

# REVIEWING THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY FROM A PARTICIPATING COUNTRY PERSPECTIVE

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This Brief presents some findings on the [Summit for Democracy](#) (US Department of State n.d.b) process from the perspective of participating countries based on a selected number of interviews with representatives from the governments of six countries (Germany, Lithuania, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Zambia) and the European Union (European External Action Service). The objective of the Brief is to highlight the experiences of countries within the summit process and their views on the way forward towards the Third Summit, due to take place in March 2024. The views of the interviewees do not necessarily reflect the official position of their respective governments. Due to the limited number of interviews and predominance of European interlocutors, the Brief does not aspire to provide an in-depth analysis but rather to offer the individual perspectives of officials from participating countries who supported the summit process.

The Brief complements the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (International IDEA) Summit for Democracy impact report, [Democratic Engagement after Two Summits for Democracy](#) (Keutgen et al. 2023), which provides a comprehensive analysis of the Summit for Democracy process, the implementation of country commitments, the level of inclusion of civil society in the summit and the Democracy Cohorts, and recommendations for future summits.

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## MAIN TAKEAWAYS

1. The summit process was a welcome initiative on the part of the United States Government for countries to mobilize resources to unite efforts around democracy support. However, the organization of the summit and the selection of countries were the subject of some controversy. The non-

invitation of Hungary was seen as highly unfortunate by the EU and several EU Member States, preventing the union from taking a common position. The summit has the potential to become a permanent global forum for democracies, but efforts need to be made to adjust the format to ensure that it remains relevant in the future and does not duplicate existing efforts.

2. Most interlocutors considered the declaration of the Second Summit for Democracy an important achievement, highlighting some core democratic values. However, there were diverging views. Some stressed the necessity for such a declaration, underlining the inclusive process and final result of the negotiations. Others questioned its added value while claiming that the process was too time-consuming, which prevented efforts from being made elsewhere. Some argued that the summit focal group, which was largely limited to negotiating the declaration, could have developed into a steering committee that could have served as a driver of a more consultative, inclusive and predictable summit. The declaration nonetheless managed to help build alliances and highlight where visions of democracy converge and where they differ.
3. The summit helped to put focus on existing national priorities and activities that were channelled into national commitments, creating momentum for their implementation. While many of the commitments were made before the first summit, the summit process acted as a catalyst, pushing the implementation further than would have been the case in the absence of a summit process.
4. The Democracy Cohorts proved valuable in establishing collaboration between countries and with international bodies, but also with civil society, which was often able to take on a more dynamic and flexible role as a result.

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## THE FORMAT, STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY

Government interlocutors welcomed the Summit for Democracy, as it brought together democracy actors from different communities and created stronger collaboration between actors with different priorities that normally would not engage with each other. The summit was born out of US President Joe Biden's 2020 election campaign, during which he announced the summit as a campaign pledge and vowed to rebuild the image and leadership of the United States in the world (Ifri et al. 2021). Therefore, the summit largely mirrored US foreign policy and strategic interests, a perception that proved both a boon and a hindrance for the summit (Kandel and Salliofest 2021). While interviewees were positive about the US Government's level of dedication to the summit process and its vision of the future of democracy, reactions were more mixed regarding the summit's invitees and format, which many perceived as disproportionately reflecting US interests.

Interlocutors perceived the Second Summit, in March 2023, as more inclusive than the First Summit, in 2021, with the number of invited countries increasing from 112 to 120, and the organization of five regional summits giving other countries greater ownership of the process. In addition to the USA, the host countries Costa Rica, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea and Zambia were able to outline their own approach based on local needs and political priorities (Chatham House et al. 2023; Keutgen et al. 2023). However, interviewees saw this regional independence as somewhat limited by the USA, as only countries that the USA had invited could participate in the regional summits. For example, it was noted that more countries could have benefited from being invited and taking part in the discussions on free, fair and transparent elections taking place at the Zambian regional summit, as this issue was particularly pertinent for many countries in Africa. Twenty-four African countries held elections in 2023 alone, but many of these countries were not invited to attend.

The non-invitation of Hungary was seen as a major hindrance to the EU's full participation by interlocutors from the EU and several EU Member States, as it prevented the bloc from taking a common position and making a unified contribution to the summit's outputs. Interlocutors from the EU and from some EU member states, including Germany and Lithuania, stated that the summit process would have benefited greatly from a strong and united EU position. Lithuanian interlocutors in particular stressed that the EU should play a key role in the summit, as the EU and its Member States are the leading democracy donors globally (see also European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships 2021). Some interviewees noted that the fact that Hungary was not invited to the First Summit could have been seen as a warning to the country, but interlocutors from the EU and several EU Member States saw its exclusion from the Second Summit as highly unfortunate for the EU: the country's non-invitation was compared to other similarly criticized regimes that received invitations to both summits, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and Serbia.

Finally, some interlocutors—for instance, from Germany, Lithuania and Norway—reported that it was initially not clear what outcomes were expected from the Second Summit and what the overall objective of the Summit for Democracy process was. This uncertainty was compounded by delayed communications from summit organizers on the format, preventing participants from engaging in timely preparations for the different steps in the process. Some interviewees suggested that efforts should be made to determine the Summit for Democracy's true *raison d'être* to ensure that it remains relevant in the future.

