



PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND OBSERVING ELECTIONS

Supporting democracy worldwide is a priority for the European Union. Democracy remains the only system of governance in which people can fully realise their human rights, and is a determining factor for development and long-term stability. As the only directly elected EU institution, the European Parliament is particularly committed to promoting democracy.

LEGAL BASIS

- Articles 2 and 21 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU);
- Article 205 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

POLICY FRAMEWORK AND POLICY TOOLS

The EU's approach to democracy complements its work on human rights (see fact sheet [5.4.1](#)). It is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional standards on human rights, democratic institutions and elections. Since 2015, the EU has also been basing its support for democracy on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular goal 16 on accountable institutions and inclusive and participatory decision making, and goal 10 on reducing inequality.

On 17 November 2009, the Council adopted conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations, which outlined a new strategy for supporting democracy by means of a country-specific approach, greater coherence and the involvement of all stakeholders. The Commission's 2011 Agenda for Change subsequently highlighted the importance of supporting human rights, democracy and good governance within the EU's development policy. Following the Arab Uprisings of 2011, the EU updated its European Neighbourhood Policy to adopt a 'more for more' approach, with support being linked to democratic transition and 'deep democracy'. Incentives — including deeper economic integration, greater financial assistance, enhanced mobility of people and access to the EU's internal market — were offered to those countries willing to undertake political reforms.

The EU's commitment to stepping up its efforts to promote democracy was reiterated in the Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council in 2012. The Action Plan included a plan for more systematic follow-up to the reports of EU election observation missions ([EOMs](#)), so as to support the full electoral cycle. The Action Plan for the 2015-2019 period, adopted



in July 2015, is aimed at mainstreaming democracy support across several objectives. The 2020-2024 Action Plan is currently being developed.

The Council emphasised the role of civil society in its 2012 conclusions entitled 'The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations'. Its conclusions of 19 June 2017 on EU engagement with civil society in external relations reaffirmed the EU's commitment to an empowered and resilient civil society as a crucial way of supporting good governance and the rule of law in any democracy.

Several elements of the EU's policy developed over time address both human rights and democratic principles. This includes country-specific strategies on human rights and democracy, which define priorities for action and objectives to be pursued by the EU in partner countries; the human rights and democracy clauses in international agreements, which allow the EU to suspend trade or cooperation if a country commits grave violations of human rights and democratic principles; and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), a strategic funding instrument (see below).

Election observation is a central EU tool for supporting democratic developments in third countries, promoting human rights and the rule of law, and contributing to peacebuilding and conflict prevention. The EU's long-term EOMs assess events that take place throughout the electoral process. Long-term observers usually begin operating two months before the elections and follow the entire electoral process through to the announcement of the official results and the appeals procedure. Short-term observers monitor polling day and the tallying of votes. The chief observer is, as a rule, an MEP. After the mission, the EOM publishes a final report containing conclusions and recommendations, which give guidance for electoral reform and possible future assistance by the EU. In addition to election observation, the EU can provide technical and material electoral assistance to partner countries, enhancing the conditions for democratic elections, increasing the capacity of state and non-state actors, and supporting necessary reforms, taking into account the full electoral cycle.

In October 2019, the Council adopted conclusions on democracy which reconfirm the principles of its 2009 conclusions, while identifying new challenges that the EU needs to counter urgently and comprehensively through external action. These include the undermining of democratic processes and institutions; low levels of trust in institutions and politicians; a shrinking democratic space for civil society; increased violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms; and manipulation using online technologies.

FINANCING INSTRUMENTS

Supporting human rights, democratic reform and political participation and representation is the main task of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Specifically designed for these goals, the EIDHR finances projects, programmes and EU EOMs, and awards grants to civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders.

The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) provides financial assistance for the promotion of the rule of law, political dialogue and reforms, democratisation,



media pluralism and election observation. Civil society actors in the countries of the EU's southern and eastern neighbourhood are also eligible for funding from the Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility for projects, networks, training and exchanges of best practices.

The Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) also provides financial backing. Although its primary objective is to eradicate poverty, it also aims to consolidate and support democracy in developing countries.

The EU's Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) can be used in some circumstances to support democratic institutions and civil society.

The European Development Fund (EDF) — which operates outside the EU budget but is managed by the Commission — finances cooperation with countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Like the DCI, it focuses on poverty eradication, but also contributes to consolidating and supporting democracy, the rule of law and good governance.

In 2018, the Commission presented its proposal for the external financing instruments for the 2021-2027 period, which would see the EIDHR, ENI, DCI, IcSP and EDF merged under one regulation. Parliament [adopted](#) its first reading position on the proposal on 27 March 2019, strengthening the references to democracy support as an objective of EU external assistance and demanding a higher financial envelope for the human rights and democracy thematic programme. Negotiations between the institutions are [ongoing](#).

In 2012, the European Endowment for Democracy was established. Operating autonomously as a private law foundation, it aims to support political and civil society actors striving for democratic change by providing tailored financial assistance in a quick, flexible and non-bureaucratic way, with a focus on the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Its governing board includes representatives of the EU Member States and institutions, including up to nine MEPs, as well as other experts.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament, the only EU institution elected directly by the citizens of the EU, is strongly committed to promoting sustainable democracies around the world. It has highlighted this commitment in a number of resolutions. Every year, Parliament adopts a resolution on human rights and democracy in the world and the EU's policy on the matter, analysing the main challenges and achievements of the EU's approach to democracy support, and making recommendations for the future.

Parliament has also developed a range of tools for engaging directly in [global democracy support](#). Parliament is continuously involved in election observation activities, working to strengthen the legitimacy of national electoral processes and to increase public confidence in the protection of elections and human rights. Each year, it sends several parliamentary delegations to observe elections or referendums in third countries. Parliament may decide to send such delegations of MEPs on condition that the elections are held at national level, that the national authorities have invited the EU or the European Parliament, and that a long-term mission is present. Parliament delegations are always integrated into EU EOMs or the long-term missions of the Office



for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The European Parliament is consulted on the identification and planning of EU EOMs and follow-up activities.

Guided by its Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach, Parliament links election observation to complementary activities including pre-election actions and election follow-up, human rights actions, and initiatives to support parliamentary work. Special focus is placed on the enlargement countries in Southeastern Europe and the European Neighbourhood. The European Parliament assists parliaments beyond the EU's borders in strengthening their institutional capacity through conferences and seminars, joint training programmes and study visits for members and officials, as well as fellowships for staff of third-country parliaments. It supports partner parliaments in mainstreaming human rights into legislation and connecting to civil society. Parliament facilitates capacity building for agents of democratic change, including human rights defenders, and promotes media freedom and independent journalism. Parliament's [Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought](#) and the activities of the Sakharov Prize community of laureates are integrated into this approach. The Simone Veil programme is specifically designed to support women politicians and parliamentarians. Parliament also provides support and expertise in the field of mediation and dialogue, through targeted activities with partner parliaments and international events focused on mediation and conflict prevention. The [Young Political Leaders Programme](#) is one of the flagship initiatives designed to promote dialogue and understanding among future leaders outside the EU, and thus to contribute to building trust and peace. The European Parliament [resolution](#) on building EU capacity on conflict prevention and mediation adopted in March 2019 recognises the importance of mediation and dialogue processes and Parliament's role therein.

The Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) gives political guidance for Parliament's different activities. It consists of 16 MEPs and is co-chaired by the chairs of Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and Committee on Development. The DEG decides on European Parliament election observation missions and adopts [an annual work programme](#) for the other activities. In 2020, six countries/regions were reconfirmed for enhanced democracy support activities, namely Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Tunisia, the Western Balkans (as a priority region), and the Pan-African Parliament (as a priority regional parliament).

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