	Failure to guarantee order and security

Source: Authors’ own compilation.

3.1 Theme 1: Rule by the wise

Classical critics argued that the general ‘populace’ is ill-equipped to govern. Plato contends that democracy hands power to ‘incompetents’ who err in equating the value of their opinion to that of experts¹³. As a form of elite governance or so-called ‘noocracy’, Plato’s ideal polity is led by philosopher-kings: rigorously educated, wise men. Aristotle favoured aristocracy or rule by the ‘best’, while Machiavelli praised the lawgivers’ guiding role in a mixed government¹⁴.

Many 19th-century critics believed that a rule by a qualified few was inevitable. Gaetano Mosca¹⁵ and Vilfredo Pareto argued that ‘an organised minority’ rules over the majority, implying that democracy is a façade for oligarchy¹⁶. Joseph de Maistre upheld monarchy and clerical authority as divinely

¹² W. A. Galston, [‘The Enduring Vulnerability of Liberal Democracy’](#), *Journal of Democracy*, 2020, pp. 08-24.

¹³ Plato, [‘Republic: Book VIII’](#), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, webpage, nd.

¹⁴ R. A. Dahl, [Democracy and Its Critics](#), Yale University Press: New Haven, USA, 1991; N. Machiavelli, [Discourses on Livy](#), H. C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov (trans), University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Illinois, USA, 1998.

¹⁵ G. Mosca, [The Ruling Class](#), H. D. Kahn (trans), McGraw-Hill: New York, USA: , 1960.

¹⁶ V. Pareto, [The Mind and Society: A treatise on general sociology](#), A. Livingston, (ed, trans), A. Bongiorno (trans), New York, USA: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935.

ordained expert rule¹⁷. Even liberal observers, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, conceded that ‘the few’ would continue to lead, hoping they would be enlightened aristocrats tacitly guiding democracy in the public interest¹⁸. Hippolyte Taine, analysing the French Revolution, described the democratic mob as governed by irrational impulses rather than reason¹⁹. Elitist liberals and reactionaries alike believed that most people were too ignorant or fickle for self-rule. Even the more democratically inclined liberals harboured doubts: John Stuart Mill proposed extra votes for the educated due to the risk posed by ‘uneducated democracy’ of the masses.

Contemporary anti-democratic theorists dismiss voters as ill-informed, driven by base interests. Tech entrepreneur, venture capitalist and cofounder of PayPal, Peter Thiel, insists that democracy generates economically illiterate demands and mediocrity: he asserted that ‘I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible’ since mass voting curbs market freedom. Philosopher Jason Brennan calls for epistocracy (rule by the knowledgeable) to replace one-person-one-vote. Other modern sceptics support elite governance²⁰. Political blogger Curtis Yarvin advocates a ‘neocameralist’ state run like a corporation by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO)-sovereign²¹. Through the ‘Dark Enlightenment’ movement, British philosopher Nick Land calls for democracy to be replaced by algorithmic governance and expert management. Libertarian theorist Hans-Hermann Hoppe calls for rule by wealthy entrepreneurs or hereditary monarchs to displace the ‘short-sighted mass plundering’ of democracy²².

3.2 Theme 2: Self-interested individualism

Classical thinkers identified a tension between individuals’ selfish desires and the general will of the community. Jean-Jacques Rousseau championed popular sovereignty but saw real-world democracy aggregating private interests rather than the common good: voters pursue their own factional or short-term aims, and the ‘will of all’ (the sum of individual preferences) crowds out the ‘general will’ (the true, unified common interest). Aligning politics with the general will was only feasible in small, virtuous communities. Rousseau idealised a republic of virtue where each citizen votes with the public interest in mind but conceded ‘so perfect a government is not for men²³’. The classical insight was that without a high degree of civic virtue and unity, democracy tends to move towards factionalism.

From 19th-century thinkers, Alexis de Tocqueville famously warned of a majority using power to serve selfish interests, thereby sacrificing justice. Economic liberals, such as Frédéric Bastiat, saw voters trying to vote themselves benefits and plunder the public treasury²⁴. The sum of group demands, such as pensions, tariffs and favours, weakens the sense of common will. Measures were

¹⁷ O. Bradley, *A modern Maistre: The social and political thought of Joseph de Maistre*, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, Nebraska, USA 1999.

¹⁸ P. J. Deneen, *The odyssey of political theory: The politics of departure and return*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Lanham Maryland, USA, 2000.

¹⁹ L. Weinstein, *Hippolyte Traine*, Twayne: New York, USA, 1972.

²⁰ J. Brennan, 2016. *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, USA, 2016.

²¹ J. Derbyshire, ‘The Philosophy behind Trump’s Dark Enlightenment’, *Financial Times*, 26 March 2025.

²² R. M. Pearce, ‘Democracy: The god that failed [Book Review]’, *National Observer*, No 56, 2003, pp. 68-69.

²³ J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract: Book III*, 1762.

²⁴ F. Bastiat, ‘The State’, in *Selected Essays on Political Economy*, G. B. de Huszar (ed), S. Cain (trans), *Foundation for Economic Education*: Irvington on Hudson, New York, USA, 1995.

needed to check majoritarian excess. John C. Calhoun in the USA advocated for a 'concurrent majority' and veto power for regions²⁵.

This theme persists among contemporary ideologues. Hans-Hermann Hoppe criticised democratic politics for favouring 'pressure groups which seek to increase government expenditures and regulations' for their own benefit²⁶. Tech theorist Balaji S. Srinivas criticises national-level representative democracy as leading to unrealistic and unsustainable popular demands; he proposes a decentralised network state in which members voluntarily coordinate around a more coherent common will²⁷. Similarly, Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land claim that smaller exit-driven sovereignties (that allow individuals to drop out of the system) and communities of shared values would avoid the tragedy of the commons²⁸.

3.3 Theme 3: Managing crisis

Among key narratives against democracy, the idea of strong sovereignty and the ability to make swift decisions is something that authoritarian regimes tend to underscore as a necessity in times of crisis and emergencies. Some classical thinkers also underscored democracy's weaknesses during times of crisis. Thucydides noted how Athenian assemblies wavered during wartime and Plato warned that the lack of unity in democracy could invite in tyrant saviours after chaos. Machiavelli, admiring Roman practice of extra-legal authority, argued that while a republic might work in stable times, in a crisis it 'inevitably decays into anarchy and then tyranny'. He praised Rome's use of 'temporary dictators' when needed in the face of crisis²⁹.

The French Revolution's Reign of Terror and Napoleon's rise formed the founding template for supposedly decisive autocracy in this period. Juan Donoso Cortés, in an 1849 speech amid revolutionary turmoil, famously declared that liberal revolutions themselves 'proclaimed [...] and accepted dictatorship' as the only way to restore order³⁰. 19th-century experiences showed that 'temporary' dictators often sought to retain power for longer periods, notably Napoleon III. The idea of a strong leader embodying the nation's will, the pillar of Bonapartism, gained momentum as a stable solution rather than just a stopgap.

Political theorist Carl Schmitt wrote 'Sovereign is the who decides on the exception', arguing that a true ruler must be able to bypass the law to save the state; liberal parliaments are too slow, fragmented and indecisive when facing existential threats³¹. Modern far-right intellectuals, such as Curtis Yarvin, call for an American 'Caesar' to 'dismantle' the 'decadent' liberal order³². He has outlined scenarios in which an elected authoritarian could declare emergency powers, override

²⁵ J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract: Book III*, 1762.

²⁶ R. M. Pearce, 'Democracy: The god that failed [Book Review]', *National Observer*, No 56, 2003, pp. 68-69.

²⁷ H. Chitkara, 'For God and 'The Network State': The crypto elite's endgame', 24 October 2022.

²⁸ A. Jones, 'From neo-reactionary theory to the alt-Right', C. Battista and M. Sande (eds.), *Critical theory and the humanities in the age of the alt-Right*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

²⁹ J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract: Book III*, 1762.

³⁰ C. Pérez-Crespo, 'An Apocalyptic Speech Outlining a Theory of Dictatorship: Carl Schmitt Inspired by Juan Donoso Cortés', *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, Vol 26, No 1, 2023, pp. 21-40.

³¹ C. Schmitt, *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*, Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1988.

³² J. Wilson, 'He's anti-democracy and pro-Trump: the obscure 'dark enlightenment' blogger influencing the next US administration', *The Guardian*, 21 December 2024.

courts and legislatures. Many illiberal thinkers today explicitly praise states of exception and emergency rule as the cure for democratic weakness; Carl Schmitt, for instance, favoured institutionalising sovereign power above the law, not just in emergencies. Some political parties today seek to concentrate sovereignty permanently within a single authority and praise modern examples such as Singapore's semi-authoritarian model as a success in crises.

3.4 Theme 4: Opposition to progressive changes

Plato and Aristotle did not believe in equal political rights for all. Plato's ideal Republic is explicitly anti-pluralistic: it permits no dissenting subcultures or competing values to cultivate a single virtue-oriented character in the city. Poets spreading unapproved ideas, for instance, are banished. Democracy was criticised for flattening the natural social order: Aristotle described extreme democracy as a system where the poor, as the numerical majority, unjustly rule over the rich minority. Classical critics valued virtue, order and unity of values over pluralism and equity, as dissent and diversity were seen as threats to the cohesion of the *polis*³³. Classical models often tied political legitimacy to a shared culture or virtue. The *polis* was usually culturally homogeneous (Athens had an established civic religion and excluded outsiders from citizenship). Thinkers such as Plato sought to impose a singular moral vision ('the Form of the Good') on the city. Competing viewpoints were not accommodated; the idea of plural legitimate doctrines would have been seen as endangering the state's coherence.

19th-century anti-democrats explicitly rejected the liberal Enlightenment ideals of individual rights, secularism and pluralism. Reactionary Catholics, such as Joseph de Maistre and Pope Pius IX, argued that truth was unitary and rooted in tradition³⁴. Pius IX condemned 'modern liberal, secular values' as pernicious; he listed the proposition that democracy and freedom of conscience are good as being among the age's grave 'errors'³⁵. Likewise, radical royalists, such as De Bonald, insisted that political power must rest with 'throne and altar', not the aggregate of disparate individual wills³⁶. Many cultural critics of the period saw democracy as destructive to national or high culture. Jacob Burckhardt held that mass democracy and liberal egalitarianism would lead to the triumph of a vulgar mass culture over refined high culture³⁷. Houston Chamberlain and other *völkisch* thinkers attacked liberal universalism in favour of ethnic and national particularism³⁸.

As liberal secular states developed in the 19th century, critics pushed back by asserting particularistic sources of legitimacy. Integral nationalists (such as Charles Maurras in France) argued '*la politique d'abord*' (politics first) must be rooted in the nation's historic Catholic

³³ See previous references for Theme 1 Table.

³⁴ A. Craiutu, '[The true Joseph de Maistre](#)', *Modern Age: A Conservative Review*, 04 June 2024.

³⁵ Pope Pius IX, '[The Syllabus of Errors](#)', *Papal Encyclicals Online*, 1864.

³⁶ A. Cobban, '[Review of the Historical Thought of the Vicomte de Bonald by Mary Hall Quinlan](#)', *The English Historical Review*, Vol 69, No 272, 1954.

³⁷ S. Tonsor, '[Jacob Burckhardt: For the great historian of the Renaissance, democracy, centralization, and materialism were culture's enemies](#)', *Modern Age: A Conservative Review*, 21 March 2025.

³⁸ H. S. Chamberlain, '[The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century](#)', J. Lees (trans), John Lane Company: New York, USA, 1911 [1899].

culture³⁹. The Austrian and Spanish *ultramontanes* held that Catholicism must remain the state religion, opposing religious freedom. Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine and Oswald Spengler believed that Western liberal universalism was hollow, masking the will-to-power of rich elites⁴⁰. These thinkers favoured a return to authentic cultural roots, medieval hierarchy and ethnic solidarity over progressive change.

