



HOW TO MAKE THE EU NARRATIVE ON DEMOCRACY FIT FOR THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

Policy Brief

JUNE 2023

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

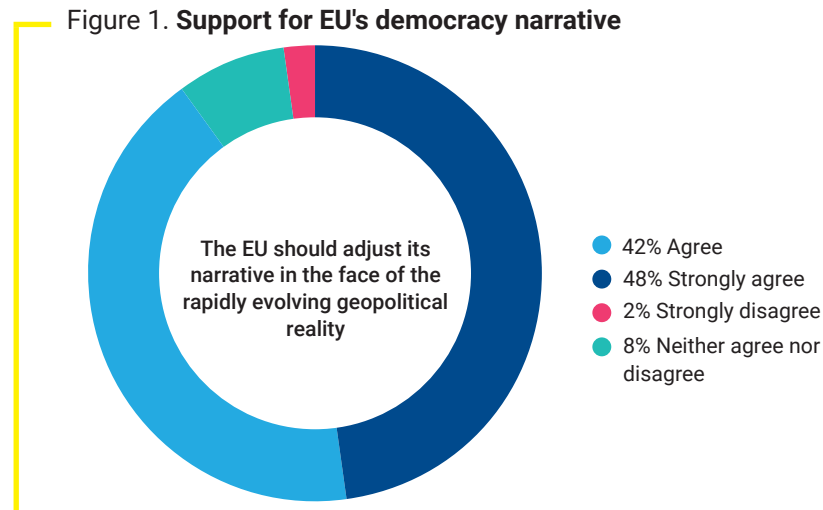
1. *Systematically present democracy as a universal aspiration.* To counter the fallacy that democracy is a Western model, the EU should underline that democratic principles are universally applicable and desired by most people.
2. *Proactively make the case for democracy.* To respond to people's concrete needs and expectations, the EU could demonstrate with robust evidence that democracy delivers better outcomes for citizens in a more holistic way.
3. *Be humble and act in a more reciprocal way.* To build common ground with external partners, the EU could acknowledge more openly that building and defending democracy is a joint challenge from which everyone can learn and share experiences, regardless of geography or culture.
4. *Sell the narrative better.* To maximize the impact of its message, the EU could explore ways to improve its communication delivery methods.
5. *Link words with action.* To make the narrative a political reality, the EU could identify concrete policy hooks, including under the next European Commission to be appointed in 2024.

The global democracy landscape has been severely shaken in recent years. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is one of the latest illustrations of the ongoing assault on democratic principles. Open conflicts, the Covid-19 pandemic, autocratic crackdowns and new challenges, such as polarization and disinformation, are just a few further examples of recent developments affecting democracy worldwide. As demonstrated by ample evidence (International IDEA 2021), democracy is in retreat around the globe.

Faced with this grim reality, the European Union is expected to take a leading role in defending democratic and accountable governance and explaining its benefits for citizens. To

be able to act forcefully, the EU should adjust its democracy approach to meet contemporary challenges and ensure that its narrative on democracy is fit for the new geopolitical environment. This is one of the key findings stemming from recent work led by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). With the support of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, in January 2023, International IDEA launched a Recommendations Report looking at options to further strengthen the EU's external democracy policy (International IDEA 2023). Since the release of the Report, the recommendation on the EU's democracy narrative has received considerable support (Figure 1). In light of recent geopolitical developments,

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Source: International IDEA, Survey to all consulted stakeholders in the framework of the project, 2023.

many argue that the merits of democracy should no longer be considered self-evident. Making the case for democracy requires a proactive, convincing and concrete message tailored to the targeted audience. International IDEA has continued with consultations and analysis to assess more precisely what such an updated narrative could entail. The ideas developed in this Policy Brief are the fruits of this work and aim to inform the EU institutions and EU Member States' reflection and action on democracy.

1. SYSTEMATICALLY PRESENT DEMOCRACY AS A UNIVERSAL ASPIRATION

In an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment, the EU must counter the fallacy that democracy is a Western model. Rather than talking about European values, the EU should emphasize that democracy is a universal aspiration shared by most, if not all, people around the world. Pro-democracy citizens and actors (e.g. political parties, civil society, constitutionally independent bodies) push for democratic governance and participation across the globe. They are present in even the most autocratic and repressive regimes. They relentlessly defend the democracy agenda, often at their own personal risk, and, as such, defy the notion that democracy

is a Western concept. Despite attempts to promote cultural relativism (e.g. the 'Asian values' ideology developed in the 1990s), experience has shown that democratization processes occur everywhere. In Africa, democracy remains the preferred system of governance by far (Gyimah-Boadi and Asunka 2021). In Latin America, although the daily functioning of democratic institutions can be criticized, citizens continue to support democracy as the best system of governance and ask for further democratic reforms (Corporación Latinobarómetro 2021).

