

Summary

The mandate of the European Union (EU) for democracy support stems from the Treaty of the European Union of 1992 and subsequent initiatives and frameworks. The EU has carried out its democracy-assistance activities through a series of specific policies and programmes, and their attached instruments, targeting both institution-building and political reform. This Policy Brief outlines the democracy-assistance work conducted within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and in particular the Eastern Partnership. It includes a number of policy recommendations which, if implemented, would help strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's democracy-assistance programmes.

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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Supporting democracy in the EU Neighbourhood: the Eastern Partnership

Key recommendations

1. *Increase consistency across democracy-support instruments and institutions:* Contradictory policies, instruments and actions weaken the credibility and trustworthiness of the European Union (EU).
2. *Improve definitions of policy priorities:* The EU should clearly spell out how it supports the advancement of democratization and state-building. The policy priorities of development aid in general, and EU democracy assistance in particular, are too broadly and vaguely defined.
3. *Increase transparency in democracy assistance:* The EU's development assistance, and in particular assistance related to democracy support and political reform processes, has suffered from a lack of transparency.
4. *Give greater prominence to gender equality:* A review of the strategic documents and action plans related to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) reveals that, while gender equality features among the common values on which the ENP is based, clear objectives and specific action points on this matter are lacking.
5. *Become more involved in conflict management:* While the EU acknowledges that conflicts in the South Caucasus hinder democratization and its own democracy-building efforts, it has not concretely addressed conflict management in the region.

Background

The EU's mandate to support democracy in its neighbourhood stems from article 21 of the Treaty of the European Union (1992), which states that democracy, the rule of law and the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms are the guiding principles of the Union's external action. The European Council's Conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations, adopted in 2009, made the EU's efforts to support democracy more coherent. The EU's commitment to democracy assistance has been further strengthened by the Foreign Affairs Council's 2012 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, and the 2011 Agenda for Change.

In 2011 Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated: 'we need to help build what I call deep democracy and that includes political reform, elections, institution building, fight against corruption, independent judiciary and support to civil society' (Ashton 2011). Human rights and democracy remain high on the EU agenda, as shown by the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for the period 2015–19.



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Catherine Ashton, 2011

The EU institutions involved in democracy assistance and good-governance programmes are the European Commission, the European Council, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Parliament. In addition, two other initiatives—the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), launched in 2006 as a tool of the European Commission designed to support civil society, and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), established in 2012 as an independent institution to complement the initiatives of the EU instruments—support civil-society actors and other stakeholders in their efforts to deepen democracy and human rights. These instruments are flexible and can operate without the consent of the formal authorities.

Much of the EU's democracy-assistance work in the countries neighbouring the Union is conducted within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Developed in 2004 and currently under review and renewal, the ENP's main objective is to promote a 'ring' of well-governed countries strengthening prosperity, stability and security for the EU Member States and their direct neighbours. The ENP is based on mutual commitments to common values, including the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, promotion of good neighbourly relations, market principles and sustainable development.

Today, ENP democracy support is increasingly tailored to the needs and conditions of specific countries, and therefore each initiative under the ENP is highly differentiated depending on the historical, cultural and political

context. The ENP mostly consists of bilateral cooperation between the EU and its partner countries. The ENP is further complemented by three additional initiatives: the Eastern Partnership (EaP) covering Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED) covering 15 countries in Africa, the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East; and the Black Sea Synergy, encouraging cooperation between the countries surrounding the Black Sea.

The EaP is a far-reaching framework for cooperation, especially in the areas of institution-building and good governance. Since its adoption in 2009, the EaP has sought to deepen EU support for reforms essential to building peace, prosperity and security, and has set out proposals for an ambitious programme of institution-building with the aim of further reinforcing the ENP.

Under the objective of accelerating political association and furthering economic integration, the EaP includes a programme of visa liberalization and mobility for citizens as long-term goals for individual partner countries. In order to support gradual economic integration, the EU has offered its eastern neighbours the option of negotiating Association Agreements, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements. Granting enhanced access to the European market, the Association Agreements present strong incentives for democratic and economic reform. As such, they are the main instruments the EU uses in order to bring EaP countries closer to its own norms and standards.

In contrast to earlier iterations of the ENP—which provided partners with

the option and target to harmonize over 80 per cent of their legislation with that of the EU, in effect adopting the vast majority of the body of EU laws, the *acquis communautaire*—the requirement that EaP members adopt EU legislation is a revolutionary move. Through its ENP Action Plans, the EU covers a variety of issues including economic development, promotion of democracy and human rights, energy, transport, environmental protection, people-to-people contacts, development of political institutions, and cross-border and regional cooperation.

Achievements

Within the broader framework of the ENP, and the EaP in particular, the EU's democracy-assistance activities and support for state-building in these countries have generally been well targeted, with a strong focus on local ownership. They have been tailored to the particular circumstances of each country, and the complementarity of other donors' programmes, thus avoiding duplication and enhancing synergies and common interests.