There were varying considerations regarding how to maintain the summit's momentum. Whereas some interviewees indicated the need to make the summit a regular global forum for democracies in order to elevate the issue on the global agenda, others raised the concern that organizing summits too frequently would create fatigue and allow for too little time to implement national commitments.

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## THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY DECLARATION AS AN OUTCOME OF THE SECOND SUMMIT

The declaration of the Second Summit for Democracy was an important achievement that pledged to 'strengthen democratic institutions and processes and build resilience, [and] to meet the rising challenges to democracy worldwide' ([US Department of State 2023b](#)). Out of the 90 participating countries, 74 endorsed the declaration. Among these, 13 expressed reservations about certain sections, such as on what constitutes the fundamental values of democracy, especially regarding sexuality and gender identity and equality, as well as on support for territorial integrity, civilian control of the military and justice where war crimes are committed ([Keutgen et al. 2023](#)). While a unified consensus could not be reached, the declaration highlighted certain core democratic values, such as free and fair elections, access to impartial justice, the right to opinion and expression, the fight against corruption, freedom of assembly and association, worker rights and the responsible use of technology. The declaration thus helped to build bridges regarding the common themes of democracy, despite the different contexts in which democracy has grown around the world. Most government interlocutors who were interviewed were supportive of the final text of the declaration and its inclusive negotiation process, though some expressed frustration about the long time spent to agree on the final text. Moreover, the fact that some countries did not endorse certain sections of the final text exposed differences in the perception of what constitutes the fundamental values of democracy.

Regarding the overall content and length of the declaration, some government interlocutors stated that it covered too many issues, while others argued that it could have been more ambitious. In the end, the broad declaration, with a high number of signatories, allowed for a more inclusive approach, encompassing diverse opinions from a wide array of countries. However, some interlocutors questioned the added value and effectiveness of such a broad declaration, as it risks duplicating existing initiatives at the level of the United Nations. Interlocutors noted that, despite the fact that the declaration received little to no attention in the media, such a document was necessary to have a clear outcome from such an important international event as the Summit for Democracy.

The text was crafted by the summit focal group, a body consisting of participating governments and authorities that was created in the margins of the summit to 'bring together governments and authorities from Summit participating countries to develop an inclusive agenda for the next Summit, to draft a meaningful declaration for the Second Summit, and to institutionalize democratic renewal into existing platforms and fora' ([US Department of State 2022](#)). However, interlocutors from the EU regretted that the focal group was largely limited to negotiating the declaration. Some interlocutors mentioned that the summit would have benefited from developing the focal group into a steering committee, which could have served as a driver of a more consultative, inclusive and predictable summit.

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## THE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT OF DEMOCRACY COMMITMENTS

The heads of state and government of the 98 countries that participated in the First Summit made more than 750 commitments to be implemented during the Year of Action ([US Department of State n.d.a](#)). Many commitments were not born out of the summit process itself but were, according to all state interlocutors, based on existing national priorities and activities. Nonetheless, the majority of interlocutors mentioned that the summit process often acted as a catalyst, generating additional momentum and political will for these national and international democratic initiatives to be prioritized and implemented. It was also noted that developing international commitments and making them public elevated their importance and provided a level of protection against being deprioritized in times of shrinking aid budgets.

Spain and Zambia were among the countries that mentioned that they capitalized on the opportunities presented by the summit. Spain committed to strengthening democracy in Latin America through the project 'For a New Social Contract: Renewing Democracy with the Objective of Leaving No One Behind' ([Summit for Democracy Resources 2022](#)). While the project was initiated before the First Summit, the summit process acted as a catalyst, pushing its implementation much further. [Spain's Ellas+ Fund](#), which aims to foster women's participation in politics and democratic institutions, was reportedly developed in the context of the Summit for Democracy process ([Summit for Democracy Resources 2022](#)).

In Zambia, the publication of the Summit for Democracy commitments created greater transparency about the commitments and government efforts to address these and therefore helped to promote their implementation. The commitments included improving the independence and transparency of the election commission, amending the Public Order Act to strengthen fundamental freedoms and reinstating broadcasting licences that had been revoked for political reasons ([Summit for Democracy Resources 2023](#); [Lusaka Times 2023](#)). Zambian civil society was invited to participate in consultations on the reporting on the implementation of commitments, and emerged as a sort of accountability mechanism in respect of the state. These consultations reportedly enabled the latter to take a more active role and provide important information for progress reports ([Summit for Democracy Resources 2023](#)).

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## THE DEMOCRACY COHORTS AS A SUSTAINABLE COORDINATION MECHANISM FOR GLOBAL DEMOCRACY ACTION?

The USA facilitated the creation of 16 Democracy Cohorts to support the Summit for Democracy's Year of Action by bringing together various stakeholders from government, civil society and the private sector to take action to support the implementation of commitments in their area of interest.

