



THE EU'S EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY ACTION IN A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

Policy Brief

JANUARY 2023

This Policy Brief presents the main findings and recommendations on the European Union's external democracy policy in a new geopolitical reality, as a collective contribution resulting from consultations International IDEA held with civil society in several world regions and with a wide range of EU institutional and Member States officials. Its purpose is to inspire future EU democracy policy to ensure it can defend democracy globally and at home in line with the EU's declared intention to become a stronger geopolitical player. Such a shift is justified and critical in view of the escalation of geopolitical turmoil, authoritarian trends and recent attacks on the foundations of democracy on the one hand and provides a positive response to the resulting political momentum on the other. This Policy Brief provides a snapshot of the full Recommendations Report: *The EU's External Democracy Policy in a New Geopolitical Reality*.

ADJUSTING THE EU'S EXTERNAL DEMOCRACY ACTION TO THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

The EU has historically been one of the world's staunchest advocates of democracy. It can build on its positive track record and a substantial external democracy acquis (Brasseur, Pachta and Grigolo 2023). Consultations conducted showed that it is an appreciated democracy actor.

However, major changes have affected the global democracy landscape in recent years, including the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In addition, new challenges such as disinformation hinder democratic development. As the EU is revisiting its strategic interests, it needs to embed democracy at their heart. Addressing the challenges that lie ahead is now first and foremost about political will. Democracy, as an all-encompassing and values-based political system, is the model of governance that the EU should promote in a world order increasingly exposed to competing governance models.

1. The EU should build a new narrative on democracy

To advance democracy as a model of governance, the EU should build a new narrative on democracy that squarely promotes it as a universal aspiration but that is tailor-made to local realities in partner countries. Democratic regimes are no longer desired only for the principle of equal participation in public decision making, but also for their ability to safeguard the rule of law, fight corruption and deliver for citizens. The EU should thus demonstrate that democracies can act and achieve results (V-Dem Institute n.d.). The EU should also counter the autocratic fallacy of democracy being a Western model and defuse 'us versus them' perceptions (democracies vs. the rest), which ultimately risks antagonizing weaker democracies and hybrid regimes. The new narrative should be humble and

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transparent, keeping in mind that the EU can be accused of double standards. The EU's credibility would benefit from openly acknowledging when its own strategic interests conflict with its democracy agenda. Addressing its internal challenges and being more vocal about its own internal democracy and rule of law mechanisms to address them when engaging with external partners would strengthen its credibility further. Building a new narrative could also show that the EU is ready to engage in a reciprocal dialogue with external partners and listen to them, while remaining bold about its values.

2. The EU should use democracy as a guide in all its external policies

The EU should in fact be more assertive in owning its democracy agenda, and it should not shy away from using more systematically political conditionality when the democracy principles it stands for are being assaulted. Pursuing this agenda successfully also means implementing it coherently. Recent geopolitical shifts call for an additional effort to use democracy to politically guide all EU external policies. All EU decision makers and practitioners should not only be democracy-aware but also become active democracy promoters. To give a couple of examples, the EU could consider integrating democracy more prominently into the rights-based approach it adopted to development cooperation in 2014, and turn it into a full-blown democracy-based approach. The EU's trade policy and negotiations could also become more democracy sensitive. The EU could use the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+) as an entry point to push for democratic reforms in partner countries. To that end, EU trade agreements could include a dedicated democracy clause

based on a comprehensive country situation assessment. The state of democracy in a given country could also be added as a stand-alone point on the agenda of the EU Human Rights Dialogues with partner countries.

3. The EU should adopt an EU Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations

The EU has so far never explicitly determined what it means by supporting democracy abroad. It should get clear on what its external democracy action aims for and how its various democracy-related efforts come together in support of this (e.g. connecting the dots between its support to human rights, rule of law, anti-corruption). To do so, the EU should adopt an Integrated Approach to Democracy Support in External Relations. Such an Integrated Approach could focus on supporting and linking essential democracy prerequisites¹ in a non-prescriptive and context-sensitive way. This would result in the adoption of locally-tailored democracy objectives. When implementing the Integrated Approach, the EU could develop further early warning mechanisms to assess not only conflict-related risks but democracy-related threats. This could be done via the informal networks of local democracy actors and by using open data, such as the Democracy Tracker developed by International IDEA in 2022 (International IDEA n.d.). Furthermore, EU action would benefit from a comprehensive democracy assessment framework to grasp the democracy trends, and help design calibrated responses in partner countries. Lastly, the EU could adopt EU Guidelines on Democracy as a practical tool to advance the EU's external democracy agenda and to provide instructions on the daily

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¹ For example: representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration, participatory engagement.

operationalization of its democracy policy documents.