Challenges

An in-depth analysis of EU activities in democracy-building targeting the countries covered by the EaP, and in particular Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, illustrates some of the partnership's challenges. In particular, despite significant differences, these three countries share many political and socio-economic challenges, including fragile institutions, corruption, poverty and conflict.

Recommendations

Several policy recommendations have been identified which, if adopted, would strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's democracy-assistance programmes. These recommendations relate to increasing consistency across democracy-support instruments; improving the definitions of policy priorities; increasing transparency in democracy assistance; giving greater prominence to gender equality; and involvement in conflict-management.

Increase consistency across democracy-support instruments

Contradictory policies, instruments and actions weaken the EU's credibility and trustworthiness. Therefore, the EU should improve consistency across its democracy-support instruments and institutions. The EU's democracy-building activities have generally privileged institution-building in order to prevent 'violent transitions' in the Eastern Neighbourhood. These activities have been focused on gradual transition to ensure real societal reforms over time and prevent violent short-term transitions that could have wider regional repercussions and high human, social and economic costs. However, these incremental and gradual aspirations have not been fully aligned with the EIDHR or the EED.

For example, the EIDHR has supported revolutionary transitions, as shown by its involvement in Tunisia in 2010 and 2011. Meanwhile, a 2012 report by the EEAS considered these same revolutionary transitions dangerous. Furthermore, the EED aims to 'support the unsupported', including 'journalists, bloggers, non-registered NGOs [and] political movements' (European Commission 2012). This also seems to contradict the pursuit of gradual political transition.

Improve definitions of policy priorities

The EU should improve its definition of policy priorities and more clearly spell out how they support democratization and state-building. The policy priorities of development aid in general, and of EU democracy assistance goals, could benefit from clearer formulation.

For example, the EU's priorities with regard to its eastern partners often lack specificity, especially in the area of democratization, where terms such as 'democratization', 'good governance' and 'institution-building' are often used interchangeably.

While this reflects the different priorities of EU Member States and partner governments, the need to reconcile competing agendas at the level of implementation inevitably results in programmes that lack a clear focus.

The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy

The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) is a platform for engagement among regional organizations on democracy, and is facilitated by International IDEA.

Regional organizations participating in the IRDD include the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the League of Arab States, the Organization of American States, the Pacific Islands Forum and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

International IDEA acts as the IRDD Secretariat and also hosts the Inter-Regional Democracy Resource Centre, a virtual resource for democracy at the regional and inter-regional level.

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Increase transparency

The EU's development assistance related to democracy support and political reform processes has suffered from a lack of transparency. While the websites of EU delegations contain overviews of current projects, it is often difficult to identify the budget lines through which these projects are financed, making it hard to assess the overarching objective and aims of support. Information about completed projects is also scarce. Publicly available evaluations are rare, although the European Commission's two major annual reports on its development assistance both include a chapter on assistance to Central Asia. Furthermore, in 2013 the EU published an extensive evaluation by the European Court of Auditors and another major review of development aid will be published in 2016.

Give greater prominence to gender equality

A review of the strategic documents and action plans related to the ENP reveals that, while gender equality features among the common values on which the ENP is based, clear objectives and specific action points are lacking. Given the low levels of political participation and representation of women in the EU's eastern neighbours, gender equality should be more prominently addressed, for example by establishing a dedicated budget line. ENP programmes should also set measurable targets to regularly track progress on gender equality in the Eastern Neighbourhood and hold partner governments to account.

Become more involved in conflict management

While the EU acknowledges that conflicts in the South Caucasus hinder democratization and its own democracy-building efforts, it has not yet concretely addressed conflict management in the region. This is especially true of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has been mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Minsk Group (co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States). While

the EU as an institution has had no representation in this core group, the resolution of the conflict has featured in the ENP Action Plans for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Both plans have called for increased diplomatic efforts, increased political support to the Minsk Group, people-to-people contacts and intensified EU dialogue. However, bilateral actions or attempts to initiate conflict-resolution talks have not featured in these plans.

The EU has been more proactive in the management of the conflict in Georgia, acting as a mediator in the 2008 Geneva talks and dispatching a monitoring mission to help prevent parties to the conflict recommencing hostilities. Even if conflict resolution is not spelt out as the EU's main priority in the South Caucasus, the conflicts that dominate the region should be more clearly addressed. Indeed, it could be argued that the EU's rhetorical support for the Minsk Group undermines its own visibility, influence and impact in the region.

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Acknowledgements

This Policy Brief has been prepared by International IDEA's Inter-Regional Democracy Resource Centre in collaboration with Nelli Babayan, Freie Universität Berlin; and Nicklas Norling and Svante Cornell, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm.