

ATTACK ON UKRAINE AND DEMOCRACY IN A CHANGING WORLD: 10 recommendations for a European democratic response

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We are at a critical juncture for the future of the European Union and democracy globally. The Russian war of aggression shows that authoritarian rule is a global security problem for states, businesses and people everywhere. Democracy support needs to be a European strategic priority.

Russia's attack on Ukraine, decided by a small circle of people and animated with a revisionist and aggressive ideology, denies Ukraine's right to stand as an independent and sovereign state. While the EU's [Versailles declaration](#) proposes a number of necessary measures to counter Russia's aggression against Ukraine - including reducing energy dependency and enhancing defence capacities - it remains vague on how the EU and its Member States will support the reconstruction of a democratic Ukraine and strengthen shared values of human rights and democracy. This raises concerns about how the EU and the Member States will operationalise their commitments in strategic terms to advance democracy, human rights and the rule of law globally and within the European Union.

As the Versailles declaration recognises, "*Russia's war of aggression constitutes a tectonic shift in European history*". Such a shift requires concerted actions not only to stop the aggression, protect refugees and provide humanitarian relief but also to build a democratic world that will protect peace in the future. To this end, we propose actionable recommendations for a democracy-first strategy for the EU and the Member States in line with the values of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the EU treaties.

We call on EU institutions and European governments to respond to the crisis with a democracy-focused approach in the short term while developing a far more strategic approach to supporting democracy globally in the long term. To this end, we have two sets of actionable recommendations:

Respond to the crisis with a democracy-focused approach:

- 1. Bolster Ukraine's democratic institutions:** The EU needs to be ready to provide swift, needs-based support to the Ukrainian state, whose sustainability is under immense stress. The release of [€300 million in emergency Macro-Financial Assistance](#) to Ukraine by the EC is a good first step, it must also include support to state institutions that are vital for maintaining democratic governance. The [amendment](#) to current EU programmes in Ukraine supports the repurposing of cooperation programmes, but the funding remains below our collective ambition.
 - The EU should provide **financial support to key institutions** currently in danger, including the Ministries of Justice, Internal Affairs, Education and Social Affairs, and Local Authorities, to satisfy the most urgent needs of Ukraine;

- The EU and the Member States should develop **emergency technical assistance** programmes to Local Public Authorities, Parliament, and the executive to uphold Ukraine's state capacity to resist the Russian aggression and support reconstruction efforts.
2. **Invest in Ukrainian civil society:** Civil Society Organisations are at the frontline of the international armed conflict, providing essential services to the population in the midst of the conflict. Ukrainian civil society is resilient and has played a crucial role in Ukraine's recent democratisation, but its capacity to act is under increased threat in wartime, which hinders its ability to act effectively in providing relief and monitoring human rights violations.
 - The EU should give **immediate, direct, and simplified access to EU funds** to key Ukrainian civil society organisations by applying Article 27, 3(b) of the NDICI using crisis management rules in order to respond to immediate needs on the ground;
 - The EU should **continue supporting Ukrainian CSOs in exile** and enhance their capacity to act directly in the country.
 3. **Support independent media organisations and journalists in Ukraine:** Independent media organisations, media workers and journalists in Ukraine are now at risk more than ever. [According to RSE](#), by 22 March, 4 media workers have been killed and 7 injured. An immediate issue is that many local media organisations are unable to pay their staff in due time as their editorial offices had to cease operations as a result of active hostilities.
 - The EU should provide immediate support in the form of **grants** in order to cover staff pay, as well as **in-kind support and safety equipment to Ukrainian media organisations and media NGOs**;
 - The EU should support initiatives that enable Ukrainian media organisations and journalists to **continue their work** in exile.
 4. **Support drivers of change in Russia and Belarus:** Considering the rapid increase of repression and censorship in Russia, and the sustained suppression of dissent in Belarus, civil society in Russia and Belarus has never been under such intense pressure.
 - **Support democracy and human rights defenders** in-country and in exile with integrated protection strategies, including by extending emergency shelter and visa waivers to Russian and Belarus journalists fleeing the country, seeking refuge from war and repression;
 - Continue structural support to **independent journalists, human rights activists and whistleblowers in Russia and Belarus** to facilitate investigations and continued independent reporting.
 - Provide **alternatives to financial support** such as resources, in-kind support and exchanges with CSOs outside of Russia and Belarus;
 - Engage in **information campaigns** in Belarus and Russia (and other authoritarian countries) on circumventing censorship;
 - The EU, Member States, and tech companies should **support an open internet** and refrain from cutting civil society off from this essential means of communication within closed societies and with the outside world.
 5. **Give a meaningful EU membership perspective to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, without taking shortcuts on democracy:** The EU's accession conditionality is the single most effective democratisation tool at the disposal of the EU. Accession should be made possible for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova given their commitment to democratic principles - principles that Ukraine is now fighting for.
 - The EU should initiate an **accelerated accession** process for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova;

- The Commission should reinforce **institutional cooperation** funding to accelerate the adoption of the EU acquis in new candidate countries.