Countries' engagement in Democracy Cohorts required a high level of national coordination, often involving multiple sections in different ministries, government offices and independent national bodies working on areas such as human rights, electoral processes or anti-corruption. Some interlocutors highlighted this aspect as particularly beneficial, as it helped raise awareness of the initiative at the government level and facilitated input from various departments on different facets of democracy. At the international level, the Democracy Cohorts proved to be particularly valuable in establishing collaboration between countries with converging priorities and between international bodies, coalitions and civil society. Democracy Cohorts were also important in breathing life into existing but stagnant efforts, with one interlocutor crediting the summit with directly helping to revitalize the Media Freedom Coalition (see also [Heinmaa and Paus 2023](#)).

Most interlocutors argued that the Democracy Cohorts were among the most important outcomes of the summit, as they enabled direct engagement between governments, international bodies and civil society organizations. Within the framework of the Democracy Cohorts, civil society organizations often proved to be more dynamic and flexible in engaging in certain activities. For instance, in the context of the Resisting Authoritarian Pressure Cohort, Lithuanian interlocutors stated that civil society organizations were able to advocate on issues that governments would normally be more hesitant to take on for political reasons.

However, interlocutors also identified some challenges related to the Democracy Cohorts. They said, for example, that there was a lack of clarity about the overall purpose of the cohorts and their expected final outputs, which caused some delays, in particular during the initial stages. The identification and selection of co-leading countries and participating civil society organizations for the cohorts was notably cumbersome. Interviewees expressed the need for greater support in identifying relevant civil society organizations with which to partner in leading the cohorts, as leads had little time to find and engage with partners, with certain co-leads resorting to their own networks to identify relevant organizations. Moreover, some government co-leads from the Global North, such as Lithuania and Norway, struggled to find more countries from the Global South to act as co-leads. Some countries that declined reportedly cited a lack of capacity or failure to see the added value of the cohorts.

Several interlocutors raised the question of duplicating existing efforts—for instance, citing the risk of replicating work that is already being done in the UN or in other forums. One example was the Rule of Law and Access to Justice Champions Cohort, which was perceived as doing similar work to the Justice Action Coalition. However, the cohort has since aligned its work with the coalition, potentially creating new synergies and bringing in wider voices. A lack of clarity and timely communication during the summit process exacerbated issues with duplication. For example, the USA announced its own Global Youth Democracy Network ([US Department of State 2023a](#)) during the

Second Summit, which was seen by some interlocutors as duplicating the work of the Youth Democracy Cohort.

In the run-up to the Third Summit, in South Korea, expected for March 2024, the Democracy Cohorts are mostly being maintained, but many still face challenges, notably a lack of capacity and funding. Interviewed officials expressed a clear desire to continue the work of the Democracy Cohorts, whether within the current format or through other forums, as long as there is capacity and a perceived added value among the co-leads.

Interviewees felt that the absence of a dedicated space for the Democracy Cohorts and their initiatives at the summit was a missed opportunity, one that should be rectified before future summits. Encouragingly, the preparations for the Third Summit indicate that the cohorts will play a more prominent role (Dalke and Heinmaa 2023). Interlocutors emphasized the crucial need for early dissemination of information regarding the timing and format of the Third Summit, as timely communication is essential to maintaining momentum and enabling well-timed preparations.

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## CONCLUSION

This Brief builds on International IDEA's [Impact Report](#) that was released shortly after the Second Summit for Democracy by incorporating insights from government officials who participated in the process in different capacities. The findings show largely converging views on the summit process, reflecting the main conclusions and recommendations from the impact report.

The general perception was that the summit process was a welcome initiative that managed to mobilize efforts around democracy. While the summit has the potential to become a permanent global forum for democracies, efforts are still needed to find the right format to ensure that it remains relevant in the future. Particularly important is ensuring that the summit does not duplicate existing efforts and that it develops a space of its own.

The summit declaration was an important achievement of the Second Summit. Though a unified consensus could not be reached, with 13 countries dissenting from sections of the final text, the declaration nonetheless helped to build alliances and highlight where visions of the fundamental values of democracy converge and where they differ. However, interviewees expressed diverging views on the negotiation process, and the continued disagreement regarding certain democratic values indicates the need for further work in these areas.

Both country commitments and work on the Democracy Cohorts were perceived as important initiatives that helped to raise democracy on political agendas both domestically and internationally. While many of the commitments were developed before the summit and based on national priorities and activities, interlocutors stressed that the process was effective



in generating additional momentum and political will for these initiatives to be prioritized and implemented. The cohorts helped to establish collaboration between countries and with international bodies and civil society. While the fact that a dedicated space was not provided for the cohorts during the Second Summit was seen as a missed opportunity, interlocutors nonetheless expressed a willingness to continue the work of the cohorts as long as there was capacity and a perceived added value for the Third Summit. In this context, early dissemination of information regarding the timing, agenda and format of the Third Summit is essential to maintaining the momentum of the summit and ensuring timely preparations for all interlocutors involved.

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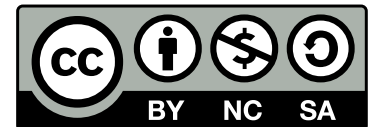
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