Autocracies have understood this universal aspiration and are now actively developing their own 'concept' of democracy to better contest basic democratic principles (e.g. China's 2021 white paper on democracy (China's State Council Information Office 2021) and Russia's concept of sovereign democracy (Lipman 2006)). Stressing the inherent attributes of democracy therefore remains vital. Such principles, which include guaranteeing civil liberties and fundamental rights, safeguarding checks and balances, and ensuring accountability, are essential for upholding the common good. External partners see democracy as an integral part of the EU's soft power, which should, in their view, adhere to these principles. Competing with autocracies

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by adopting their transactional methods, in which values are just another bargaining chip, would only be counterproductive. On the contrary, the EU's own democratic story can serve as an exemplar to show the benefits that democracy brings to citizens' well-being.

2. PROACTIVELY MAKE THE CASE FOR DEMOCRACY

Emphasizing the universality of abstract democratic principles alone is not sufficient. In most, if not all, regions of the world, people want their political systems to deliver on policies that improve security, socio-economic justice and equality, and mitigate climate change. The EU could therefore demonstrate with robust evidence that democracy delivers more efficiently and for more people than autocracy. Such evidence is already publicly available (Box 1), although the collection of local data could be further developed to tailor the messaging to local realities.

Box 1. Democracies perform better than autocracies

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute regularly provides research data demonstrating that democracies perform better than autocracies. The following data are extracted from the Case for Democracy Report (V-Dem Institute 2023):

1. Economic growth. Democratization leads, on average, to 20% higher GDP per capita after 25 years.
2. Social protection. Transitioning to democracy leads, on average, to more than a 100% increase in social protection spending.

3. Public goods. Compared to autocracies, democracies with strong accountability mechanisms provide 23% more safe water access, 35% more immunization for young children, up to 40% more electricity access and a 300% higher Internet connection rate.

4. Human health. Democratization leads to a 3% increase in life expectancy within 10 years of regime change.

5. Gender equality. Citizens in fully democratic countries have 60% more gender-equality attitudes than those in autocracies.

Making the case for democracy does not have to be restricted to the issue of economic prosperity. Democracy is not only demonstrably more able to achieve economic prosperity but also offers greater political stability, social welfare and inclusion, and environmental protection. Its ability for self-correction (notably through elections) enables a change of course based on the people's will. The EU could also highlight the holistic nature of democracy and its ability to simultaneously tackle various policy agendas through societal consensus. The sustainability of democratically agreed policies is another dimension worth underlining as this will be a major challenge for all political systems in the coming decades, especially concerning issues of generational change, such as climate adaptation and the digital revolution. Viewed in this light, the EU narrative could capture practical issues that really matter to people (e.g. air and water quality, deforestation) and show how democratic methods bring communities together to develop jointly agreed solutions.

In addition, the EU could more proactively deconstruct some proclaimed economic success stories that are promoted by autocratic states. It could, for example, highlight the social inequalities under many of these regimes. There are clear signs that autocracies perform, on average, significantly worse than democracies when preventing or dealing with crises (e.g. mismanagement of pandemics, natural disasters or financial crises) (Van der Staak 2023). The EU could better highlight cases where significant democratic shortcomings have prevented sound crisis management. Democracies can also better deconstruct the double standards and alleged freedoms that autocracies profess, such as the selective promotion of religious freedom.

3. BE HUMBLE AND ACT IN A MORE RECIPROCAL WAY

The EU operates in an environment in which no country is beyond criticism. The EU itself cannot rely on its democratic credentials to lecture the rest of the world. External partners, especially those living nearby, closely monitor the democracy situation in all 27 EU Member States. In its dialogue with partner countries, the EU can expect tough questions on its own democratic shortcomings for which honest, public and transparent responses will be needed. Providing robust answers to these questions would help preserve the EU's democracy credibility.

The EU could use its internal challenges to demonstrate that building democracy is a continuous process, while underlining that democracy is equipped with the appropriate tools to address such challenges. Recently, autocratic actors used Qatargate to denounce corruption within EU institutions. The EU could, however, underline that independent police and judicial

systems properly identified and swiftly investigated the scandal. The EU could also promote its internal democracy achievements more systematically (e.g. citizens' participation mechanisms, such as the conference on the future of Europe and its concrete impact on EU policy initiatives). The EU's internal market regulations that shape its democracy, such as digital or due-diligence directives, can have a ripple effect outside EU borders which affects the democratic functioning of partner countries. The EU could engage more actively with those partner countries that fear negative impacts from EU regulations to ensure that their concerns are equally reflected in EU policymaking.

Listening is key to ensuring that the EU's narrative properly captures and responds to partners' views and their understanding of democracy. The motivation behind democratic aspirations can vary from one place to another, and institutional set-ups may differ while ensuring fundamental democratic principles. The EU could cite itself as an example, highlighting that it is an organization of 27 differently shaped democracies that have walked different democratic paths. EU Delegations and EU Member States' embassies would therefore benefit from engaging with the widest possible range of stakeholders in partner countries to hear what they expect from democracy and how the democracy narrative could be translated locally. This means involving not only governments but also civil society, local authorities, businesses, media and local influencers on a more continual basis.