Ensure democracy is a cornerstone of geopolitical strategy:

- 6. Make democracy a top strategic priority in foreign policy:** The confrontation between Russia and the West cannot lead to Cold War-style geopolitical blocs, where the West's allies are exempt from accountability on democracy and human rights. To prevent aggressive, corrupt, and repressive autocratisation globally, the EU and European governments must not compromise on democracy in their international partnerships and instead see it as central to foreign policy strategy.
 - The EU should **increase support to civil society and democratic institutions** worldwide, especially in places where there is a well-documented threat of democratic backsliding. The Commission should mobilise resources from the Emerging Challenges and Priorities cushion of the NDICI for this purpose;
 - The EU Commission should **mainstream democratic governance** in all EU programming of the Global Europe programme as well as the investments under the Global Gateway, ensuring that this is a priority in all EU funded actions and implemented at the operational level, with specific indicators and follow-up procedures;
 - The EU should consistently **apply funding conditionality mechanisms** to incentivise partner countries to deepen democracy at home, particularly with regards to budget support, with specific indicators and follow-up procedures.
- 7. Strengthen democracy at home:** The EU's credibility relies on its ability to uphold and strengthen its principles even when it is facing external threats. This means that the EU should continue enforcing Rule of Law conditionality in countries where it is directly being undermined (Poland, Hungary) and prevent democratic backsliding in countries [where democracy is deteriorating](#) in Europe.
 - The Commission should continue [withholding EU recovery funds](#) and continue implementing the **general conditionality regulation** with regards to Hungary and Poland, while still supporting state and non-state actors in the reception of Ukrainian refugees;
 - The EU should build on the conclusions of the **Conference on the Future of Europe** and establish sustainable deliberative means to engage with civil society on policy and programming;
 - The Commission should add a **civic space chapter to the rule of law reports** to monitor threats to fundamental freedoms and democratic processes, and put in place follow-up mechanisms to implement the country-specific recommendations;
 - The Commission should **increase financial support to civil society** in countries experiencing democratic backsliding in Europe, with additional flexible and long-term funding distributed under the CERV programme;
 - The Commission should empower the **Fundamental Rights Agency** to investigate extremist and populist movements and their impact on civic space;
 - The Commission should **implement Article 11 TEU on civil dialogue**, prioritising citizen and civil society participation in policy-making at the EU level.

8. **Support the work and the integrity of independent journalists and media organisations to counter disinformation:** Press freedom is under threat in the majority of countries in the world, according to [RSF's World Press Freedom Index](#). Increasing the budget to independent journalism & media with the Emerging Challenges and Priorities cushion of the NDICI is not only relevant for Russia, but for a growing number of closed regimes.
- The EU institutions and Member States should take a clear stand in favour of the exercise of press freedom, particularly in the context of war, and **provide emergency support to reliable media organisations and independent journalists** to mitigate polarisation in the media landscape and enable citizens to have access to accurate information;
 - The EU needs to increase its support towards **media literacy** programmes, including exploring the possibility of embedding such programmes into other sectors' cooperation programmes such as in education.
9. **Combat corruption and kleptocracy:** European countries and their financial institutions have long [facilitated](#) the flow of assets from around the world to European democracies by kleptocrats and authoritarian elites. The EU and its Member States should strongly commit to combating corruption and illicit money flows.
- Member States should take measures to **ban “golden passports”** and reconsider the conditions needed for their “golden visa” policies in order to help tackle money laundering, corruption, and tax evasion. Residency-by-investment schemes should be accompanied by rigorous checks;
 - The EU and its Member States should urgently implement **transparent beneficial ownership registries** and follow-up on the recommendations for targeting corruption outlined in the framework of the Summit for Democracy;
 - The EU and its Member States need to **reduce their dependence on imports from authoritarian regimes and authoritarian elites**, including but not limited to the import of goods and services from the energy sector, and include democracy conditionality in Association Agreements and other Trade Agreements, with clear indicators that are consistently enforced.
10. **Use Team Europe Democracy to improve coordination:** The momentum of the unified response to the invasion should be carried forward into the EU's overall foreign policy coordination and cooperation. The EU should use Team Europe Democracy to ensure that EU's policies will promote inclusive, participatory, and accountable governance, and to act as a means to exchange on policy and approaches to democratic support in a more coordinated manner.
- The EU should build responses to the ongoing security crisis and its consequences, through meaningful **policy co-design and joint programming**;
 - The EU should continue supporting democracy research, including **research on early warning systems** for democratic backsliding in the EU and the neighbouring region.

SIGNATORIES:

