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Toward a New EU Democracy Strategy

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Introduction

Ten years ago, the European Union's (EU's) member governments agreed on important council conclusions designed to raise the profile of the union's support for democracy across the world. In late 2019, EU member states are likely to agree on new democracy conclusions and then, in 2020, on an updated and more operational action plan. They recognize that the strategic context has changed dramatically in the last decade, and the union needs to take on board many lessons about what has worked and not worked in its policies since 2009. Many policymakers hope that the change in leadership of the EU institutions in late 2019 might rejuvenate the bloc's commitment to international democratic norms, after a period in which the priority has shifted to security issues.

This working paper assesses the evolution of EU democracy support policies in recent years and proposes a number of improvements that a new policy framework might offer. The union has focused on improving microlevel tactics, but it most urgently needs a rethink at the macrolevel of its democracy strategies. Ironically, in the last ten years EU approaches to democracy have slowly become more sophisticated and sensitive at the implementation level yet have lost traction because they have failed to keep up with larger political and strategic changes within and beyond Europe. The paper proposes ten action points built around the need for the EU to be more proactive and flexible in supporting democracy and to link democracy support to the union's changing approach to geopolitical challenges.

A Changed Geopolitical Context

Multiple changes in the global political context have occurred since the EU agreed on its agenda for action on external support to democracy in 2009. These changes present severe challenges to democracy support.

A plateauing of the global improvement in overall democracy: The dynamics of global democracy have shifted. In its 2018 annual report, [Freedom House](#) talked of an outright row-back in democracy levels across the world. In its 2018 report, the [Varieties of Democracies](#) project pointed to a gathering process of full-scale “autocratization.” The Economist Intelligence Unit has also recorded an overall fall in democracy levels during the last decade—its [2018 Democracy Index](#) gave a stable global democracy score for the first time in three years. EU democracy support is not working with the grain of overarching political trends anymore; rather, it has to operate in a context of more active resistance against such efforts.

More overt and assertive attempts to neuter democracy support: Russian and Chinese external strategies represent a more serious impediment to international democracy support than they did a decade ago. While the actions taken by Russia and China are well known, many other governments are also becoming more open, systematic, and effective in reducing the scope for externally

supported democracy initiatives. Over one hundred governments, including many in the EU, have in recent years imposed some kind of restrictions on civil society, ranging from outright violent attacks through to harsh new laws against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and on to more covert and subtle forms of intimidation. Many governments have clamped down hard on pro-democracy protests, as these have become more numerous around the world in recent years. [Intimidation of journalists](#) is also on the rise. Opposition to democracy support does not take place solely in the domestic context but is increasingly also woven into the foreign policies of key authoritarian states.

U.S. doubts about democracy support: Meanwhile, the EU can no longer be so certain of U.S. partnership in democracy support. Former president Barack Obama was relatively cautious in this area of policy. President Donald Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy and celebration of many dictators around the world are well known. Thanks to Congress, the level of U.S. democracy aid remains relatively high, and there are some elements of U.S. policy that remain broadly favorable to democracy support. Yet, the general direction of U.S. foreign policy risks leaving the EU more alone in upholding democratic norms in many parts of the world.

Manipulation in the digital sphere: A decade ago, the geopolitical consequences of information and communication technology were only just emerging as policy issues and were largely absent from thinking about democracy support. This is the area of perhaps the most far-reaching change since 2009. Authoritarian regimes are now systematically using digital tools to intensify their attacks on democratic reformers and, indeed, on Western democracies. Digital communication technology seems to have become a danger to democracy rather than simply a tool of benign individual empowerment. Many-to-many communication has enabled authoritarian states to subvert the democratic debate through disinformation and misinformation, while hacking and the manipulation of social media threaten the integrity of electoral processes.

More challenging immediate interests: The failure of the Arab Spring uprisings that began in late 2010 to bring about true democratic change and the large increase in migration flows in the summer of 2015, along with multiple terrorist attacks in the EU, led to a shift in foreign policy priorities. This has resulted in a greater focus within the EU institutions on the short-term goals of stability, security, and curbing migration, with an apparent downgrading of democracy support and development policy. While the EU still insists that interests and democratic values go together, it is under greater pressure to prioritize short-term concerns that many see as sitting uneasily with the union's declared values.

EU troubles: The EU itself does not enjoy the same power or prestige as it did when it agreed on the last council conclusions in 2009. Many democrats around the world still look to the EU with great admiration and for inspiration, but the EU's years of crisis have left their mark. While reformers in other regions want support for democracy, they now tend to be more selective in what they seek from the union, and which EU norms and rules they wish to emulate. This means the EU cannot rely to quite the same extent on replicating its own integration model and rules as a means of

democracy support. Policymakers have increasingly recognized this reality, at least rhetorically, but it is a change yet to be fully incorporated into EU external democracy support.

In addition, the EU's relative power is weaker than it was in 2009. Whether measured through nominal gross domestic product (GDP) or purchasing power parity, the EU share of the global economy continues to decline as the shares of others grow more rapidly. The EU accounted for 18.8 percent of [world trade](#) in 2009; by 2017 this figure had declined to 16.7 percent. The EU's ability to act as a supporter of democracy on the international stage is also challenged by attacks on democracy within EU member states. Ten years ago, some members were ambivalent about democracy support, but today some of them more fundamentally question the validity of trying to uphold democratic norms.

Taken together, these challenges raise some profound and searching questions about the wisdom and propriety of democracy support. The danger appears greater today that outside support may be counterproductive in certain contexts: democracy promotion efforts cause regimes bent on the centralization of power to clamp down far more than in the past. The danger also appears more real that support to certain state institutions can in many contexts be detrimental to democracy in the long term, by consolidating the power of undemocratic regimes rather than promoting inclusive and accountable governance. Democracy support in such circumstances must be rethought—or many are likely to question whether it still has a place in EU foreign policy at all.

Recent Trends in EU Democracy Support

In the last several years, these challenges have begun to have an impact on EU democracy support policies. To some degree, they have diluted the European commitment to democracy and human rights globally. Yet in some places, the EU has retained a significant level of effort to foster democratic reforms. The more difficult contextual factors have not entirely killed off EU democracy support; in some measure, they have accentuated long-standing features of European policies, such as a focus on gently encouraging very incremental change. Overall, EU policies in this area exhibit a degree of continuity. The flipside of this is that the EU has struggled to refashion its democracy and human rights strategies in a way that is commensurate with overarching political and strategic trends.

In the decade since the 2009 conclusions, numerous EU documents have referred to the importance of democracy in external action and development policy. The 2012 Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy and the 2012–2014 Action Plan tightened operational guidelines and improved internal processes. The 2016 [EU Global Strategy](#) said that “a resilient society featuring democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable development lies at the heart of a resilient state.” Democracy support is also formally built into an array of external policy frameworks, like the EU Consensus on Development and the European Neighborhood Policy. The treaties that govern the EU institutions mention democracy as both a founding value and a principle of external action.

Critical Engagement and Its Limits

The EU has never been especially drawn to punitive approaches to democracy support and, if anything, has become more circumspect in its use of political conditionality in the last decade. Yet the union is not averse to using sanctions and additional critical measures for specific foreign policy goals. As of 2019, the EU had more than forty sets of sanctions in place.¹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, while the union has been willing to use sanctions with notable frequency in the last decade, most of its punitive measures relate to security or stability concerns rather than to democracy. Examples include the EU's sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and Syria's civil war. While these measures have penalized nondemocratic regimes—and could thus be said indirectly to have a democracy component—the absence of democracy was not the reason why the union imposed the sanctions.

On some occasions, the EU has exerted relatively tough pressure more directly in relation to democratic regression. The EU has dramatically reduced pre-accession funding to Turkey as the country has returned to authoritarianism—although these cuts are offset by the €6 billion (\$6.6 billion) the [union has given Turkey for cooperation](#) on stemming refugee flows and migration. Since 2018, the EU's pressure on democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans has increased as the union has worked up procedures to reduce pre-accession aid where democratic recession occurs. The EU pressured the Albanian government with some effect to agree to widespread justice reform as a condition for launching membership negotiations.

The EU imposed sanctions against Venezuela in 2017 following President Nicolás Maduro's moves to close down the newly elected parliament. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the EU adopted targeted sanctions against members of the government who were seeking to exert control over the December 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. In November 2018, the EU froze support to the [government of Tanzania](#) in response to negative political developments in the country.

The EU is currently considering whether to suspend Myanmar from the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP), which removes import duties from products coming into the EU from certain developing countries. The union has also launched a GSP withdrawal procedure against Cambodia, to be decided on in early 2020. The EU has awarded GSP+ status, which grants full removal of tariffs on most EU tariff lines, to countries that are in general fairly democratic: Armenia, Bolivia, Cape Verde, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Paraguay, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. This move suggests that the EU has weeded out authoritarian regimes from this more preferential trade scheme.

The EU exerts some of its strongest pressure on governments that are at least partly democratic and with which it has especially comprehensive and broad engagement. Since 2014, the union has on

three occasions delayed tranches of macroeconomic aid to Ukraine in response to delays in anticorruption reforms. The EU held back some macrofinancial assistance to Moldova after the government annulled the 2018 Chişinău mayoral election, which was won by an opposition activist. Moreover, in June 2019 the union was robust—and successful—in its support for Moldova’s newly elected coalition against threats from the country’s most powerful oligarch. In Georgia in 2012, EU ambassadors pushed hard to ensure that then president Mikheil Saakashvili accepted a transfer of power after his party lost the parliamentary election.

In the case of Iran, the EU priority has been to uphold the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which involves a dilution of European sanctions in return for Iran limiting its uranium enrichment activities. The EU has gone to some lengths to keep the accord alive since Trump withdrew the United States from it in May 2018. For the EU, this has largely precluded any critical focus on Iran’s internal human rights situation. However, the EU has added targeted measures in response to its conviction that the Iranian regime is implicated in the killing of opposition members on European soil. In January 2019, [the EU imposed sanctions](#) on the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security and two Iranian nationals, based on indications that they were involved in the killing of two Dutch nationals of Iranian origin and in planned attacks in France and Denmark.

In a potentially significant step forward in December 2018, EU foreign ministers approved a Dutch proposal for an EU-wide sanctions regime to apply to individuals guilty of human rights abuses. The proposal also includes the use of majority voting to make sanctions easier to deploy. Some have dubbed this an EU Magnitsky Act, in reference to the 2012 U.S. law that sought to punish Russian officials responsible for the death of accountant Sergei Magnitsky. In March 2019, [the European Parliament](#) backed this proposal. Discussions are ongoing among the ambassadors of the EU member states in the Political and Security Committee, with a view to adopting a new sanctions instrument when the next foreign policy high representative takes office in November.

These examples show that the EU has sometimes exerted pressure on democracy-related issues through punitive measures. There are many more cases, however, of the EU pursuing enhanced cooperation in aid and trade with countries that are clearly authoritarian or becoming more authoritarian. In recent years, these include Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Cuba, Egypt, Morocco, and Serbia. While the EU has moved away somewhat from open-ended budget support that allowed recipient governments to spend aid money more or less how they wanted, nondemocratic regimes still receive large amounts of European aid without political strings attached. Indeed, 84 percent of EU development aid for 2013–2017 went to countries that are authoritarian or hybrid regimes (see table 1).

TABLE 1

Average EU Funding to Different Regime Types, 2013–2017

Authoritarian	\$2.88 billion
Hybrid	\$6.59 billion
Flawed democracy	\$1.80 billion
Full democracy	\$0.03 billion

Source: Authors' calculations based on OECD and EU data and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index.

The democracy and human rights clause in the EU's external agreements has been activated only with regard to parties to the Cotonou Agreement, a treaty between the EU and African, Caribbean, and Pacific states—and only to freeze aid, not trade relations. There are some examples of the EU reducing funding to countries suffering from autocratization—like Burundi, South Africa, and Venezuela—but the numbers do not suggest a systematic or coherent policy in this regard.

In the mid-2010s, European aid flows to Rwanda increased; in 2015, only [Belgium and the EU withheld funding](#) in response to the deteriorating human rights situation in the country. In recent years, France has ramped up [financial](#) and counterterrorist [military support](#) to the autocratic President Idriss Déby of Chad. While the EU has maintained its suspension of funding to the Burundian government following the 2015 political crisis, France has recently resumed [financial cooperation with Burundi](#) despite a lack of improvements on human rights and democracy.

Many EU governments supported, and indeed actively pushed for, Russia's readmission to the Council of Europe in 2019—the very inverse of democracy-related pressure. Beyond the cases of Cambodia and Myanmar, the EU has declined to invoke the GSP conditionality that was tightened in 2012, even in cases where human and labor rights are clearly worsening, like Pakistan. The EU has rewarded Vietnam with a recently ratified free-trade agreement and a [tripling of aid](#) between 2016 and 2017—despite [criticism from rights groups](#) about the country's lack of political reforms.

The EU often responds positively to elections it knows are not free. While [Thailand's 2019 general election](#) was widely condemned as unfair and further deepened the military's grip on power, the vote appears to have unblocked talks on a [Thai-EU free-trade agreement](#). The EU increased aid in the immediate aftermath of [stolen elections in Kenya](#) with a €4.5 billion (\$5 billion) envelope. It also awarded the Ethiopian government additional aid after the regime took all the seats in the 2015 parliamentary election and clamped down more harshly on civil society.

The EU has rewarded governments that are either not reforming in a democratic direction or becoming more repressive. The union signed a new Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement

with Cuba in November 2017, as human rights conditions have worsened on the island. In Central Asia, although recent leadership changes have yet to result in meaningful political openings, the EU has signed a new-generation [Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement](#) with Kazakhstan and is negotiating such agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In Zimbabwe, the EU had diluted sanctions well before former president Robert Mugabe was forced from office in 2017 and began to seek new cooperation before the new government showed any discernible commitment to democratic reform.

Despite the EU code of conduct on arms sales, member states have increased the export of military equipment to authoritarian regimes. Exports have also increased of dual-use technology used by regimes for digital surveillance of activists. Indeed, Western companies supply most of the surveillance technology used by authoritarians around the world. European surveillance technology has helped [authoritarian regimes](#) in countries including Azerbaijan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. The Syrian regime has bought [surveillance technology](#) from French, German, Irish, and Italian companies.

Democracy Assistance

As the EU and its member states generally recoil from critical measures, democracy-related aid projects tend to be the leading edge of EU democracy support policies. EU democracy and human rights aid allocations remain significant in absolute terms even if they are small compared with overall aid financing. One challenge in assessing EU policy is that different documents and sources give contrasting figures for democracy support, and there is no common EU-wide definition for this category of aid. The EU's 2018 [Annual Report on Human Rights in the World](#) said the union provided €115 million (\$127 million) in 2018 for democracy projects.

The budget line that is specifically dedicated to democracy and human rights funding, the [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#) (EIDHR), has amounted to just over €160 million (\$177 million) a year since 2014. This is around 1.8 percent of the European Commission's total annual aid budget of €8.7 billion (\$9.6 billion). EIDHR figures show that in most years, around €15–€20 million (\$17–\$22 million) of the annual €160 million goes to democracy projects strictly defined. The rest goes to human rights issues such as children's rights and campaigns against the death penalty. Since 2014, the EIDHR has contracted €73.7 million (\$81.6 million) for democracy support, representing 14.4 percent of the instrument's total spending.

In the last decade, support for the media sector, political parties, and parliamentary support has lagged far behind backing for other sectors in terms of financial assistance. This is slowly changing under the EIDHR. Recently launched support includes pilot programs on strengthening multiparty systems and women's role in political parties as well as a parliamentary strengthening program. The EIDHR identifies media freedoms and gender issues as particular priorities for 2019 and beyond. European support for media freedom has been given extra momentum by a large-scale

Media4Democracy project that focuses on the growing threat to freedom of expression online and offline. In July 2019, the United Kingdom government hosted a high-profile event on this topic, while the European Center for Press and Media Freedom in Leipzig adds further support. Since 2017, the EIDHR has additionally prioritized freedom of religion and belief, and an EU special envoy is now dedicated to this theme.

The EU's generic focus on civil-society support has intensified. EU delegations in 107 countries agreed on civil-society road maps for 2014–2017; fifty-six of these were renewed for 2018–2020. The directorate general of the European Commission responsible for enlargement and the EU neighborhood has increased its support to the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), which can operate in environments that prove complex with classic aid cooperation methods. The commission's Supporting Democracy initiative provided just under €5 million (\$5.5 million) over three years, sending experts to work with civil-society actors and EU delegations.

In 2018, the EU ran a CivicTech4Democracy initiative and launched a [new €5 million call](#) to support [civic activism through digital technologies](#)—a new priority reflecting the emerging problems associated with the online sphere. The EU introduced a policy framework on transitional justice, under which it commits to a participatory approach to truth-seeking initiatives. An emerging area of work relates to business's compliance with human rights standards; sixteen EU member states had introduced national action plans on business and human rights by early 2019. The EU has begun an assessment of the human rights impact of trade and investment agreements—although it is not clear whether this will have any tangible impact on European commercial policies.

The EU now deploys some eight to ten election observation missions (EOMs) a year—twenty-four in total since 2015—and an increasing number of electoral follow-up missions (EFMs). In 2018, the EU committed €41.7 million (\$46.2 million) to electoral observation. It deployed nine EOMs, in El Salvador, Lebanon, Madagascar, Mali, Pakistan, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe. The EU also supported local electoral observers in eight countries. It has stepped up its efforts to ensure that EOM recommendations are implemented, deploying five EFMs in 2018. The increased focus on the follow-up to recommendations of EOMs is an important step in ensuring that these missions are part of a wider democracy support tool kit rather than support to a stand-alone event.

Over and above the EIDHR, the EU uses funds from geographic mainstream development budgets for some initiatives related to democracy—although it does not compile figures for this type of political aid. This support goes predominantly to state institutions such as judicial bodies or election commissions but also supports civil society. [EU development cooperation](#) has become more political in its stated aims, by focusing on societies in transition and frequently articulating political goals. Changes in 2017 to the conflict-related [Instrument Contributing to Peace and Stability](#) made this tool better able to support political reform in specific situations. This includes work on supporting the political party system in Colombia, financing to combat electoral violence in Kenya, and aiding constitutional reform in Sudan.

Through its multiple financial instruments, the EU has moved to increase democracy assistance where new opportunities have arisen in recent years. Notable examples include Armenia, Fiji, Myanmar, Tunisia, and Ukraine. So-called umbrella funds under the European Neighborhood Policy have helped channel additional financing to reformers to the EU's east and south. The EU has continued to fund some civil-society actors even in tough cases like Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, and Zimbabwe. When large-scale protests take place, the EU tends to maintain a prudent distance, offering rhetorical backing while refraining from any active involvement, and promising upgraded support if reforms succeed. This balance has conditioned recent EU responses to revolts in Algeria, Hong Kong, Russia, and Sudan.

Under the [European Commission's proposal](#) for the post-2020 EU budget, a new single instrument, the Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), would set aside €1.5 billion (\$1.7 billion) for human rights and democracy and another €1.5 billion for civil society, out of a total of €68 billion (\$73 billion). This represents a 15 percent increase for democracy and human rights and a 6 percent rise for civil society.

After much debate, the EIDHR's specificities are likely to be preserved, meaning that the EU will be able to fund projects without the consent of governments, through flexible emergency calls, and to fund nonregistered entities. Diplomats insist that the single instrument should allow for quicker pro-democracy funding and for money to be shifted around. The European Parliament has established its broadly favorable position on these proposals, and the Council of Ministers has almost done so after much negotiation—although some member states remain unconvinced of the case for merging the current array of instruments into the NDICI.

More of the EU's funding now goes directly to protecting activists from state repression. Increasingly, EU democracy support has shifted toward pushing back against negative trends like the shrinking space for civil society, disinformation, and attacks on electoral integrity. The EIDHR's emergency fund for human rights defenders can directly channel funds at speed when defenders face a moment of acute risk. The EIDHR also funds a human rights defenders' protection mechanism, known as [Protectdefenders.eu](#). Under this, a consortium of twelve international NGOs provides emergency grants for relocation, individual security, and legal support. By early 2019, [Protectdefenders.eu](#) had provided over 1,000 emergency grants, training for 5,000 human rights defenders at risk, and other support for just over 10,000 human rights defenders.

Member State Funds

In addition to European Commission funds, a handful of member states allocate significant amounts of their aid to democracy initiatives. Member states use slightly different language in describing democracy: some refer directly to democracy, others to governance, the rule of law, or human rights as priorities. Some stress democracy's importance to development, others its role in conflict

resolution and stabilization. A small number of member states—the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands—have published [democracy support strategy documents](#), while others—like Germany and the UK—fold democracy into mainstream development policy guidelines and the broader category of good governance support.

Although there is significant variation in funding levels between European states, they remain some of the biggest funders of democracy around the world. One of the three pillars of Germany’s Marshall Plan with Africa promises increased support for “democracy, rule of law, and human rights.” Sweden has long been a generous funder of democracy in proportional terms: this area of policy accounted for around 20 percent of its total aid and was €580 million (\$642 million) in 2018. A new [Swedish strategy](#) for 2018–2022 commits to more democracy support and to offering civic actors more core funding. [Denmark](#) is the other highest-level funder in proportional terms.

In 2017, the four parties represented in the Dutch parliament reached a coalition agreement that pledged to increase the budget for the Netherlands Human Rights Fund. A new UK Department for International Development (DfID) strategy published in 2019 focuses on [governance](#) but stresses that this will include more focus on fostering democracy, protecting civic freedoms, and supporting moments of democratic breakthrough.

France increased its overall [official development assistance](#) (ODA) in 2018, after eight years of annual declines, with plans that included “strengthening human rights, stability and peace” as one of four main pillars, reflecting a [focus on human rights](#) rather than on democracy as such. The same year, France introduced a [human rights strategy](#), but this did not mention democracy.

Spain’s development resources were cut to virtually nothing during the eurozone crisis and are now only just beginning to increase again—to the modest level of €326 million (\$361 million) in 2018. Spain’s development agency says 18 percent of this aid goes to [democratic governance](#), broadly defined.

Democracy Hedging

Despite many policy improvements, in the round the evidence does not point to the EU taking a strong stand for democracy on any sort of consistent basis. Questions remain over how the different funding and tactical approaches link up to what are ostensibly the EU’s overall foreign policy principles and objectives.

EU policymakers stress that much democracy support takes place behind the scenes, and claim that a lot is going on in terms of dialogues and missions even if the union normally does not allow all of this to affect the macrolevel of its diplomatic relations with partner countries. The EU now has forty-five human rights dialogues with partner countries and regional organizations. The EU’s

annual reports on its external human rights actions list scores of initiatives in support of conferences, new action plans, strategy reviews, United Nations (UN) positions, and the like on a large number of specific human rights issues—from the death penalty to torture, gender issues, conflict minerals, children’s rights, business practices, and many others. The EU supports many events or new action plans on rights-based sectoral issues in autocratic regimes with which it maintains cooperative geopolitical relations.

It might be suggested that the EU keenly funds a large number of extremely worthy, useful, and important rights-based projects with the reassurance that these do not undercut relations with regimes at a higher political level. The more charitable interpretation is that this micro-macro policy balance allows the union to work indirectly on opening possible avenues of political reforms in a way that would not otherwise be possible.

While the positive justification for such gentle, cooperative approaches may sometimes be convincing, in many cases it is difficult to see how it generates any kind of reform traction. The cooperative strategy of democracy aid does not always serve as an alternative to punitive measures. In many of the cases where the EU has decided not to invoke democracy-related sanctions, it has also held back from funding political aid projects. EU support to civil society in Russia is a negligible €7 million (\$7.8 million)—EIDHR funds are ten times oversubscribed in Russia, suggesting that [Russian civil society](#) does want EU support.