4. The EU should ensure that the design and implementation of its external democracy policy are more inclusive and more gender and youth responsive

To fine-tune further its democracy vision and approach and to demonstrate the need for collective action in a shifting global context, the EU could consider engaging further with democracy stakeholders in the design and implementation of its external democracy policy in a more structured, inclusive and gender and youth responsive manner. Democracy cohort/s could provide a unique forum for policy discussion, as from the early stages of democracy policy development. It would bring together civil society, EU institutions and Member States to coordinate and contribute to the formulation of the new EU narrative on democracy and build bridges among stakeholders. Given the key role civil society organizations (CSOs) play as democracy actors, the voice of civil society could be better considered. The EU should guarantee the structural inclusion of civil society in EU democracy policymaking and implementation, by involving CSOs in its relevant political and policy dialogues on democracy in a more systematic manner, and by revising its civil society support modalities to enhance CSOs' democratization functions based on the experience gathered by Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations in the Eastern Partnership region (e.g. extend provision of core support, devising new funding strands to support small grassroots CSOs).

REFLECTING THE NEW APPROACH IN THE EU ACTION PLANS ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

1. Using the Mid-Term Review of the 2020–2024 EU Action Plan

The Mid-Term Review (MTR) is carried out by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and is expected to conclude in June 2023. Given the limited implementation time left for the Action Plan, the MTR should identify a restricted number of priorities (e.g. disinformation, countering democratic backsliding and the closing of civic space, safeguarding democracy and human rights in the digital sphere, and fighting corruption) and set a clear timeline for achieving them. It should mainstream youth further, building on the recent political drive accompanying the adoption of the Youth Action Plan (European Commission 2022). The introduction of youth checks could allow for the assessment of the impact of all external EU policies on youth and increase its representation and participation in democratic processes. The Council Conclusions adopting the MTR should be political in their messaging. This would be a way to address the democracy narrative gap identified in this Policy Brief. The MTR should outline the process for the preparations of the next Action Plan including by establishing democracy cohort/s.

2. Using the design and timeframe of the next EU Action Plan

The drafting of the next EU Action Plan will most likely start just a few months after the MTR of the third iteration. Given the magnitude of the challenges to democracy that lie ahead, the next EU Action Plan should be a politically ambitious document setting out an updated narrative on democracy and on EU action in the changing global context,

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The EU could also consider updating its 2012 Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, to signal that the times are not just business as usual and that the level of threat against democracy urges for a clear strategic vision behind the operational plan.

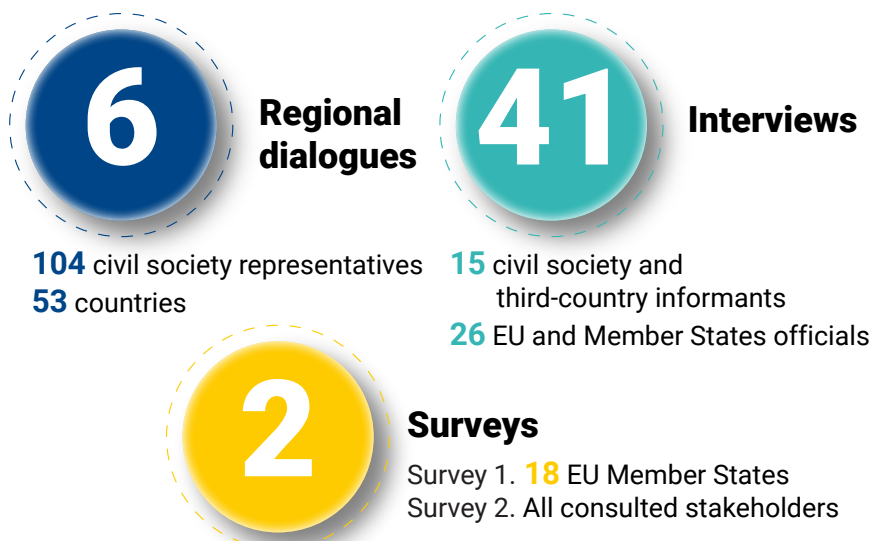
reflecting the key recommendations made in this Policy Brief. Besides adopting its fourth Action Plan, the EU could also consider updating its 2012 Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy, to signal that the times are not just business as usual and that the level of threat against democracy urges for a clear strategic vision behind the operational plan. Structurally, democracy as a model of governance should be the silver thread connecting all components of the fourth Action Plan. It should also show how synergies will be built between the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the (internal) European Democracy Action Plan. Some of the internal mechanisms that the EU has devised, such as on participatory democracy and citizens' engagement, could be shared as good practices with external partners. The timeframe of the new Action Plan should be reviewed to consider synchronizing it with the programming cycle of the EU financial instruments. Such an alignment would ensure that democracy is better reflected as a

key priority, including in geographical instruments, and that democracy-related thematic priorities are not overlooked. Such an adjusted timeframe would also facilitate co-creation, by ensuring the closer involvement of the EEAS human rights and democracy divisions in the programming exercise, steering the delivery on the political ambitions of the new Action Plan.

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. The research consisted of a desk study, online surveys, in-depth interviews with more than 40 key EU democracy policy stakeholders, and regional dialogues with more than 100 civil society representatives from across the globe.

Figure 1. Methodology



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. The full findings, analysis and recommendations formulated by the project can be found in the final Report listed in the references section.

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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Design and layout: International IDEA

DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.4>>

ISBN: 978-91-7671-602-1 (PDF)



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