4. SELL THE NARRATIVE BETTER

To be impactful, a narrative that is fit for the new geopolitical reality must be accompanied by adequate delivery methods and be consistently and

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proactively communicated. External partners stress that the EU too often promotes democracy on a selective basis or acts defensively when democracy is already under threat. By revealing how its democracy agenda relates to its other strategic interests and explaining how these align (or why in certain cases they do not), the EU can mitigate some of these perceptions of double standards. The continual development of EU Delegations' democracy assessment capacity, to inform both EU democracy support and democracy protection, can also help feed into and tailor the EU democracy narrative locally. This could be achieved in close cooperation with all EU diplomatic missions and build on joint initiatives such as the Team Europe Democracy initiative.

Joining forces with EU Member States can also help deliver strong democracy messages. It is necessary to thoroughly reflect on how to best achieve this. It may include practical avenues, be it through the regular meetings of the communication directors of ministries of foreign affairs, via the press and information officers posted in partner countries or by training young diplomats to master the EU democracy narrative in the newly established European Diplomatic Academy. The EU could benefit from partnering with all democracies to communicate on practical democratic experiences on all continents. Such partnerships would help tailor the messaging to local audiences (including by using local languages) and avoid (over) communication from an EU angle only. Existing cooperation platforms such as the Summit for Democracy, the Open Government Partnership, the Community of Democracies and International IDEA could provide spaces in which to develop such partnerships.

They are, however, global initiatives; establishing this cooperation at country level is yet to be achieved.

Updating the EU narrative on democracy also means reflecting on current terminology and geographical approaches. The language of EU democracy should not come across as divisive, condescending or arrogant. The use of certain implied or blurred concepts, such as the Global South, should be reconsidered in favour of more neutral or factual terminology. Diplomatic jargon and subtleties in official statements (e.g. urging or condemning) also require further reflection in a similar way in order to identify language that speaks to citizens.

In certain contexts, the term democracy may be viewed negatively, and the EU might then have to use other hooks (e.g. social justice, equality, participation) as entry points to promote universal democratic values. One should also keep in mind that the EU's reputation varies considerably from one region to another, as does its shared history with certain partners. Hence, it is necessary to capture these different realities in the EU democracy discourse. This also implies understanding the local information environment in which the EU operates and using local multipliers to deliver concrete democracy stories similar to the 'Good Human Rights Stories'. Some interesting initiatives have been launched for that purpose. The Strategic Communications division of the European External Action Service has, for example, hired an Arabic-speaking journalist to cover the Middle East and North Africa region and is working with young influencers who are active on social media. Such initiatives could be replicated.

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5. LINK WORDS WITH ACTION

With Russia's war against Ukraine, the red lines of democracy have become clearer. Democratic values are openly under attack, and pro-democracy actors must actively defend universal principles that are at the core of the multilateral order. As expressed by the stakeholders consulted by this project, adjusting the EU narrative on democracy to a shifting geopolitical environment is very timely.

While doing so, the EU should, however, keep in mind that any narrative must be accompanied by action. The EU is often perceived as delivering grand speeches, especially on values and principles, that are then left unattended. An updated narrative should therefore concretely shape EU policymaking. The 2023 Council Conclusions on the Mid-Term Review of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, the 2024 Mid-Term Review of EU funding instruments, the design of the 2024 Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, and the European elections in June 2024 are all important opportunities in this regard.

Together, these should inform the workplan of the 2024–2029 European

Commission. Taking the reins of the EU at an historic geopolitical juncture, the new political leadership will have a unique opportunity to own the democracy narrative. At a time when democracy is under assault in Europe and around the globe, technocratic measures are not enough. More than ever, speaking, engaging and acting to promote democracy are political actions that can decisively shape the EU's role in the world.

6. METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this Policy Brief are based on an analysis of the EU's external democracy policy led by International IDEA during 2022, captured in the Recommendations Report published in January 2023 (International IDEA 2023). To expand on one of the report's key recommendations, the project team conducted 12 additional semi-structured interviews with democracy stakeholders. This Policy Brief also draws on information collected during 17 presentations of the report to EU institutions, EU Member States and other relevant stakeholders, including donor organizations both inside and outside the EU (Figure 2).

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Figure 2. Methodology



Interviews

- EU representatives
- Third-country informants



Presentations and exchanges

- EU institutions and services
- Embassies and EU delegations
- International partners and donors

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of a wider project led by International IDEA's Regional Europe office which looks at questions related to the relevance and coherence of the EU's external democracy policy in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment. It is a follow-up to the *Recommendations Report: The EU's External Democracy Action in a New Geopolitical Reality*. The full findings, analysis and recommendations formulated by the project can be found at <<https://www.idea.int/sweden-eu-democracy>>.

ABOUT INTERNATIONAL IDEA

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

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int

sweden
2023.eu