Moreover, it is questionable whether much of the EU’s bilateral aid actually helps further democracy. Much development aid labeled as democracy related is relatively technical, as it focuses on state institutions rather than other, pro-democracy actors. Most EU political aid tends to focus on better technical governance standards, functional cooperation on EU laws, economic development, or a civil society better able to deliver services. Around two-thirds of [EU development aid for good governance](#) goes to governments and state institutions. By far the biggest recipients of EU governance aid are the membership candidate states of Turkey and countries in the Western Balkans, in which priorities revolve around pre-accession preparation rather than democracy as such.

While some believe technical governance cooperation can feed into broader political reforms, the EU has now been running these kinds of initiatives at a fairly large scale for two decades or more in countries whose records on democracy and human rights have become worse not better. Many authoritarian regimes have received [hundreds of millions of euros](#) for such EU projects while tightening control over technical spheres. Some assessments conclude that this aid actually helps regimes [stave off democratic reforms](#).

Recent studies have raised questions about the [EU’s approach to anticorruption](#). The recipients of significant EU aid have in general not made progress in wrestling with corruption—if anything, their levels of corruption have worsened. This lack of correlation applies to total aid amounts and to governance aid more specifically. EU interventions tend to support anticorruption agencies or

specific anticorruption initiatives, when progress on corruption is a matter of wider institutional culture and quality. In Ukraine, the EU has put its stress mainly on anticorruption bodies, when the broader institutional deficiencies in democracy mean these cannot work as intended. In Moldova, corruption worsened most dramatically immediately after the country signed an association agreement with the union in June 2014.

Moreover, companies from EU states figure disproportionately highly in bribery cases across the world. Despite being signatories to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) antibribery convention, European governments have done little to stop this, and among EU member states only Germany and the UK escaped recent OECD criticism for poor implementation of the convention.

While the EU's focus on emergency support for human rights defenders is vital and a strong point of its recent international rights work, it also raises difficult questions. The EU's own financial rules often leave NGOs exposed to regime intrusion and oblige them to reveal information that governments can use against democratic reformers. EU security aims are making this problem worse. For example, the Tunisian government introduced new restrictions on the civil-society organization (CSO) sector, in part because the EU pressed Tunis to tighten finance-reporting rules, ostensibly to foreclose the possibility of funds getting through to terrorist groups.

A much broader issue is that large-scale displacements caused by repression push the EU toward humanitarian rather than democracy support. The EU has in recent years provided emergency funding to people leaving their countries—the Rohingyas, Venezuelans, Syrians—far in excess of what it gives for promoting reform inside such states.

The impact of the EU's overarching shift toward more security funding remains difficult to determine. The EU insists that upgrades to its counterterrorism work has spurred new local projects on countering extremism through better protection of human rights and through dozens of budget lines and funding initiatives that have increased funds available for rights work under a security label. EU leaders routinely maintain that the priority focus on helping migrants return home with funding for reintegration programs is itself a service to human rights.

Most independent observers reject this interpretation. Moreover, the detailed figures show that the EU's various new funds focus overwhelmingly on capacity building for security services, border forces, and coast guards, with one or two modules of training that cover international law and human rights, as is the case with the [EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#), for instance. It is questionable that the EU is justified in claiming that in this way it has advanced human rights and governance standards in the states where it has a heightened security presence.

Action Points

The analysis above points to a range of observations about the state of European support for democracy. Most importantly, it is clear that EU approaches need a critical update. In many instances, there is a mismatch between words and deeds. The bigger picture shows that many European policies may be working counter to the democracy assistance provided by the union and its member states. This suggests that those who believe that democracy is vital for development, peace, and respect for human rights need to focus on improving the place of democracy among macrolevel policy priorities.

There is also a clear mismatch between the key changes to the global context, on the one hand, and the way that EU policies have evolved, on the other. In a far less benign international environment, with a range of new conflicts and security challenges, the EU has not given up on democracy support. At a formal level, the main features of EU strategy have remained largely the same. In modest ways, some EU tactics have improved and begun to focus necessarily on protecting democratic activists from repression. European governments have started to inject a more geopolitical tenor into the way they approach democracy support. But overall, the undramatic, incremental unfolding of EU democracy policies and the overwhelming focus on assistance to state institutions have not come close to matching the major and qualitative shifts in global politics.

It is highly unlikely that any of the trends outlined at the start of this paper—the plateauing of democracy, increased authoritarian influence, U.S. doubts, manipulation in the digital sphere, challenging immediate interests, and EU troubles—will change in the short term. In light of this, a number of action points can be identified that EU member governments might usefully address in council conclusions and a new EU action plan on human rights and democracy. These are specific improvements that the union could contemplate.

New council conclusions must focus on practical and operational action points rather than ending up as a document that simply repeats well-known tropes. EU documents and leaders' speeches still tend to use many clichéd phrases about the EU not imposing models, listening to local voices, accepting that change comes from inside, rejecting one-size-fits-all approaches, and the like. These are undoubtedly true, but their infringement is not one of the main problems that beset EU democracy support.

The following ten action points would help the union recalibrate its approach to supporting democracy.