Contemporary authoritarian and reactionary thinkers often portray liberal democracy's values as a kind of fake, oppressive religion; an ideological 'Cathedral' is the much-used term coined by Curtis Yarvin to refer to what he sees as a nexus of academia-media-bureaucracy enforcing liberal norms⁴¹. These modern thinkers reject the notion of universal rights and secular, cosmopolitan values, arguing instead for particularist and traditional bases of order. Carl Schmitt contended that liberal tolerance of diversity 'contradicts democracy': 'Democracy requires [...] first homogeneity and second, if need be, elimination of heterogeneity'⁴². Alt-right figurehead Steve Bannon insists that democracy must be rooted in Western Judeo-Christian values, sidelining liberal ideals of minority rights and secularism⁴³. Hans-Hermann Hoppe attacks the liberal principle of equality as a false idol, maintaining that natural social hierarchies should be preserved against forced egalitarian 'integration'⁴⁴.

Russian ideologue Alexander Dugin explicitly calls for abolishing liberal universalism in favour of tradition-based civilisation: Western liberal democracy represents an attempt at 'universal empire' that erases distinct cultures⁴⁵. In his *Fourth Political Theory*, he argues that authoritative, illiberal governance is needed against universal human rights. Nick Land flatly 'opposes egalitarianism and democracy' and calls for a tech-CEO 'king', in rejection of the liberal democracy pluralist compromise⁴⁶. From a different angle, the backlash against gender equality forms another part of this challenge to progressive rights equality⁴⁷.

3.5 Theme 5: Order and security

Classical thinkers frequently asserted that democracy's love of freedom leads to disorder and the breakdown of authority. Plato insists that an 'excess of freedom [...] undermines order and authority'. Citizens come to disrespect laws and leaders; hence, chaos reigns. This internal anarchy makes people so desperate for stability that they 'turn to a strongman to restore order', trading freedom for security. Plato concludes that 'the probable outcome of too much freedom is [...] too much slavery', as a tyrant seizes power to repress disorder. Aristotle's cycle of constitutions holds that extreme democracy devolves into anarchy, inviting the rise of a tyrant. For classical thinkers,

³⁹ C. Maurras, *La Politique naturelle*, l'Association des Amis de la Maison du Chemin de Paradis (édition électronique), 2021, [1937].

⁴⁰ O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd: London, USA, 1918.

⁴¹ M. Moldbug [C. Yarvin], *A gentle introduction to Unqualified Reservations*, 2009.

⁴² C. Pérez-Crespo, 'An Apocalyptic Speech Outlining a Theory of Dictatorship: Carl Schmitt Inspired by Juan Donoso Cortés', *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, Vol 26, No 1, 2023, pp. 21-40.

⁴³ D. Smith, 'Steve Bannon: We've turned the Republicans into a working-class party', *The Guardian*, 17 December 2019.

⁴⁴ R. M. Pearce, 'Democracy: The god that failed [Book Review]', *National Observer*, No 56, 2003, pp. 68-69.

⁴⁵ A. Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, Eurasian Movement, Moscow, 2012.

⁴⁶ N. Land, 'The Dark Enlightenment', webpage, 25 December 2012 (archived 25 September 2013).

⁴⁷ A. Graff and E. Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, Taylor & Francis: Melbourne, Australia, 2021.

democracy was seen as a dangerously weak form of government, with a stable hierarchy (as in Sparta or Rome's mixed Republic) needed to maintain *Eunomia* or 'good order'⁴⁸. In Plato's cycle, the tyrant arises as a product of democratic chaos but once in power, he imposes order by force, curing this 'chaotic malaise'.

In the later period, critics pointed to the Terror of 1793–1794 as proof that popular rule leads to chaos. Edmund Burke had earlier warned that throwing off monarchy and church would tear society's fabric. Hippolyte Taine argued that the revolution did not bring liberty but a new form of despotism produced by violent crowds and demagogues⁴⁹. Across Europe, 'order' became the watchword of democracy sceptics. Joseph de Maistre maintained that only a strong monarchy, backed by the moral force of religion (the executioner and the priest), could keep the sinful impulses of society in check⁵⁰. Democracy would succumb to 'collective depravity'. The idea gained traction of a 'benevolent despot' or enlightened autocrat who could impose order when democratic government was paralysed.

In this spirit, 19th-century commentators viewed authoritarianism as a remedy for the perceived chaos of democracy. Positive spin on this was the Napoleonic legend, the idea that a strong ruler could ride in to rescue society from anarchy. Napoleon III's election and subsequent coup were widely approved by a French public tired of disorder. This notion of a 'man on horseback' bringing order became a recurring theme in politics and literature. This fed directly into early 20th-century fascist arguments that liberal democracy must give way to dictators who can unite the people and crush chaos.

Order is also a prime concern for contemporary neo reactionaries who argue that liberal democracies have become too soft or divided to ensure public order. Tech entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan paints a picture of American cities sliding into chaos under democratic governance. He and others propose quasi-private alternatives, such as charter cities or 'network states', where rules would be enforced more strictly. Curtis Yarvin highlights urban disorder and civil unrest as symptoms of democratic decline, suggesting that only an authoritarian reboot (a 'CEO' or new monarchy) can 'drain the swamp' and re-establish civic order⁵¹. This line of critique echoes throughout the alt-right; democracy is weak, permissive and chronically indecisive, whereas authoritarian regimes are praised for being 'tough on crime' and capable of swift action.

Today's anti-democratic thinkers explicitly prioritise order and security over liberty and due process. They laud authoritarian-capitalist regimes such as Singapore or China for their low crime rates and social stability. Contemporary populist leaders (endorsed by ideologues such as Steve Bannon and Dominic Cummings) advocate policies such as harsh criminal sentences and military-style policing. They equate liberal democracy to a disorderly bazaar, where 'anything goes' until eventually the bazaar burns down.

⁴⁸ See previous references Theme 1 Table (to be added).

⁴⁹ L. Weinstein, *Hippolyte Traine*, Twayne: New York, USA, 1972.

⁵⁰ A. Craiutu, '[The true Joseph de Maistre](#)', *Modern Age: A Conservative Review*, 04 June 2024.

⁵¹ A. Kofman, '[Curtis Yarvin's plot against America](#)' *The New Yorker*, 02 June 2025.

4 Narratives for defending democracy

As authoritarianism has spread, scholars have offered various perspectives on defending democracy through structural reforms and normative renewal. Some of these works speak to the five themes of ‘autocratic ideologues’. Still, overall, it is striking that pro-democracy narratives tend to cover other issues and have not wrestled fully or directly with the anti-democracy arguments above. Few return to the basics of rebuilding democracy’s supposed advantages, instead focusing on institutional improvements that are needed to defend democracy.

With hundreds of such works appearing in recent years, offered here is just a small selection of the most prominent books to illustrate some of the pro-democracy arguments that counter the ‘democracy challengers’. Pro-democracy writings have focused on innovative ideas to reinforce democratic institutions, provide avenues for citizen engagement and defend democracy from external threats. While there is extensive scholarship explaining the benefits of democracy as a system of governance, this paper’s analysis focuses on new writings covering a selection of key themes. These focus not only on why democracy is good in a generic sense, but also on how to defend it from increasing threats. Taken together, contemporary scholarship offers a toolkit for strengthening democratic resilience, which could also inform the EU’s policy improvements.

Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky’s *How Democracies Die* offers a framework for understanding and preventing democratic erosion. Their framework focuses on the USA but can also be applied to various cases worldwide; it is pertinent in suggesting how some EU tools need to be used to counter signs of autocratisation⁵². Stein Ringen’s riposte, *How Democracies Live*, suggests a menu of institutional and policy reforms that could and should be supported to shore up pluralistic systems, with a narrative of governments having considerable scope to improve the core processes of representative democracy rather than ceding to democratic defeatism⁵³.

Many scholars have focused on the idea of building positive coalitions against autocratisation. For instance, Giovanni Capoccia’s *Defending Democracy* stresses the importance of political parties forming coalitions to isolate and alienate far-right extremist politicians. Capoccia warns that a limited centrist consensus does not provide enough to defend democracy and, in fact, often fails. He advocates for broader cross-ideological coalitions as a crucial element in maintaining democratic institutions under pressure⁵⁴. These works offer vital strategic suggestions in building defences against risks to democracy, a somewhat different focus from the more fundamental conceptual concerns of the autocratic ideologues.

A different focus has been placed on civic mobilisation and social movements worldwide. John Keane’s concept of ‘*monitory democracy*’ highlights the need for more effective and innovative civic scrutiny of government power as the key to defending democracy⁵⁵. In *Can Democracy be Saved?*, Donatella della Porta argues that social movements are pivotal in the defence of democratic norms. According to della Porta, grassroots mobilisation plays an increasingly important

⁵² S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York, USA: Broadway Books, 2018.

⁵³ S. Ringen, *How Democracies Live*, Chicago University Press: Chicago, USA, 2024

⁵⁴ G. Capoccia, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, USA, 2005.

⁵⁵ J. Keane, *The Shortest History of Democracy*. Melbourne, Australia: Schwartz Books, 2022.

role against authoritarian resurgence, especially in contexts when democratic institutions are weakened. Civic mobilisation globally demonstrates that bottom-up civic pressure is the first and most significant line of defence against democratic backsliding – a significant finding because donors have not offered strong support to such movements. This angle indirectly speaks to subsections 3.2 and 3.4 above, with its conviction that collective mobilisation can boost societal support for democratic values and move democracy beyond narrow individualism.

More indirectly related to the same criticisms of 'actually existing democracy', another common focus in recent years has been on defending democracy through innovative forms of citizen participation. Simon Tormey's seminal *The End of Representative Politics* stresses moves towards a post-representative form of democratic politics that restores citizens' trust in institutions⁵⁶. Hélène Landemore in *Open Democracy* and David Van Reybrouck in *Against Elections* push for sortition-based citizen assemblies and a reform to election-based representative democracy that guarantees citizens' ongoing involvement in political affairs and decision-making⁵⁷. Jon Alexander's *Citizens* calls for looser and active forms of citizen engagement as core to reviving democracy against illiberals⁵⁸. The assumption is that more participative forms of democracy will help hold the authoritarian temptation at bay. Richard Youngs' *Democratic Crossroads* chronicles how such participative engagement has helped democracies soften multiple crises over the last two decades, questioning ideologues' claims, outlined above, that autocracy deals with crises more effectively⁵⁹.

In *Ill Winds*, Larry Diamond calls for wider solidarity and alliances between democratic and strategic countermeasures against authoritarianism. This argument aligns with the arguments of William Dobson, Tarek Masoud and Christopher Walker in *Defending Democracy against Sharp Power*. This volume pushes democracies to do more to counter disinformation and invest in strengthening democratic resilience abroad⁶⁰. The concern here is to encourage more assertive geostrategy against authoritarian power, which differs from addressing the conceptual underpinnings of autocracy.

Speaking more pointedly to subsections 3.2 and 3.4 above, Francis Fukuyama, in *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, argues that democracy should be best preserved through a fundamental recasting of liberalism to ensure a better balance between individual rights and social cohesion⁶¹. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's *The Narrow Corridor* argues that stronger state powers are needed to balance strong civil societies, if democracies are to deliver on public goods and restore trust⁶². Addressing the critiques above regarding narrow individualism, many analysts have

⁵⁶ S. Tormey, *The End of Representative Politics*, Polity Press: Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2015.

⁵⁷ H. Landemore, *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, USA, 2020; D. Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*. London, United Kingdom: Bodley Head, 2016.

⁵⁸ J. Alexander, *Citizens: Why the Key to Fixing Everything Is All of Us*, Canbury Press, London, United Kingdom, 2021.

⁵⁹ R. Youngs, *Democratic Crossroads: Transformations in 21st Century Politics*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 2024.

