



INTERNATIONAL IDEA
Supporting democracy worldwide



The State of Democracy in East-Central Europe: Thirty Years after the fall of the Berlin Wall

Ten Points for Action

Marking three decades since the fall of the communist regimes and the spread of democracy in East-Central Europe, in November 2019 the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the European Committee of the Regions hosted a conference in Brussels, titled *The State of Democracy in East-Central Europe: Thirty Years after the fall of the Berlin Wall*. The conference gathered former heads of state and government from East-Central Europe, leading representatives of state institutions and civil society organisations, high-level decision-makers from European Union institutions, and representatives of inter-governmental organizations.

This event followed the launch of International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Report¹ in Brussels on 19 November, which gathered considerable interest among EU officials, academics, civil society activists, international organizations and others. The main findings concerning the state of democracy in Europe indicated room for optimism, but also significant challenges:

- Europe has the highest share of the world's democracies, but the region has seen a decline in the quality of its democracies in the last 10 years. More than half of democracies in Europe suffer from democratic erosion.
- Of the ten democracies in the world currently experiencing democratic backsliding, a severe case of democratic erosion, six countries—Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Turkey and, Ukraine—are in Europe.
- Most of these declines are associated to weakening Checks on Government and a shrinking civic space

With these challenges in mind, listed below are the key messages that emerged across interventions of various speakers at the conference marking thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This ten-point list is compiled with the purpose of distributing it widely as important reflections, as we look back at the past thirty years and prepare for the future:

1. **Protect democracy and the rule of law at all times:** Democracy and the rule of law should not be taken for granted anywhere, including in countries where it has been considered as well-established and consolidated. The primary causes of the current democratic backsliding in East-Central Europe are the intentional actions taken by the ruling elites to undermine the rule of law, weaken checks on governments and limit civic space. The weakening of these principles and institutions should not be accepted as mere effects of institutional design choices.
2. **Resist majoritarian instincts and seek legitimacy through consensus-building:** A 'winner-takes-all' approach to politics degrades political competition to mere partisanship where populism becomes the standard and political polarization leads to fragmented and polarized societies. Leaders entrusted with public office need to make use of inter-generational dialogue and learning, where leaders with past governing experience can share their lessons and help to prepare current and future leaders.
3. **Bring back the citizens into the democratic process:** Profound societal and technological changes in the past thirty years have fundamentally changed the way in which citizens and the institutions of representative democracy interact. At the same time, citizens are increasingly losing faith in the ability of democratic institutions to listen to them. Reinvigorating democracy's appeal among the public requires that citizens be brought back into governance through participatory processes. This process should enable democracies to close the gap between elites and citizens in access to political power and influence on political decision-making.

1. *The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2019) <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2019.31>>. The GSoD Indices are available on the International IDEA website. Users can generate their own data visualizations and extract data at the country, regional and global levels across the attributes and subattributes for specific years or for selected time periods starting from 1975. The Indices are updated annually.

4. **Protect and promote democratic values and principles in all decision-making within the European Union:** The earlier call of former dissident and later President of Czechia, Vaclav Hável, continues to ring true today: Hável urged the European Union to place a greater focus on ‘the European spiritual foundations and values’ instead of acting as a technocratic body that deals ‘with only economics and money’. Greater democratic scrutiny, effective dialogue and timely responses to the deteriorating state of democracy in the European Union member states should be prioritized. Effective conditionality in the pre-accession stage should entail a stronger focus on the need to consolidate democracy and advance the rule of law. Progress should be tracked through objective and comprehensive data on democratic development.
5. **Strengthen the autonomy and reinforce the integrity of the institutions of democratic checks and balances:** Integrity and effectiveness of the institutions of checks and balances should be continuously protected and strengthened. These include parliamentary oversight functions, the role of the opposition, independent reporting mechanisms and ombuds-institutions, the media and judicial institutions. These mechanisms should ensure that the critical defenses of democratic oversight are intact and resilient.
6. **Strengthen professional solidarity among judges and other professions that often come under pressure and persecution:** As recent practices have shown, the lawyers, journalists and others serving in professions that are often first in line when democracy and rule of law come under pressure, stand stronger when forging strong alliances among their ranks. This professional solidarity builds mutual strength in defending against the weakening and delegitimization of democratic checks and balances.
7. **Democracies should be put to work to deliver on social and economic development:** Make the task of improving human security, economic and social development the central purpose of the functioning of democratic institutions. This should be done, inter alia, by promoting convergence between the agenda for democratic strengthening and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There is increasing evidence that a functioning democracy enables human development. On average, levels of fundamental rights, including access to justice, gender equality and basic welfare are higher in democracies. Levels of corruption are on average significantly higher in non-democratic countries than in democracies. Democracies also provide better conditions for doing business.
8. **Local and regional governments with meaningful citizen engagement should be strengthened as a defense against democratic backsliding:** Closer proximity between the European Union and its citizens should be sought through active subsidiarity. Local politicians should be empowered and supported in their role of defending and promoting democracy where people and politics meet on a daily basis. Demonstrating that democracy delivers to the everyday life of citizens is best done at the local level, where politics and citizens meet most directly.
9. **Civic education needs a new boost in Europe:** Civic education should be made more robust. Governments, political parties, civil society, educational institutions and the media need to regularly communicate with and educate citizens on the indispensability of democratic principles and values. Civic education and the media should make more use of comparative knowledge on democracy, both to build a higher quality civic literacy and to combat disinformation. Enhanced education will enable a vibrant public dialogue and improve civil society’s ability to react to the breaches and abuses of power.
10. **Give more resolute backing to democracy-support organizations to enable them to promote democracy within European Union member states:** Inter-governmental and non-governmental democracy support organizations—once strong drivers of democratization in East-Central Europe—largely ceased to focus on countries within the EU once those joined the Union. Given the current trend of democratic backsliding, the international community should revisit their approaches in this regard. The new approach should provide unwavering support, both politically and financially, to the work of democracy-support organizations to enable their effective and unhindered work in Europe. There is the need for increased international funding to finance independent and non-partisan actions for protecting and promoting universal democratic standards, rule of law and fundamental human rights and freedoms. The various EU Institutions should act more harmoniously so that those institutions that support democracy externally are enabled to also use their capacity and expertise within the EU.