1. Strengthen the Link to EU Strategic Aims

Democracy is a [founding value of the EU](#) and a guiding principle for the union's action in the international arena. But given current international events and the challenges outlined above, the EU

needs to fashion support for democracy more specifically as a tool for European security self-interest—and not simply allude to a foundational value for the union itself. Both the EU institutions and EU member states should recognize this security logic in more specific and systematic terms. The EU tends to list large numbers of [democracy and human rights projects](#) without indicating how these relate to overarching EU foreign policy actions. The union should build future policy around a more detailed account of how democracy support bolsters—and is necessary for—the EU’s long-term security.

The concept of resilience has arguably diverted attention from this imperative, but could be operationalized as a more clearly pro-democracy strategic concept in the future. The fact that this has not happened so far means that the EU Global Strategy acts to weaken rather than galvanize democracy support. Diplomats admit that they see democracy support as a niche area of project funding, not as a pillar of EU security in any operationally meaningful sense. The creation of an overarching EU democracy support policy would be an important step forward in this regard. The EU should move from a narrative of principled pragmatism to one of democratic security.

2. Revamp Civil-Society Support

Several European donors recognize the need for a fundamental rethink in how civil-society organizations are supported and the need to encourage newer forms of activism. Global civil society is not the same as it was ten years ago, as new civic movements come to supplement traditional NGOs. Despite recent policy changes, European democracy support is struggling to keep pace with the emergence of new types of pro-democracy actor and emerging models of democratic accountability.

The EU has repeatedly reiterated the need to broaden the range of organizations it funds in third countries, but in many contexts does not follow through on this commitment. New policy mechanisms are needed to shift EU democracy support in this direction.

Mass protests have spread around the world in recent years. Democratic governments have lost much legitimacy, but authoritarian regimes are also on the back foot—this is an era of popular mobilization against all forms of regime. It is not a case of undisputed authoritarian success pitted against democratic failure, yet sometimes the EU seems to buy into this somewhat defeatist narrative. EU responses tend to be slow and underplay the potential of democratic breakthroughs.

The union needs a dedicated initiative designed to influence mass protests. Citizens around the world today tend to protest more than join NGOs—but EU policy has yet to make this shift in the theory of political change to which it implicitly, if not explicitly, works. The EU therefore needs new policy and funding mechanisms to update its democracy support in this direction.

3. Work With Those That Receive Less Support

This applies to other spheres as well. The EU has done an impressive job in improving its ability to support smaller initiatives in recent years and should expand on this. Two areas merit further support. First, the current challenges to representative democracy around the world mean that the key institutions of representation, particularly party systems and legislatures, need support from the international community.

Second, recent changes to the media sector and the increased use of social media mean that independent media, including investigative journalism, also need increased support from the international community. Where EU rules are restrictive, it might be necessary to channel more funds in the future through the EED, democracy-support organizations, or national donors that operate more flexible aid modalities.

4. Work With Governments on Political Reform

A large proportion of EU democracy support goes to state bodies, with the aim of empowering reformers in ministries or regimes. A common trend is toward support for national anticorruption authorities. The EU and most member states tend to argue that cooperating with nondemocratic governments can offer a way of encouraging reforms without harsh confrontation.

In practice, it is difficult to assess with precision whether this type of quintessential EU aid makes democracy more likely, helps legitimize authoritarian regimes, or has little impact either way. The EU therefore needs a more detailed monitoring process capable of assessing whether this is the case in specific national contexts. A systematic, mesolevel process of assessment of EU democracy policies is much needed, especially as global political trends mean that much of EU policy in the future is likely to exist in this gray area between working with and working against regimes.

5. Foster Human Rights Dialogues as Part of Democracy Support

Another abiding feature is that the EU tries to combine modest pressure with dialogue between governments and pro-democracy actors. In Venezuela, the EU imposed a relatively limited range of targeted sanctions while encouraging both regime and opposition to engage in dialogue. In Zimbabwe and Myanmar, the EU encouraged dialogue after political change when repressive regimes had not been entirely dislodged. The EU now runs over seventy such human rights and democracy dialogues, yet almost nothing is done to publicly demonstrate that these have any identifiable use.

This is a difficult balance to strike and one that may need more systematic attention and monitoring. In some cases, pressing for such dialogue in a kind of quasi-mediation approach may help democracy, but in others it may delay reforms and unwittingly sustain authoritarian governments—for example, in the case of Bahrain's national dialogue or in Belarus. The EU needs a more careful

and differentiated approach to such dialogues and must ensure that they do indeed filter into meaningful political change. The union should draw up new guidelines to define the use of democracy-enhancing dialogues.

6. Reassess the Democracy Strand of Conflict Resolution

The EU Global Strategy promises that in conflict scenarios, the EU will support “**inclusive governance** at all levels.” The EU has civilian response teams to engage in issues such as rule of law training, while the European Gendarmerie Force offers police training. Common Security and Defense Policy missions often include training initiatives for security personnel—something that is useful and important but rarely about underpinning democracy. The EU has invested billions of euros in Afghanistan without entrenching inclusive politics or a representative political system. The EU needs to reexamine the democracy elements of its conflict interventions, which in the last ten years appear to have functioned at a very low level and without overwhelming success. The EU increasingly prefers to outsource postconflict peace building to regional organizations, at least in Africa—an approach the union sees as more in tune with the reshaped order. This increases the need to support the democracy-building components of conflict resolution policies through these other organizations.