⁶⁰ L. Diamond, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage: Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*. Penguin Press: New York, USA, 2019; W. J., Dobson, T. Masoud and C. Walker (eds), *Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power*, National Endowment for Democracy: Washington, DC, USA, 2023.

⁶¹ F. Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, USA, 2022.

⁶² D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson, *The Narrow Corridor: How Nations Struggle for Liberty*, Penguin Press: New York, USA, 2020.

asserted that democracy can and must be revived through a shift in economic paradigm. These experts stress that the tension between capitalism and democracy has deepened due to neoliberal economics. They advocate for economic policies that prioritise improving democratic accountability over markets, along with increased civil society involvement in economic decision-making and democratic processes within corporations (and, in the most progressive versions, the establishment of radical worker cooperatives). This generally goes hand in hand with a call for strengthened welfare states and reduced economic inequality as the essential conditions to generate a more collective form of democratic governance oriented to the general will.

Amongst the huge number of works focusing on this pro-democratic perspective, prime examples include: Richard D. Wolff's *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (2012), Wolfgang Streeck's *How Will Capitalism End?* (2016), Colin Crouch's *The Globalization Backlash* (2018), Wendy Brown's *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (2019), Joseph E. Stiglitz's *People, Power, and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent* (2019), Yanis Varoufakis' *Another Now* (2020) and Martin Wolf's *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (2023). More tailored to this report's concerns, Paolo Gerbaudo's *The Great Recoil* advocates for a new statist economic model as the foundation for democratic restoration⁶³.

A large number of books argue for controls on tech companies as essential to defending democracy. One illustrative example of this vast field is Marietje Schaake's *Tech Coup: How to Save Democracy from Silicon Valley*, which argues that the unchecked influence of tech giants and the growing prevalence of disinformation today pose an increasing threat to society and public discourse. Schaake, like many others, calls for action by democratic governments to regulate tech companies and strengthen public infrastructure⁶⁴.

In sum, while pro- and anti-democracy thinkers have been increasingly active in developing their respective cases, the two sides of this debate are somewhat mismatched. Most of the pro-democracy narratives speak indirectly more than directly to the five themes raised by the autocratic ideologues. They are concerned with strategic or process changes that might help hold autocracy at bay, while the ideologues build a more principled set of arguments against democracy. The EU's challenge is to rebut the anti-democratic arguments more directly and demonstrate their shortcomings more convincingly.

5 Trends in and drivers of autocratisation

In line with this paper's remit, a significant question is how these ideological critiques relate to contemporary autocratic dynamics. At a general level, the authoritarian ideas outlined above both reflect and feed into an ongoing global autocratic surge. All major democracy indices tell the story of an autocratic wave gaining momentum worldwide over the last 10 to 15 years.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2025 Democracy Index reports a global democracy score of 5.17 at the end of 2024, a historical low and down from 5.5 in 2006. In this index, authoritarian regimes are now the largest category of political system, comprising 60 such regimes globally, or roughly a

⁶³ P. Gerbaudo, *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic*, Verso: London, United Kingdom, 2021.

⁶⁴ M. Schaake, *The Tech Coup: How to Save Democracy from Silicon Valley*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 2024.

third of the world's countries. The V-Dem 2025 report finds that 72 % of the planet's population is now living under autocracy (electoral and closed autocracy combined), an increase from 48 % a decade earlier; for the first time in over two decades, the number of autocracies (91) exceeds the number of democracies (88)⁶⁵.

Different kinds of dynamics underlie these trends. One is that most authoritarian regimes have become even more authoritarian⁶⁶. Another is that democracies are being infused with more notable elements of authoritarianism⁶⁷. The trend is powerful because it flows from multiple drivers, including identity, security and political factors⁶⁸. Experts highlight a need to focus analytically on autocracy itself and to correct the longstanding tendency to treat it simply as a residual absence of democracy⁶⁹. This resonates with the autocratic ideologues' five themes above.

5.1 The debate over illiberal value shifts

The issues above that are especially prominent in accounts of contemporary autocratisation are the critiques of liberal secularism and individualism. Some authors have detected what they term an 'authoritarian reflex' among groups that feel their traditional values are under threat from a generally more liberal majority⁷⁰.

Many surveys have generated results which suggest that voters' tilt towards authoritarian values has driven the rise in support for ethno-populist parties⁷¹. Pew Research Center 2024 data suggests that a median of 31 % across 24 nations support authoritarian systems⁷². With less ideological difference on economic or security issues, competition between parties has shifted to the realm of values and identity. A commonly heard line is that democracy has become too tightly associated with a narrow range of liberal identity values; those not sharing these values feel unrepresented in democratic systems, and this has stoked appeal for anti-democratic parties. Surveys in the USA and European countries have shown that many voters have become more partisan on identity issues to the extent of overlooking their preferred party's disregard for some democratic norms, especially the abridgement of civil liberties⁷³.

Data shows that much autocratisation has come from reactionary nationalist parties that have stressed identity issues as core to their anti-democratic positions⁷⁴. This perspective suggests that there is a psychological aspect to autocratic trends, as citizens experience rising anxiety and

⁶⁵ V-Dem Institute, [Democracy Report 2025 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?](#), March 2025.

⁶⁶ G. Ekiert and N. Dasanaik, '[The Return of Dictatorship](#)' *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 35, No 4, 2024, pp. 177-191.

⁶⁷ B. Wejnert, (ed.), [The Global Rise of Autocracy: Its Threat to a Sustainable Future](#), 1st edition, Routledge: New York, USA, 2025.

⁶⁸ L. Diamond, '[Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes](#)', *Democratization*, Vol 28, No 1, 2020, pp. 22-42.

⁶⁹ D. Slater, '[The authoritarian origins of the third wave](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 36, No 2, 2025, pp. 118-129.

⁷⁰ P. Norris and R. Inglehart, [Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism](#), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2019.

⁷¹ A. Azedi, '[Which Values Distinguish Supporters of Radical Right Populist Parties From Their Rivals? Political Authoritarianism As a Key Ideological Feature](#)', *Political Studies*, Vol 1, 2025.

⁷² L. Silver and J. Fetterolf, '[Who Likes Authoritarianism, And How Do They Want To Change Their Government?](#)', Pew Research Center, 28 February 2024.

⁷³ M. H. Graham and M. W. Svobik, '[Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States](#)', *American Political Science Review*, Vol 114, No 2, 2020, pp. 392- 409.

⁷⁴ V- Dem, '[V- Party Dataset](#)', webpage, nd.

increasingly seek order, as well as a sense of belonging. They often judge liberal norms as failing on this score. Many anti-liberal projects have tipped over into anti-democratic dynamics, building their supporting narratives step by step as they do so. Many non-democratic regimes engage in much more discursive justification, legitimation and legal rationalisation of authoritarian practices than previously⁷⁵.

This is highly significant in conceptual terms: so-called modernisation theory posits that economic modernisation tends to open the way for social liberalisation and democracy. Yet, in many countries over recent years, economic development and growth have appeared to have prompted the rise of more illiberal values. In turn, these social values have militated against democratisation following economic development⁷⁶. There is much to suggest that the ideological critiques of liberal individualism above find an echo in contemporary drivers of authoritarianism.

Some writers contest these arguments. They insist that autocratic dynamics have not spread from citizens' shift away from liberal individualism but rather 'from the top down' – that is, from individual leaders and executives adopting skilful tactics that weaken democratic checks and balances. Some leaders have proven adept in this regard, while others have not⁷⁷.

Experts have been paying increasing attention to country-specific tactics adopted by leaders and governments to erode democracy or tighten authoritarian repression. Notwithstanding headlines from democracy indices alluding to a sweeping autocratic wave, the variation in political trends between countries has widened in the last decade. This raises doubts about the all-encompassing ideological drivers of autocratisation.

Instead, the principal motivation behind autocratisation has in recent years been fuelled by leaders' strategies of power preservation. Autocratisation has taken root in countries where governments have been effective in using and fuelling grievances and then moving in stages to neutralise checks and balances. In many states, political elites have become more astute in how they slowly dismantle democracy to protect their own power. Leaders have themselves, 'from the top', fostered illiberal identities by exaggerating threats, cultivating resentments and fanning the flames of xenophobia⁷⁸.

Today's autocratic leaders have become strikingly skilful in their tactics, and this has underpinned their tightened grip on power⁷⁹. They have successfully employed tactics of incrementalism, subtly chipping away at civil liberties and countervailing powers, which helps explain their populations' forbearance of autocratisation. While many autocrats still deploy the classic tools of repression – indeed, these are becoming more severe and brutal, with killings of democratic activists increasing dramatically – many now use more subtle authoritarianism tools.

⁷⁵ M. Khosla, M., ['The authoritarian argument'](#), *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 36, No 3, July 2025; J. Gerschewski, *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2024.

⁷⁶ D. Silander, ['Building Democracy: National and International Factors'](#), in G. Wang (ed), *Globalization*, Intech Open: London, United Kingdom, 2017.

⁷⁷ L. Bartels, ['Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe'](#), Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, USA, 2023.

⁷⁸ L. Bartels, ['Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe'](#), Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey: USA, 2023.

⁷⁹ S. Guriev and D. Treisman, ['Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century'](#), Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, USA, 2022.

These include the delegitimisation and demonisation of democratic actors, pre-emptive messaging and the development of illiberal narratives that appear to appeal to significant parts of the population, controlling information, and the creation of more self-confident illiberal narratives. These strategies are not as violent or repressive as previous authoritarian regimes but trickier to rebut as a result⁸⁰. In the context of this paper, such a line implies that the ongoing autocratic surge is not strongly rooted in the kind of citizen rejection of liberal values that anti-democratic ideologues lay claim to.

5.2 Digital technology

Autocratic trends in recent years clearly foreground the concept outlined above of a technological elite gaining leverage to the detriment of democracy. It has become increasingly clear that many aspects of digital technologies have had a negative impact on democracy and contributed to the rise of authoritarian dynamics. Some of the autocratic impacts are inherent to the nature of digital technology itself, while others stem from revised business models and corporate structures that have emerged to govern the digital sphere. Technology companies have gained power over states; states, in turn, have gained technological power over their citizens⁸¹.

The power of large technology companies has taken power away from democratically elected governments and undermined their accountability. Data companies provide an increasing number of services to public bodies that influence policies with little or no accountability⁸². The use of social media has been especially influential in the far-right's rise, with radical parties' presence online exceeding their vote shares in most countries. American technology companies, as highlighted by Carnegie Europe, 'are now clearly using their control of platforms to distort and neuter online debate even more overtly for political ends'⁸³. In this latest phase, the power of 'big tech' has expanded beyond standard lobbying power to insinuate itself into the core fabric of democratic decision-making⁸⁴. The richest person in the world, Elon Musk, deployed Artificial Intelligence (AI) in his takeover of the USA's state bodies against democratic checks and balances⁸⁵.

Digital technology has also provided the kind of enhanced surveillance powers that assist authoritarianism⁸⁶. The focus has shifted from a belief in digitally led 'liberation technology' to a gathering momentum of 'digital authoritarianism'. Digital surveillance has become a prominent part of authoritarian regimes' toolbox for maintaining power and quashing democratic movements both within and beyond their own borders. Even many relatively democratic governments have deployed

⁸⁰ D. Slater, '[The authoritarian origins of the third wave](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 36, No 2, 2025, pp. 118-129.

⁸¹ T. Roberts and M. Oosterom, '[Digital authoritarianism: a systematic literature review](#)', *Information Technology for Development*, 2024, pp. 01-25.

⁸² M. Schaake, [The Tech Coup: How to Save Democracy from Silicon Valley](#), Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 2024; S. Feldstein, [The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance](#), Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 2021.

⁸³ R. Youngs, '[Rethinking EU Digital Policies: From Tech Sovereignty to Tech Citizenship](#)', *Carnegie Europe*, 16 June 2025.