7. Fight Back and Recognize Specificities

The EU’s new attention on protecting reformers and human rights defenders from heightened repression is admirable and has been effective in saving many people. However, the EU still needs a more preemptive and broader approach to the shrinking-space challenge. It needs to get ahead of the curve and (re)build legitimacy for democratic norms and the notion of autonomous civil society, rather than only reacting to emergency situations.

This aim in particular would benefit from a set of funding modalities specific to democracy support: modalities to allow for greater policy innovation, a sensible degree of risk taking, more nimble funding procedures, and the ability to explore new ways of circumventing regimes’ repression against democrats and externally funded civic organizations.

8. Consider Other Models of Democracy

Relatively little democracy support has incorporated systematic joint deliberation about the necessary updating of the concept of democracy that is being promoted. In practice, the EU still struggles to adapt to local variations in political dynamics. While EU policymakers insist they no longer base their strategies on the assumption of a standard transition paradigm, in practice EU policies still tend to be based on a view that political reform has an inherent forward movement that transcends momentary setbacks. In many countries, however, elements of democratization coexist with aspects of de-democratization. The EU needs to base its future democracy support on more concrete ideas of how to encourage such democratic variation in tangible ways.

9. Cooperate With Other Democracies

The EU could do a lot more to link its democracy support agenda to its efforts to defend multilateralism and the liberal order. The union is certainly moving to deepen its partnerships with other democracies: in the last year, it has agreed on new strategies with Japan and India. But these do not provide for practical coordination on democracy support. Most EU member states have been lukewarm toward cooperation on global human rights with new democracies, for fear this might harm their relations with Russia and China. Member-state allocations to the UN Democracy Fund have decreased.

The EU's democracy support efforts would be helped by a much more sustained effort to use such global partnership not only for achieving security and commercial goals but also for defending democratic values—beyond merely stating the union shares such values with these other powers. As such, the EU should seriously consider organizing a high-level annual gathering of heads of state and government and pro-democracy actors from around the world in an effort to improve cooperation—and send a political message.

10. Devise a Common Definition and Boost Monitoring of Democracy Support

It is very difficult to define with any precision what kind of European aid is relevant to democracy and human rights aims. Most donors classify as being in the field of human rights and democracy many funding initiatives that do not warrant such a definition. Even people working in development agencies most commonly cannot answer the question of how much their own government spends on democracy and human rights. OECD figures do not seem to match figures given in member states' own democracy strategies. This poses significant problems for effective use of funds—after all, if it is an arduous process to even find reliable data, it is exceedingly difficult to engage in constructive analysis and learning.

The problem is starker when one compares this with the clarity on defense spending and the high-level political priority this receives relative to democracy support. To help in this endeavor, the European External Action Service, the EU's foreign policy arm, would benefit from a dedicated corps of democracy support officials; the very small number of officials currently working on democracy is clearly inadequate for what is supposed to be a defining principle of EU foreign policy.² There are a small handful of policy officers working on democracy in member states and the EU institutions—compared with hundreds working on economic diplomacy. If the EU is serious about democracy and human rights, this revealing imbalance needs correcting.

Conclusion

The EU's level of ambition in democracy support cannot realistically return to the days when the bloc aspired to be a profoundly transformative power—an ambition that was anyway rarely met even when geopolitical winds were more favorable. The ten guidelines above are suggested as ways in which EU democracy support can both regain traction and be updated. Some updating will be about adjusting to a different global geopolitical era, while some will be about taking on board lessons from on-the-ground democracy initiatives in recent years. That is, change is required at both the macro- and the microlevel of European democracy policies.

Since EU governments' 2009 council conclusions, European democracy support has evolved and been constantly fine-tuned. It has made advances and suffered setbacks. Despite the many improvements made, EU democracy support must still change more to embrace a wider variety of tactics, models, actors, and strategies. EU approaches must embody more variance across countries on the receiving end of policies, support more diverse institutional pathways and models, and work with a broader range of partners beyond Europe. And these tactical refinements must dovetail with a clearer set of operational guidelines for high diplomacy of EU external relations. This should be the overarching theme of the union's next council conclusions.

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Notes

- 1 Sarah Raine, *Europe's Strategic Future: From Crisis to Coherence?* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies) 122, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/adelphi/2019/europes-strategic-future-from-crisis-to-coherence>.
- 2 Although election observation is part of democracy support, at the EEAS only two out of nine desk officers in the Democracy and Election Observation Division are working specifically on democracy. The service should reinforce this portfolio. By comparison, in the realm of security, the EEAS consists of over fourteen divisions (not including EU military staff).



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