⁸⁴ E. García Guitián and L. Bouza García, '[Democracy vs. Digital Giants: Is the EU Ready to Protect Democracy from Digital Oligarchs?](#)', *Verfassungsblog*, 03 February 2025.

⁸⁵ K. Chayka, '[Elon Musk's AI-fuelled war on human agency](#)', *The New Yorker*, 12 February 2025.

⁸⁶ A. Fields-Meyer, J. Haven, '[AI's Alarming Trend Toward Illiberalism: Left ungoverned, the technology opens pathways to undermine democracy](#)', *Foreign Policy*, 31 October 2024.

such means against their own citizens⁸⁷. Embryonic AI has 'raised the prospect of further intimidation against democratic institutions'⁸⁸.

Many experts fear that the spread of generative AI has more recently taken these autocratic dynamics a step further⁸⁹. There are mounting fears that AI will even further undermine democratic politics by subverting democratic agency and representation as well as eroding political trust⁹⁰. As highlighted by Carnegie Europe, 'The latest iteration of AI models has dramatically intensified digital interference in elections and the spread of disinformation tailored to accentuate people's existing biases'⁹¹. Algorithms militate against democracy's signature capacity for self-corrective change as they reinforce existing patterns of behaviour and stifle citizen-led policy correction – democracy's defining dynamic⁹². All this reflects the autocratic ideologues' espousal of technologically driven control and order.

5.3 Crisis and order

An element of the ideological perspective above that has come back strongly to the foreground of political trends is the focus on crisis. Many observers have in recent years attested to democracies struggling to deal effectively with 'the era of crisis'.

In today's age of polycrisis, successive crises seem to have favoured centralised power – very much in line with so much anti-democratic writing over the centuries. The combination of different crises in recent years has produced an almost permanent sense of crisis⁹³. Key crises have increasingly come to act as powerful drivers of political change, including the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic spill-over and the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. These crises have unfolded more or less together and this clustering magnifies their overall political impact. Each has intensified the risks and difficulties that democracy faces in different parts of the world, in some ways stimulating authoritarianism.

Climate and ecological stresses have in some places fuelled authoritarian dynamics. Autocratic regimes have assumed more power under the guise of managing energy transition and the dramatic

⁸⁷ S. Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 2021.

⁸⁸ R. Youngs, *Rebuilding European Democracy: Resistance and Renewal in an Illiberal Age*, 2022, op. cit. See also. S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the Frontier of Power*, Profile Books: London, United Kingdom, 2019; M. Moore, *Democracy Hacked: How Technology is Destabilizing Global Politics*, Oneworld Publications, London, United Kingdom, 2018.

⁸⁹ R. Csernaton, *Can Democracy Survive the Disruptive Power of AI?*, *Carnegie Europe*, 18 December 2024.

⁹⁰ A. Desmarais, *'AI chatbots intentionally spreading election-related disinformation, study finds'*, *Euronews*, June 8, 2024.

⁹¹ R. Youngs, *'Rethinking EU Digital Policies: From Tech Sovereignty to Tech Citizenship'*, *Carnegie Europe*, 16 June 2025.

⁹² J. Susskind, *The Digital Republic: On Freedom and Democracy in the 21st Century*, Pegasus Books: New York, USA, 05 July 2022.

⁹³ A. Tooze, *'Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis'*, *Financial Times*, 28 October 2022.

effects of extreme weather'⁹⁴. Democratic governments have also 'taken on emergency climate powers that abridge democratic pluralism'⁹⁵.

The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to intensify authoritarian dynamics, as governments around the world appropriated stronger executive powers; it has left a 'legacy deeply troubling for open politics in some countries and has in some places provided a cloak for harsher authoritarian surveillance and control'⁹⁶.

Russia's war in Ukraine has led to a security crisis that other autocratic regimes are using to tighten their own grip on power; one example is how regimes in the Sahel have used their own security crises to shore up their hold on power, as many citizens in this region question democracy's ability to deliver stability. Indeed, geopolitical crises increasingly elide into the general security factors raised by anti-democratic ideologues, as mentioned above.

As Western governments have focused more tightly on their security concerns, their commitments to democracy have, in many cases, lost pre-eminence. In contrast, authoritarian powers have become more assertive in supporting autocratic norms and undermining democracy⁹⁷. The geopolitical alliances of anti-democratic actors have become a factor in the autocratic surge and Western governments have had to respond with a shift towards *realpolitik*⁹⁸. Many analysts see this as the crucial explanatory driver of the current autocratic wave⁹⁹. In this way, exogenous threats to democracy have added to the endogenous security drivers of democratic malaise¹⁰⁰. The Trump-Vance administration's turn away from international democracy support in 2025 takes this trend a dramatic step further.

A final aspect of crisis derives from the economic recessions and financial crises that have hit hard in recent years. Many studies cite the economic crisis of the 2010s as having been a prime driver of democratic regression and autocratisation¹⁰¹. While much of this focus was on the eurozone crisis in Europe and developments in the USA, the economic prism also had global relevance, with drivers evident elsewhere. Yet, some writers question this explanation, insisting that there is no compelling connection between economic and political trends. Autocratising states from the mid-2010s, such as India, Poland, Tanzania, Serbia, the Philippines and Türkiye, all recorded strong economic growth as they moved away from democracy¹⁰². Conversely, authoritarian regimes have not overall

⁹⁴ R. Youngs, [Democratic Crossroads. Transformations in Twenty First-Century Politics](#), Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 23 September 2024, op. cit.

⁹⁵ R. Youngs, [Democratic Crossroads. Transformations in Twenty First-Century Politics](#), Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 23 September 2024, op. cit.

⁹⁶ R. Youngs, [Democratic Crossroads. Transformations in Twenty First-Century Politics](#), Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 23 September 2024, op. cit.

⁹⁷ D. Slater, '[The authoritarian origins of the third wave](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 36, No 2, 2025, pp. 118-129.

⁹⁸ M. Glasius, [Authoritarian Practices in a Global Age](#), Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 2023.

⁹⁹ L. Diamond, '[Democracy's Arc: From Resurgent to Imperiled](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 33, No 1, 2022, pp. 163- 179. Cite Cooley book, 2025. A. Cooley, A. Dukalskis, [Dictating the Agenda: The Authoritarian Resurgence in World Politics](#), Oxford University Press: Oxford, United Kingdom, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ J. Gerschewski, '[Erosion or Decay? Conceptualizing Causes and Mechanisms of Democratic Regression](#)', *Democratization*, Vol 28, No 1, 2021, pp. 43-62.

¹⁰¹ J. Møller, A. Schmotz and S. Skaaning, '[Economic Crisis and Democratic Breakdown in the Interwar Years: A Reassessment](#)', *Historical Social Research*, Vol 40, No 2, 2015, pp. 301-318.

¹⁰² T. Carothers and B. Hartnett, '[Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 35, No 3, 2024, pp. 24-37.

performed better than democracies either in generating economic growth or in reducing inequalities¹⁰³.

6 EU responses to autocratisation

Support for democracy has been a core component of the EU's external action for decades. Its active backing for democratic norms is intrinsic to its own identity. The EU has defined itself as a community of democracies, but also stressed the need to foster democratic politics elsewhere¹⁰⁴. In the 1990s, such support emerged as an explicit EU external foreign policy objective, and it solidified as a separate policy within its broader development assistance framework. Momentarily, during the Arab Spring, democracy support gained prominence in the EU's external action¹⁰⁵. In the early 2010s, the EU advanced the concepts of 'deep democracy' and 'more for more' – the latter referring to rewards for partner countries making substantial progress on democracy through additional financial support available through various types of cooperation¹⁰⁶.

However, since then, the EU has faced multi-faceted challenges, with democracy and the rules-based order having come under increasing strain amid mounting autocratisation and escalating geopolitical competition at the international level, as detailed above. Other actors, such as China and Russia, started to offer countries alternative partnerships without conditions for democracy and political reform and even raised the prospect of a competitive 'autocracy promotion'¹⁰⁷. The EU increasingly labelled itself as 'geopolitical' and began developing policies to ensure its 'strategic autonomy'¹⁰⁸. Since the early 2020s, challenges to democracy and the rules-based international order have intensified further amid widening global crises.

The EU has expanded its efforts to contain autocratisation, keep up with global competition and win a 'battle of offers'¹⁰⁹. Reflecting their more defensive mindset, European policy-makers have increasingly prioritised the containment of autocracies as a way of safeguarding the rules-based order. The EU has grappled with the challenge of making a switch from previously offering support to maintain an era of positive democratic gains to now offering counter-authoritarian strategies that address the worrying dynamics outlined in the previous section.

¹⁰³ T. Carothers and B. Hartnett, '[Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 35, No 3, 2024, pp. 24–37.

¹⁰⁴ S. Lavenex, and F. Schimmelfennig, '[EU Democracy Promotion in the Neighbourhood: from Leverage to Governance?](#)', *Democratization*, Vol 18, No 4, 2011, pp. 885–909.

¹⁰⁵ A. Wetzel, J. Orbie and F. Bossuyt, '[One of What Kind? Comparative Perspectives on the Substance of EU Democracy Promotion](#)', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* Vol 28, No 1, 2015, pp. 21–34.

¹⁰⁶ European Commission, '[Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council Human Rights and Democracy at the Heart of EU External Action –Towards a More Effective Approach](#)', COM(2011)886, 12 December 2011.

¹⁰⁷ P. Burnell, '[Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?](#)', *FRIDE*, Working Paper 96, March 2010.

¹⁰⁸ P. Haroche, '[A 'Geopolitical Commission': Supranationalism Meets Global Power Competition](#)', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol 61, No 4, 2023, pp. 970–987; T. Varma, '[European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe](#)', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol 47, 2024, pp. 65–83.

¹⁰⁹ European External Action Service, '[Global Gateway Forum: speech by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Closing plenary session](#)', Press Release, 23 October 2023.

6.1 EU policy instruments

The EU has various mechanisms at its disposal to foster democracy in third countries but it has also built an internal tool for democratic conditionality to use against member state governments that are complicit in democratic backsliding and severe human rights violations. The fact that the EU mainstreams democracy through its external action and engages with partners on a variety of economic, humanitarian, security, and investment matters provides the EU with leverage that it can use to its advantage¹¹⁰. The EU is widely criticised for favouring economic or trade interests over support for democracy when striking migration, energy, or trade deals with authoritarian countries such as Egypt, Azerbaijan and Tunisia. Still, there are examples of the EU's ability to have a positive impact through the combined use of punitive measures and democracy funding to resist autocratisation and ensure support for democracy on the ground.

6.1.1 The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy

The EU's external democracy support policy is implemented within the framework of the 2020–2024 Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy¹¹¹. This Action Plan offers strategic guidance and priorities for the EU's democracy support agenda externally. The EU first developed a comprehensive strategy for democracy in 2012, which outlined its key principles and priorities and stressed the importance of streamlining democracy and human rights into all the EU's external relations¹¹². To put the framework into action, the European External Action Service also adopted three successive Action Plans on Human Rights and Democracy. The current Action Plan is the latest of these documents, which offers some innovations and adjustments based on the experience of previous implementation, but analysts suggest that it lacks clear indicators for measuring progress¹¹³. Although the Action Plan was supposed to end in 2024, the EU decided on an extension until 2027 so as to align with the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

6.1.2 Funding measures

The EU has, for over three decades, allocated funding expressly to support democracy, especially in countries where the threat of autocratisation has been particularly high. Since 2021, the EU has provided support for democracy through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe), which merged various former EU external financing instruments. NDICI funding is channelled through geographic and thematic programmes including a dedicated programme on Human Rights and Democracy¹¹⁴. For 2017–21 thematic programmes amounted to EUR 6.358 billion, which included funds under the thematic

¹¹⁰ C. Brasseur, V. Pachta and C. Grigolo, [The EU's External Democracy Action in a New Geopolitical Reality: Recommendations Report](#), International IDEA, 30 January 2023.

¹¹¹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024](#), JOIN(2020) 5 final, 25 March 2020.

¹¹² E. Mantoiu and S. Eslinger, ['New EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy: A pledge to a more inclusive future'](#), European Partnership for Democracy, November 2020.

¹¹³ R. Youngs and E. Ventura, ['The EU Pushes Back a New Democracy Plan: a Mistake?'](#), *European Democracy Hub*, 23 September 2024.

¹¹⁴ European Commission, ['Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe \(NDICI – Global Europe\)'](#), webpage, nd.

programme for Human Rights and Democracy for: supporting and protecting human rights defenders; strengthening democratic institutions; promoting pluralistic societies; fighting disinformation; and fostering an enabling environment for civil society. Besides these thematic budget lines, geographic programmes also incorporate human rights and democracy as a cross-cutting priority as part of the multiannual programmes and annual action plans, offering support for media, anti-discrimination measures and civil society participation.

On 16 July 2025, the European Commission presented its proposal for a new MFF for the period 2028–2034. This proposal suggests the abolishment of thematic programmes and envisages structuring foreign policy exclusively on geographic pillars, which aligns with the Commission’s main objective, namely defending the EU’s global interests¹¹⁵.

Since 2000, the EU has deployed and funded over 180 Election Observation Missions in more than 65 countries¹¹⁶. The EU also provides financial support to Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) under authoritarian pressure and has not only significantly developed programmes and guidelines to support those defenders at risk, but also considerably increased its support over the past decade. Since its launch in 2015, through the ProtectDefenders.eu mechanism, the EU has provided support to more than 80 000 individuals facing increasingly hostile environments¹¹⁷. In 2021, the EU announced that it would further expand its support, allocating EUR 30 million for the 2022–2027 period to ProtectDefenders.eu, in response to growing attacks on HRDs globally, who face higher risks¹¹⁸. The European Commission and some EU Member States provide funding to the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), which supports activists working in especially restrictive contexts under authoritarian pressure. In 2023, the EED published its report to assess the first 10 years of operations. In summary, it has awarded nearly 2 200 grants to democracy activists and independent media across 34 countries¹¹⁹.

6.1.3 Human Rights Dialogues

In 2021, the EU revised its Guidelines for Human Rights Dialogues as a means of pursuing its policy on human rights through external action¹²⁰. Currently, the EU is engaged in such dialogues with over 60 countries and regional groups, thereby providing a platform for addressing concerns regarding autocratic repression, including growing attacks on civil society, threats to the rule of law and clampdowns on activists as well as media organisations. The dialogues result in action-oriented roadmaps, which the EU uses in combination with other instruments – such as political dialogues, public diplomacy, demarches, cooperation programmes, support to civil society and election monitoring – to promote impact on the ground and policy improvements when engaging with

¹¹⁵ European Partnership for Democracy, [The EU Multiannual Financial Framework](#), 16 July 2025.

¹¹⁶ European External Action Service, [‘EU Election Observation Missions’](#), webpage, nd.

¹¹⁷ PROTECTDEFENDERS.eu, [‘The PROTECTDEFENDERS.eu Temporary Relocation Programme: Supporting Defenders in the Most Challenging Contexts’](#), webpage, 18 December 2024.

¹¹⁸ European Commission, [‘Human rights: EU increases support to the protection of human rights defenders worldwide’](#), Press Release, 29 September 2022.

¹¹⁹ European Endowment for Democracy, [‘Annual Report 2023’](#), webpage, nd.

¹²⁰ European Union, [EU guidelines on human rights dialogues with non-EU countries](#), webpage, nd.

partner countries¹²¹. Over the last decade, the EU has nearly doubled the number of countries and regional groups it engages with through human rights dialogues – from 35 in 2014 to 60 in 2024¹²². Around half of these countries are authoritarian or hybrid regimes, including China, Russia, Egypt, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Venezuela, Cuba and a number of Central Asian states. These dialogues cover issues such as repression, restrictions on civil society, media censorship, political imprisonments and failure to uphold the rule of law. They serve as one of the key platforms for the EU not only to push back against autocratisation but also to foster support for democracy and human rights reforms.

6.1.4 Sanctions

In 2020, the EU adopted the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (GHRSR), similar to measures taken by the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) – also referred to as Magnitsky sanctions. This allowed the EU to widen the scope of actors it can sanction, from state to non-state actors globally. In 2024, the EU applied the GHRSR to 50 individuals and 13 entities, largely targeting mid-level officials. In the aftermath of the regime's renewal towards the end of 2024, the EU's targeting has increased significantly to include 116 individuals and 33 entities from Belarus, China, Iran, Israel, Myanmar, Russia and Sudan, as well as other people linked with Hamas¹²³.

6.1.5 Democracy support initiatives of the European Parliament

The European Parliament plays a significant role in supporting democracy externally, both through its own mechanisms and by influencing other institutions' democracy policies. The European Parliament does not have its own external funding programmes or instruments, but it does have budgetary oversight over the EU's funding instruments related to human rights and democracy, including the NDICI – Global Europe instrument. Beyond budgetary oversight, the European Parliament has several relevant tools. These include:

- (i) Human rights resolutions are adopted monthly and monitor developments globally and frequently condemn violations, urging the EU to implement robust responses. The European Parliament has used these emergency procedures to address some of the challenges related to autocratisation¹²⁴. It has adopted a huge number of resolutions condemning autocratic abuses in many countries, including but not limited to China, Belarus, Georgia, Venezuela and the like. However, it is striking that these parliamentary procedures have not grappled with the kind of conceptual appeals that favour autocracy, as outlined above. Instead, the Parliament restricts itself to general and ritual condemnations of anti-democratic trends.
- (ii) Human rights reports. The European Parliament produces detailed reports concerning the human rights situation in particular countries or regions to offer guidance and recommendations for the EU's intervention. Its detailed debates offer scrutiny over the EU's Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World, thereby providing key occasions for MEPs to raise

¹²¹ European External Action Service, '[Revised EU Guidelines on Human Rights Dialogues with Partner/Third Countries](#)', 6279/21, 2021.

¹²² EU Monitor, '[Draft EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World in 2014](#)', webpage, nd.

¹²³ Carnegie Europe, '[European Democracy Support Annual Review 2024](#)', January 2025.

¹²⁴ European Parliament, '[Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament, Title V, Chapter 5, Rule 150. Debates on cases of breaches of human rights, democracy and the rule of law](#)', January 2025.

and debate autocratisation trends. EP's annual report 2024 on human rights and democracy in the world and the EU's policy on the matter stress that the EU needs to be fully equipped to confront the surge in authoritarianism and the increasing breaches of human rights and democratic principles¹²⁵.

- (iii) The Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) monitors human rights globally and oversees the respect for human rights in the EU's external policies and actions, so that it remains a central element of the EU's international relations, in compliance with the Treaties. DROI focuses mainly on specific human rights abuses rather than the broader issues raised above by pro-autocracy ideologues¹²⁶.
- (iv) The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, established in 1988, is awarded annually by the European Parliament to individuals or groups who have dedicated their lives to the defence of human rights and freedom. The Sakharov Prize aims to raise global awareness, thereby providing moral and political support to democracy activists¹²⁷.
- (v) The Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) coordinates the European Parliament's global democracy support, focusing on election observation, strengthening parliamentary capacities, protecting human rights, as well as facilitating political mediation and dialogue. Its concrete instruments include election observation missions, parliamentary electoral dialogues, as well as training seminars for Members of Parliament and their staff. DEG deploys short-term election observation delegations and engages in long-term missions through the EU Election Observation Missions and international missions led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with recent examples including the planned 2025 observation activities in Moldova, as well as post-electoral dialogues in Kenya and Senegal.

The DEG's parliamentary support is designed to strengthen core democratic functions, such as citizen representation, legislative oversight and governmental accountability, through customised capacity-building initiatives. In regions with critical democratic challenges, such as Ukraine and Moldova, DEG conducts tailored programmes such as the Jean Monnet Dialogue process, part of the DEG's mediation efforts, which facilitates discreet inter-party discussions to build trust and consensus among political groups in partner parliaments, such as those in Ukraine and North Macedonia. Another strategic initiative, the Young Political Leaders programme, engages future political and civic leaders from regions such as the Western Balkans, Armenia and Africa, promoting tolerance, political dialogue and democratic practices. DEG also prioritises empowerment programmes for women parliamentarians, focusing on tailored training and direct engagement with parliamentary institutions to help realise inclusive democratic governance¹²⁸.

¹²⁵ European Parliament, [Report of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 2024 Annual Report](#), 22 May 2025.

¹²⁶ European Parliament, ['About. Welcome words by the Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights'](#), webpage, nd.

¹²⁷ European Parliament, [Sakharov prize](#), webpage, nd.

¹²⁸ European Parliament, [2024-2029 Global Democracy Support](#), Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG), 2025; European Parliament, [DEG Annual work programme 2025](#), Democracy Support & Election Coordination Group, 2025.

6.1.6 Commission Vice-President for Democracy

To reinforce the EU's political commitment to democracy amid rising autocratisation and democratic backsliding, the 1st von der Leyen Commission, which took office on 01 December 2019, created a new high-level position: Commission Vice-President for Democracy. This role was *inter alia* responsible for promoting democracy and fundamental rights globally, strengthening democratic resilience, supporting civic space and coordinating the EU's actions across different institutions to integrate democracy into EU policies. In the new Commission for 2024–2029, Henna Virkkunen serves as Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy. However, her mission letter and mandate do not place a strong focus on external democracy support¹²⁹. In the new Commission, the Vice President for Democracy is complemented by Commissioner Michael McGrath, who holds the portfolio of Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law, and Consumer Protection. However, his mandate does not encompass the EU's external democracy support¹³⁰.

6.2 Strong aspects of EU policies

In an increasingly transactional geopolitical order, the EU is one of the few foreign policy actors that still places democracy and support for human rights at the core of external action¹³¹. Given the EU Member States' capacity and influence globally, the EU's commitment to democracy also places high expectations on the Union. Given the increasing impact of autocratisation on politics and security in all its Member States, support for democracy is increasingly recognised as being of key relevance to the bloc's geostrategic interests.

While the impact and effectiveness of the EU's democracy support in containing autocratisation remain contested, some studies conclude that this aid has a positive impact on levels of democracy in recipient countries¹³². Research shows that democracy support can be successful when used with political conditionality and effective oversight mechanisms¹³³. Democracy practitioners, civil society representatives and experts working on democracy interviewed for this paper refer to three policy developments in the EU's democracy support toolbox as positive steps towards improving aid, which are discussed in the following sub-sections.

6.2.1 Flexible democracy support

All respondents interviewed for this study, working on democracy in the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the European Parliament, as well as civil society experts focusing on democracy, have praised the creation of a context-based, flexible and demand-driven democracy support instrument – the EED. In many countries worldwide, the EU's standards for reporting and access to funding continue to pose a significant challenge for civil society. According to experts working on democracy support, increasing pressure on civil society and digital threats

¹²⁹ European Commission, [Mission Letter](#), 17 September 2024.

¹³⁰ European Commission, ['Michael McGrath, COMMISSIONER \(2024-2029\) | Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection'](#), webpage, nd.

¹³¹ C. Brasseur, V. Pachta and C. Grigolo, [The EU's External Democracy Action in a New Geopolitical Reality](#), *International IDEA*, January 2023.

¹³² A. Gafuri, ['Can Democracy Aid Improve Democracy?'](#), *Democratization*, Vol 29, No 5, 2022, pp. 777–797.

¹³³ A. Gafuri, ['Can Democracy Aid Improve Democracy?'](#), *Democratization*, Vol 29, No 5, 2022, pp. 777–797.

further strengthen the case for flexible democracy support mechanisms that can operate in sensitive contexts, even when authoritarian governments pass repressive legislation, making the work of civil society organisations (CSOs), activists and independent media very difficult.

Another important development for flexible democracy assistance is linked to the diversification of civil society globally and the increasing role of informal activist and civic movements in pushing back against autocratisation¹³⁴. In many countries across the world, informal movements are increasingly acting as a counterweight to autocratisation and require better democracy support. Moving towards institutional, flexible and adaptable democracy support is considered by many local civic actors to be the most significant adjustment in democracy assistance over recent years.

6.2.2 More targeted sanctions

Notwithstanding its limitations, the GHRSR signifies a step forward in highlighting the importance of human rights within EU foreign policy and in strengthening instruments for supporting democracy and human rights across the world¹³⁵. Analysis since 2021 clearly demonstrates that the EU has successfully used sanctions in cases involving gender-based and sexual violence, particularly against those who restrict women and girls by limiting their access to education and justice, or against perpetrators of sexual violence during conflict. The EU has also been one of the first jurisdictions to impose sanctions in response to the use of facial recognition technology by Russia's repressive government to crack down on dissent¹³⁶. The regime has provided an important additional EU instrument that can have an impact when dealing with autocratisation strategically, as part of the wider democracy assistance toolbox. Some in the EU have moved to press for an additional anti-corruption sanctions framework, such as those operated by like-minded partners¹³⁷.

6.2.3 Responding to democratic openings

As pointed out earlier, despite the overarching surge of autocracy, citizens have mobilised for democracy and, in some cases, through elections or protest activities, managed to oust authoritarian leaders. Such democratic openings have become more numerous in recent years. The European Democracy Hub's recent report examined seven case studies, focusing on the assessment of European responses to democratic openings. It concludes that the EU provided increased support for civil society, in particular to local election-monitoring missions, which had a significant impact in generating domestic pressure during election periods. Although the EU's political and diplomatic measures were considered modest compared to those of the USA, the report positively assesses the EU's combined use of targeted democracy assistance with political pressure¹³⁸.

¹³⁴ R. Youngs, E. Panchulidze and C. Magoga, [A New Phase of Civic Movements Implications for International Democracy Support](#), *European Democracy Hub*, May 2025.

¹³⁵ C. Eckes, ['EU global human rights sanctions regime: is the genie out of the bottle?'](#), *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol 30, No 2, 2022, pp. 255-269.

¹³⁶ T. Tsertsvadze, [Sharpening the EU's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime](#), *European Democracy Hub*, March 2024.

¹³⁷ T. Tsertsvadze, [The European Union's Use of Global Human Rights Sanctions in 2023](#), *Open Society Foundations*, December 2023.

¹³⁸ R. Youngs (ed), ['European Responses to Moments of Democratic Opportunity'](#), *European Democracy Hub*, March 2025.

6.3 EU approaches compared to other actors

The EU is a strong supporter of multilateral cooperation and has often prioritised joint action and coordination through multilateral fora when exercising its foreign policy and engaging with third countries. A focus on democratic principles nominally lies at the core of the EU's multilateral agenda. In recent years, the international democracy assistance landscape has undergone a radical transformation, characterised by an increasing number of actors, a broader geographic reach, and diversification, with the scope of democracy support programmes extending beyond Western organisations. The United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe and the OSCE, together with their respective agencies, are among the most prominent multilateral organisations mandated to support democracy globally.

Through its UN Development Programme and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN contributes to global efforts in supporting democracy through development aid and technical support programmes. Yet, despite this broad geographic reach, its technocratic approach focuses on working with governments, which often limits its effectiveness, especially in authoritarian contexts where authorities significantly restrict the programme's focus and scope. In 2005, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) to support democratisation efforts around the world. UNDEF funding is primarily channelled through CSOs to encourage their participation in democratic processes¹³⁹. This has been a step towards addressing the existing criticism that the UN mostly works with governments. In 18 Rounds of Funding so far, UNDEF has provided support to over 920 two-year projects across 130 countries¹⁴⁰. Still, UNDEF funding is extremely small-scale and has, in recent years, not functioned as a stand-alone, high-level UN political commitment to counter authoritarianism.

The OSCE plays a complementary role to other democracy support organisations, as it specifically focuses on election observation, media freedom and conflict prevention. Its multi-faceted mandate, focusing on political, economic and human rights dimensions, resonates with the EU's democracy support agenda. Yet, its membership of 57 states, including authoritarian regimes such as Russia, limits its effectiveness in responding to autocratisation and providing democracy assistance¹⁴¹.

In 2000, a joint initiative of the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright and Polish Foreign Minister, Bronisław Geremek, the Community of Democracies was launched as an intergovernmental coalition of states working together to promote, defend and strengthen democracy worldwide. Over the past two decades, the Community of Democracies has supported civil society actors worldwide and played an important role in advancing democratisation and pushing back against autocratisation. However, its impact is limited due to an inconsistent approach towards democracy support and its own membership, as well as its low visibility and

¹³⁹ National Endowment for Democracy and The Johns Hopkins University Press, '[Documents on Democracy](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 21, No 4, 2010, pp. 179-183.

¹⁴⁰ United Nations, '[United Nations Democracy Fund](#)', webpage, nd.

¹⁴¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, '[OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights](#)', webpage, nd.

profile. Thus, it functions more as a symbolic and coordinating platform rather than a strong instrument for supporting and defending democracy¹⁴².

Recent years have witnessed an ever-increasing number of initiatives focused on protecting democracies from autocracies. In 2021, the Biden-Harris administration launched the Summit for Democracy and underscored the need for democracy to be protected consistently¹⁴³. This Summit provided a strategic geopolitical response to growing autocratisation and the need to build a coalition of like-minded partners to protect the rules-based order. Despite Hungary's exclusion from the Summit, the European Commission and individual EU Member States have co-led many thematic cohorts with an increasing role and greater visibility for the EU. In her speech at the third Summit, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasised that joining forces was necessary for the 'vitality of democracies' and preventing autocracies from 'attacking democracies from within'¹⁴⁴.

While all these initiatives have contributed to increasing the focus on supporting and defending democracy, individuals interviewed within this research stressed the emerging criticism towards the failure of international institutions, charging them with double standards and operational shortcomings. When asked whether they see structural reforms or the rejuvenation of existing formats as a solution, our interlocutors considered far-reaching reform highly unlikely. Meanwhile, the future of the Summit for Democracy appears gloomy; the USA's exclusion of Hungary prevented the EU from taking the lead on this initiative. In fact, interviewees stressed that the EU's increasing security challenges and resource constraints undermine the bloc's ability to lead new multilateral democracy efforts. Instead, they suggest making use of existing multilateral formats for coordination and expanding the scope of democracy supporters beyond the West.

6.3.1 The absence of global leadership

The landscape and architecture of democracy support have undergone significant shifts and changes over recent decades. The USA has traditionally championed the global agenda for democracy support, with President John F. Kennedy launching the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the 1960s to consolidate efforts for global development¹⁴⁵. Over the years, USAID's mandate has expanded to cover democratic governance as an important core of its operations, recognising the importance of democratic institutions for development. Two decades later, the US Congress established an independent institution, the National Endowment for Democracy, as part of the USA's global ambition to support democracy. Unlike USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy's mission and mandate are particularly focused on strengthening democratic institutions, with its flexible grant support to political activists and human rights organisations¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴² Community of Democracies, '[Who We Are](#)', webpage, nd.

¹⁴³ The White House, '[Remarks by President Biden at the Summit for Democracy Virtual Plenary on Democracy Delivering on Global Challenges](#)', 29 March 2023.

¹⁴⁴ European Commission, '[Speech by President von der Leyen at the third Summit for Democracy](#)', 20 March 2024.

¹⁴⁵ S. Patrick, '[Trump's Move to Gut USAID Reveals the Crux of His Foreign Policy](#)', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Commentary, 04 February 2025.

¹⁴⁶ National Endowment for Democracy, '[About the National Endowment for Democracy](#)', webpage, nd.

In contrast to the EU and other actors, the USA's approach to democracy support has been overtly political. The EU's foreign policy has always faced significant constraints, given the often-competing foreign policy priorities of its Member States. Relative to the EU, the USA's responses to both democratic backsliding and democratic openings have often (though not always) been more rapid, decisive, and political. This has commonly focused on diplomatic pressure and direct support for dissidents and opposition groups. In places such as Venezuela and Hong Kong, the USA has been instrumental in supporting local democratic movements through political pressure, as well as technical and financial support to local pro-democracy actors. Other actors have often criticised the USA's democracy support strategy as overtly political and, in some instances, interventionist.

By contrast, the EU's democracy support agenda has always been linked with its normative power and ability to promote democratic governance in its neighbourhood through structural reform and cooperation. Its democracy support is incentivised through and conditioned on access to the EU market, visa liberalisation and agreements providing trade preferences. The EU's approach is more technocratic and government-to-government than that of the USA, and it is focused on long-term institutional development alongside partners' legal and political alignment with the EU's operational framework. It has always been criticised for the lack of political clout as well as a late and often relatively cautious approach to democracy support. The EU engages with governments directly, including some authoritarian ones, while the USA more often openly confronts authoritarian leaders.

The USA's retreat from global democracy assistance has severe implications, primarily for democracy actors across the globe who are now left without means to pursue their important work against the autocratisation wave. Yet it also provides an opportunity for the EU and non-EU European donors to rethink their democracy support strategies. America's absence not only reduces financial assistance but also the protection of HRDs against autocratic regimes and immediate diplomatic responses to backsliding, which have mostly come from the USA.

7 Shortcomings in EU responses

Over the years, numerous accounts have charted the strengths and weaknesses of EU support for democracy, both globally and within the Union itself. While some of the weaknesses are relatively general in nature, some pertain more closely to the ideological arguments against democracy outlined above. Still, overall EU democracy policies do not show a close alignment with the arguments of the anti-democratic ideologues.

7.1 EU accommodation of autocratic regimes

More than specifically tackling anti-democratic arguments, the EU has in many countries around the world reached an accommodation with authoritarian regimes. While the EU routinely asserts that holding the autocratic wave at bay is its priority strategic interest, in practice, it has increasingly dealt with other policy aims first. The priorities laid out for the 2024–2029 institutional term contain virtually nothing related to external democracy promotion or an anti-autocratisation strategy, in contrast to the clear and prominent focus given to standard security and economic interests¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁷ European Commission, '[Europe's Choice, Political guidelines for the next European commission 2024–2029](#)', 18 July 2025.

While in 2022 the Russian invasion of Ukraine sharpened the EU's geopolitical focus on democracy, the place of counter-autocratisation in the Union's overarching approach to geopolitics now appears less certain. Trade priorities, critical minerals partnerships, climate goals, security cooperation, the Middle East conflict and other issues are all effectively cutting across democracy support goals. The EU has tightened new cooperation deals even with those regimes using the most blatant forms of autocratisation, such as the repressive non-governmental organisation laws that have multiplied around the world in the last two or three years¹⁴⁸.

The EU is not investing enough to have a significant impact on the autocratic wave. When the EU's overall aid flows are broken down, they amount to a modest few million Euros per year, even in those countries where the EU is engaged in such work, except for higher amounts going to candidate countries for EU membership. Democracy budgets are a tiny fraction of defence budgets or climate funding. Most EU Member States' spending on external democracy support is on a downward trajectory¹⁴⁹.

In the early stages of the new MFF negotiations, it is clear that democracy funding is coming under pressure as many governments seek to redirect funds to security and other budget lines. The priority attached to Global Gateway funding risks sidelining democracy funds as the infrastructure initiative becomes a primary vehicle for EU external funding, often to non-democratic regimes. Far more EU aid goes to autocratic governments than to democratic forces working against autocratisation. Notwithstanding its rhetorical commitments, in practice the EU offers more aid in *support* of autocratic regimes than it channels into efforts to constrain autocracy. For instance, in 2019, a striking 79 % of Official Development Assistance went to autocracies, up from 64 % in 2010, mainly due to the increased number of countries classified as autocratic regimes¹⁵⁰.

As described above, the EU's sanctions regimes have evolved in notable ways; yet, overall, there is relatively little punitive EU action adopted against autocratisation. A few of the countries that have experienced the most pronounced autocratisation have been subject to EU sanctions. Even where EU sanctions have been imposed, they are typically aimed at a handful of mid-level individual officials in particular countries rather than at the more systemic drivers of autocratisation, as outlined above. Even in candidate states, EU measures have been relatively weak against autocratisation in countries such as Georgia and Serbia¹⁵¹.

7.2 Failure to adapt democracy funding

EU democracy policies offer a great deal of highly valuable and well-designed funding as well as other forms of support. Most of this follows relatively generic templates that took shape in the earlier periods of the international democracy support agenda. It does not seem, though, that the

¹⁴⁸ Carnegie Europe, [European Democracy Support Annual Review 2024](#), January 2025.

¹⁴⁹ Euronews, ['German development aid: New spending cuts ahead'](#), 31 July 2025; France 24, ['France's global aid programmes at risk from 'unprecedented' budget cuts'](#), 24 July 2025; Government of the Netherlands, ['First development budget cuts announced: overhaul of grants for NGOs'](#), 11 November 2024; Donor tracker, ['Sweden slashes ODA budget amid domestic priorities'](#), 17 September 2024,

¹⁵⁰ de Tollenaere, M. [Development Assistance in Different Political Regime Contexts](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 24, 2023.

¹⁵¹ Akhvediani, T. ['Civic Mobilisations in Georgia and Serbia: Testing the EU's Enlargement Credibility'](#), REUNIR.

EU has yet fully adapted its democracy support policies to the era of autocratisation. The specificities of anti-democratic ideas and narratives still need to be fully incorporated into policy approaches.

EU democracy policies have begun to address some of the arguments and drivers outlined in the preceding sections, but not in a comprehensive or systematic manner. If it is the case that autocrats have developed different kinds of tactics and narratives that appear to have given authoritarianism some degree of appeal among citizens, then EU policies have not yet fully adjusted to tackle this crucial change. If it is the case that the critique of liberal individualism is gaining traction (a claim still contested, as explained above), then it is significant that EU policies have not adapted much to reflect this. The democracy support agenda has perhaps inadvertently become associated with one part of the political spectrum and is seen as hostile to traditional values and non-liberal identities.

If the EU wants to target specifically and correctly this identity-based element in ideologues' writings, its current approaches are not well-designed for this; indeed, they almost seem designed to widen this breach even further. The EU continues to invest heavily in 'liberal rights' non-governmental organisations, but as a complementary aim, it does little to support new kinds of democratic practices and innovations. This is significant in the context of this paper because experts recommend these kinds of innovations not only to bring in a wider range of citizen views and voices but also to address the liberal-individualism strand of anti-democratic writers' arguments.

While the Democracy Shield may be an important and necessary initiative, the EU has framed it in a narrative that may not help garner widespread support. The Shield paints democracy's problems as coming from external actors against whom the EU needs to defend political processes in highly securitised terms against those with different values. From a liberal perspective, this might well be justified, but it does not seem to be an approach that helps hold the autocratic appeal at bay. The EU is taking significant steps through its regulatory frameworks to limit the influence of 'tech tsars' and their influence over European democratic systems; however, it is doing much less through its foreign policies to counter other regimes' digital authoritarianism. The EU has deepened cooperation with many regimes that have used digital repression against democratic actors.

7.3 Failure to pre-empt early-stage autocratisation

EU democracy support policies do not strongly home in on the early signs of autocratisation, rooted in the anti-democratic ideas outlined above. If it is true that much autocratisation now occurs surreptitiously, with astutely skilled leaders moving step by step and building a legitimising case for their illiberal politics – as highlighted above – then this is a feature of the autocratic wave that the EU has struggled to address.

This challenge calls for the EU to target actions that might not seem overly autocratic, but which nevertheless represent the first steps along the path towards autocratisation – especially the general questioning of liberal individualism. The EU has maintained uncritical partnerships with regimes far along the path towards autocracy, only to change course very late in the day, when the Union found itself behind the curve of domestic opposition, thereby paying a price in terms of its own reputation and legitimacy among democratic actors. Examples of this include Bangladesh, Thailand, Senegal, Serbia and Montenegro. The EU has moved toward creating early warning

mechanisms; its most notable effort in this regard is currently in relation to closing civic space. The EU System for an Enabling Environment (EU SEE) is designed to document changes and shed light on critical trends in the enabling environment for civil society across 86 countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, the Americas and the Caribbean¹⁵². However, it needs not only a broader approach to picking up early signs of autocratisation in general but also the means to act: the weakness in EU policy is not so much a lack of early warning as a lack of early action.

7.4 Lack of focus on the weaknesses of autocratic regimes

The EU strategy is not rooted firmly in an approach or narrative that attacks the weaknesses of autocratisation and the anti-democratic ideologues referred to earlier. Trends from recent years are not all about autocracy performing clearly better than democracy. They demonstrate that it is difficult to consolidate democracy but also to consolidate autocracy. There is a crisis of global governance that affects regimes of all kinds, not just democracies. The EU's stance has become more defensive and has missed opportunities to build in a more assertive critique of anti-democratic ideas and theories.

Such an EU narrative would need to amplify several messages. This is especially pertinent in relation to the crisis and security arguments outlined above. Against popular perceptions, non-democratic regimes have not shown themselves to be more effective in managing crises, a clear lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate emergency and the financial crises. Autocracies have not succeeded in providing better security, order and stability. They have not been better at sustaining economic growth in line with the 'general will' of society as a whole; China is more of an exception than the norm in this regard. That is, all these claims routinely made by contemporary anti-democracy writers and thinkers are highly questionable empirically. Yet, the EU seems to have been overly defensive in its relatively tepid pushback against them. The EU has a broad-brush approach to supporting democratic norms but still seems to lack a targeted strategy to capitalise on these weaknesses.

8 Conclusions and recommendations

Key recommendations:

- The EU must use multilateral fora and minilateral initiatives in a more concerted way against new authoritarian dynamics and narratives;
- The EU needs to adjust to the USA's retreat from democracy support by forming wider international alliances against authoritarian dynamics and narratives;
- The EU needs sharper funding mechanisms in the new MFF to counter authoritarian dynamics and narratives;
- The EU needs policy initiatives that deal specifically with the identity factors driving autocratic appeal;

¹⁵² EU SEE, '[The EU System for an Enabling Environment: How it works](#)'.

- The European Parliament should seize the opportunity to play an upgraded role in countering authoritarian dynamics and narratives through changes to its existing instruments.

A more effective strategy to support democracy at the European level is increasingly necessary in the face of rising authoritarian dynamics, shrinking democratic space and the retreat of the largest diplomatic and financial contributor to democracy from the field, namely the USA. Against this backdrop, the global pushback against autocratisation is likely to continue, with even fewer resources available to support pro-democracy actors. In this light, it is important that EU institutions and its Member States engineer an effective strategy with the necessary tools at their disposal, both to counter the appeal of autocracy and to ensure that democracy is effectively supported. The paper proposes several options for designing a more comprehensive democracy support strategy.

8.1 Better use of multilateral tools

One of the prominent narratives used – and often amplified – by authoritarian leaders against democracy support is that it constitutes a ‘Western agenda’ aimed at global promotion of European values. However, citizens around the world tend to see democratic values as universal; the protection of human rights and democracy goes far beyond any Western agenda. To counter narratives effectively that seek to delegitimise democracy support, the EU should make further efforts to strengthen coordination and cooperation within multilateral formats and engage with like-minded partners outside the EU when responding to cases of autocratisation.

The EU should make a concerted effort to reinvigorate global momentum through engagement with partners such as Japan, New Zealand, Canada, Brazil and India. There is an urgent need for a new global format that focuses more strongly on the importance of supporting democracy. In response *inter alia*, to America’s retreat, the EU needs to focus more strongly on using existing multilateral institutions for democracy support actions.

The EU could take the lead in a donor conference to pool resources for supporting democracy. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Commission, the Canadian government and the Global Citizen organisation convened a donor conference in Warsaw, which raised EUR 10.1 billion for Ukraine¹⁵³. A similar effort should be made to bring like-minded partners together to invest in support for democracy, channelling the funding to European and global grant-making organisations.

In December 2021, the EU launched the Team Europe Democracy initiative, bringing together governments from 14 EU Member States to enhance coordination among EU institutions and its Member States in supporting democracy and human rights worldwide¹⁵⁴. The decrease in development and cooperation budgets across the EU will require greater coordination efforts and a clearer understanding of global needs for democracy support to make strategic decisions on interventions and responses. Team Europe Democracy could also be used for improved coordination among EU institutions, Member States, and civil society – this being even more

¹⁵³ A. Krzysztosek, ‘[Warsaw-based conference raises €10.1 billion for Ukrainian refugees](#)’, *EURACTIV*, 11 April 2022.

¹⁵⁴ European Commission, ‘[Team Europe Democracy Initiative](#)’.

necessary as funding levels decline and the needs of pro-democracy actors evolve in response to the appeal of autocracy.

8.2 More tailored funding mechanisms in the next MFF

To respond to the varied changes outlined in this paper, the EU needs more tailored funding mechanisms to be integrated into the next MFF. Activists and civil society representatives operating in increasingly repressive environments call for flexible democracy funding mechanisms designs that can operate in rapidly changing political contexts under heightened authoritarian pressure. In 2013, the EU launched the EED not only to provide flexible support to democracy activists but also to complement Member States' democracy-support programmes. During the last decade, EED has offered context-based support to pro-democracy actors operating under significant political and operational risks¹⁵⁵. Given the increased need for adaptable aid to support democracy, the next MFF could include more support for EED, while also pushing the latter to tailor its work more specifically to the challenge of authoritarian narratives outlined above.

Although trends related to democracy are increasingly negative, societies across the world are also progressively mobilising to push back against autocratisation. As noted earlier, citizens in Guatemala, Zambia, Senegal, Brazil, Thailand and Bangladesh have recently ousted authoritarian governments through elections and massive civic mobilisations¹⁵⁶. The EU does not currently have a dedicated instrument or budget to respond to such moments of democratic opportunity. With limited funding available to support democracy, the EU should focus on investing in contexts where it can make an impact, broadening support for democratic allies across the world. Thus, the EU should consider a dedicated budget line to respond to democratic openings¹⁵⁷. These mechanisms should allow for quicker disbursement of democracy aid and better alignment with political developments on the ground. One of the best ways to undermine autocracy ideologues would be to make a success of democratic openings around the world as they emerge.

8.3 Initiative on identity factors

This paper highlights identity-related factors, particularly an emphasis on gender, as key drivers of autocratic appeal. Section 3 highlights the strength of this element in the ideological underpinnings of contemporary democratic scepticism. Across Europe and globally, authoritarian-leaning governments increasingly instrumentalise issues of identity and gender equality to resonate with conservative audiences and consolidate political support. Significant changes are needed to address the growing appeal of autocratic leaders more effectively.

The EU should develop a dedicated initiative to address identity-related issues that undermine public support for democracy. As the EU advances its flagship European Democracy Shield initiative – aimed at protecting Member States and candidate countries from authoritarian influence

¹⁵⁵ European Endowment for Democracy, [EED: Supporting Democracy for 10 years](#), 2018.

¹⁵⁶ R. Youngs (ed), '[European Responses to Moments of Democratic Opportunity](#)', *European Democracy Hub*, March 2025.

¹⁵⁷ European Partnership for Democracy, [Support for Democracy in the Next MFF is Key for the EU to Achieve its Ambitions](#), Statement, 10 April 2025.

– greater attention must be paid to the normative narratives propagated by disinformation actors targeting democratic values¹⁵⁸.

The factors outlined in the anti-democratic theories above are not sufficiently addressed in current EU support for democracy. While many initiatives are underway to rework democracy narratives and sharpen pro-democratic political communication, these have had little to say about incorporating the values of tradition, belonging and family that are important to many voters and that autocratic ideologues target so effectively¹⁵⁹. Many conservatives have come to criticise the democracy agenda for being too narrowly aligned with liberal (or, as they might say, 'woke') values. An EU initiative could add real value in helping develop more inclusive democracy narratives to underpin European democracy support instruments. This would require dialogue and coordination with the conservative forces that have become so critical of the democracy agenda, with an aim of reworking narrative to strengthen the buy-in from a wider part of the political spectrum.

More specifically, as a part of this identity focus, gender issues should be more thoroughly integrated into the broader democracy support agenda. Gender-related programmes must be framed not only in terms of inclusion but also as integral to democratic governance and the protection of fundamental rights. The European Commission has recently published a new Roadmap for Women's Rights¹⁶⁰. The successful implementation of its objectives will depend not only on institutional commitment but also on the capacity of the EU and its Member States to communicate effectively and foster broader societal support in the face of gender backlash. This requires confronting dominant anti-gender narratives with strong, values-based messaging capable of building societal resilience against disinformation and targeted manipulation.

8.4 Specific political role for the European Parliament

EU institutions should support these efforts both politically and financially. As the Union designs its new Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy, the European Parliament should debate how to improve its oversight and scrutiny of implementation to ensure that EU responses and policies align with the Union's political vision and strategic direction. The DROI subcommittee would be well placed to extend the European Parliament's traditional focus beyond human rights to the kind of conceptual issues outlined in section 3 Authoritarian ideas and arguments above. The European Parliament should also contribute to strengthening coalitions across political groups and enhancing engagement with civil society to offer strategic advice on the EU's political direction through resolutions and declarations. The EU's immediate and flexible response to both cases of autocratisation and moments of democratic opportunity will be decisive for the overall distribution of democracies across the world and for building coalitions to support democracy. The European Parliament is well positioned to lead the kind of identity initiative suggested above, given the pluralism of its chamber.

Another imperative is political support for democracy and the better integration of political, trade, economic and diplomatic tools in response to cases of autocratisation. The need for such a full-

¹⁵⁸ European Commission, '[European Democracy Shield](#)', webpage, nd.

¹⁵⁹ Metropolitan Group, '[Global Democracy Narratives and Message Framework](#)', June 2025. D-Hub, 'Anti Authoritarian Toolkit', Berlin, 2025.

¹⁶⁰ European Commission, '[The EU Roadmap for Women's Rights: a renewed push for gender equality](#)', News Article 07 March 2025.

spectrum democracy strategy is repeatedly highlighted by professionalised CSOs working on democracy support and has also been repeatedly noted by EU officials responsible for democracy support portfolios across various EU institutions. In particular, the challenge of inconsistent responses to democratic backsliding and human rights violations has become more prominent in light of the ongoing crises the EU is facing in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond.

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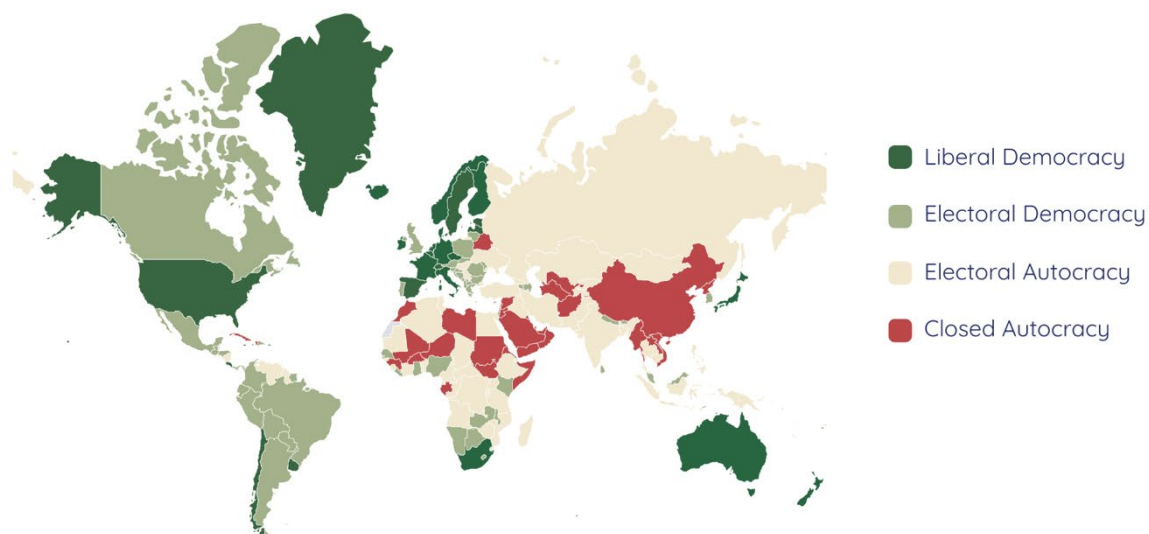
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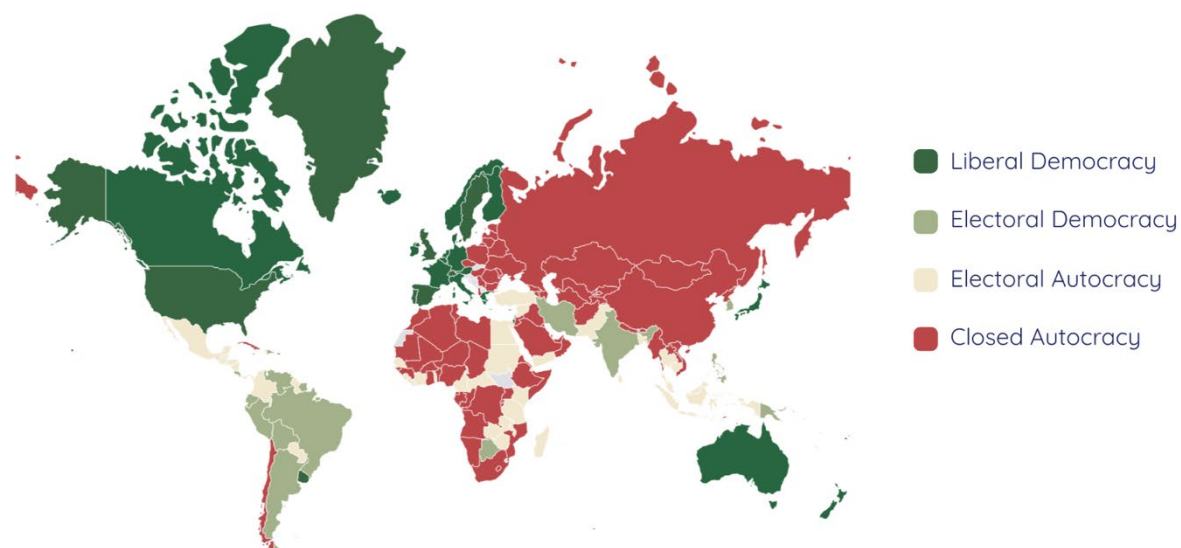
Annex 1

Figure 1: Regimes of the World in 2024, Global Map by V-Dem Institute



Source: Authors' own compilation based on data extracted from [The V-Dem Dataset](#), V-Dem Institute (data visualisation by Yuki Dionis, Communications Officer at European Partnership for Democracy).

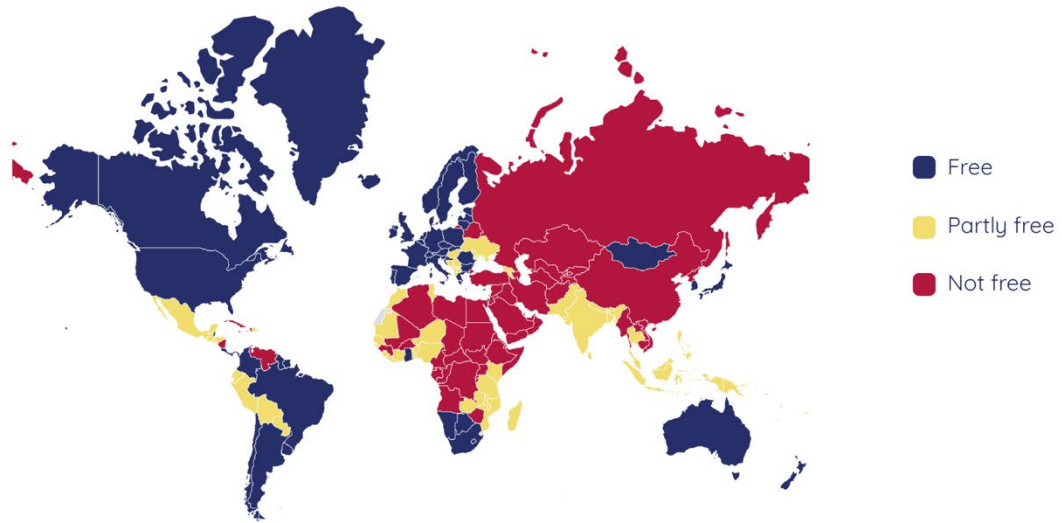
Figure 2: Regimes of the World in 1988, Global Map by V-Dem Institute



Source: Authors' own compilation based on data extracted from [The V-Dem Dataset](#), V-Dem Institute (data visualisation by Yuki Dionis, Communications Officer at European Partnership for Democracy).

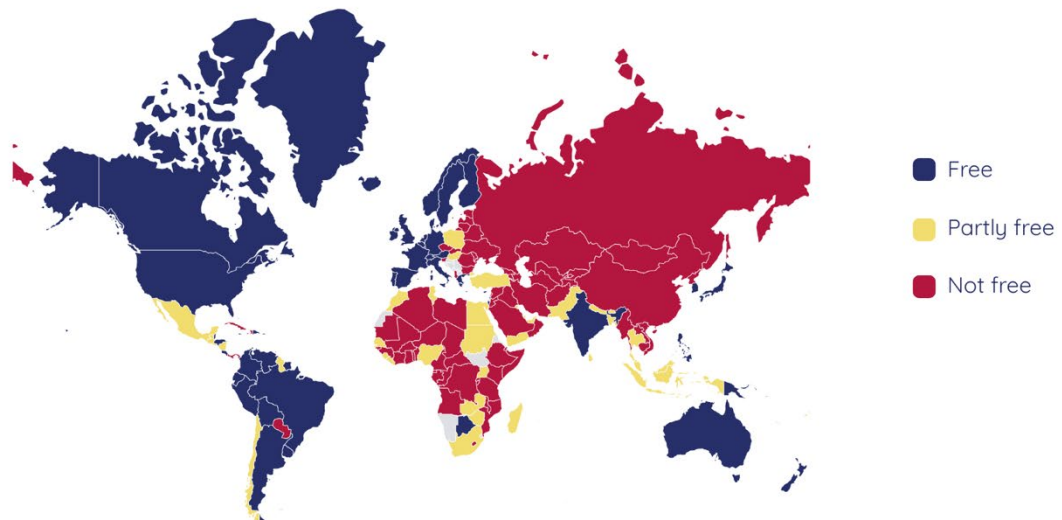
Annex 2

Figure 3: Freedom of the World 2024, Global Map by Freedom Status



Source: Authors' own compilation based on data extracted from [Freedom in the World](#), Freedom House (data visualisation by Yuki Dionis, Communications Officer at European Partnership for Democracy).

Figure 4: Freedom of the World 1988, Global Map by Freedom Status



Source: Authors' own compilation based on data extracted from [Freedom in the World](#), Freedom House (data visualisation by Yuki Dionis, Communications Officer at European Partnership for Democracy).

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