

## Support for Democracy in the Next MFF is Key for the EU to Achieve its Ambitions

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10 April 2025

We welcome the decision of the European Commission President to make '[Protecting our democracy, upholding our values](#)' a core priority of this mandate. In designing its next multi year budget (MFF), the EU must decide what world it wants to offer to European citizens at home and internationally. In many countries we are seeing a concerted attempt to roll back efforts to create societies defined by inclusive values, media freedom, equality of rights for all, and independent institutions, principles that are inherent to democracy. Supporting democracy means nurturing reliable partnerships and supporting the EU's global influence. EU democracy assistance is a vital instrument to help build democratic institutions and endow them with resilience all over the world.

**Support for democracy is part of the DNA of the European Union but it also serves its self-interest.** Strengthening EU values simultaneously means boosting the resilience and therefore security of the societies of EU Member States and that of its neighbourhood. Evidence shows that a more democratic world is a more peaceful world<sup>1</sup>. The main objective of the EU's security strategy is to protect our way of life, centered around democracy and respect for human rights. Any holistic, well-thought-out security strategy for Europe cannot but have support for democracy at its core.

Improving efficient corruption prevention mechanisms and stable investment frameworks contribute to the European economy's competitiveness. More transparency and participation in policy design help to cut red tape and build trust across sectors. Democracy is, therefore, both a project of its own value and an intrinsic tool to deliver on the priorities of the European Commission.

Ensuring strong democracies in European Member States is the basis for combating challenges such as the rise of extremism, election interference, the spread of manipulative information and threats to journalists. Threats to democracy, within Europe and outside, threaten the very

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<sup>1</sup> Data of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program show a global increase in conflict over the past decades, tracking the decline in democratic performance over the same period, see <https://ucdp.uu.se/>

existence of the EU as a political project that creates space for citizens to thrive and benefit from their fundamental liberties. The European Commission as the guardian of the treaties has the duty to protect and promote democracy within its borders and beyond.

With the steady erosion of democratic processes and freedoms across the world, words and good intentions will only go so far. It is essential to integrate fundamental rights and democratic governance across EU policy areas. The EU and Member States need to dedicate resources in a more efficient and strategic way to respond more effectively to threats through the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework.

As a community of democracy support organisations we, therefore recommend to:

## 1. Link the EU budget more effectively to Article 2 TEU

To achieve the priorities for 2024-2029, improve Europe's competitiveness, strengthen our societies and uphold EU core values, the next EU budget must include even stronger safeguards to protect the rule of law. We welcome the ambition of the European Commission to expand the general regime of conditionality to all EU funds in the next MFF and to make a clearer link to the annual rule of law report.

But to make this truly effective, the EU will need a mechanism (either through updating the conditionality mechanism, amending the Common Provisions Regulation, replicating the style of the RRP milestones) that would **sanction systematic breaches of the European values enshrined in Art. 2 TEU**. This would broaden the application of the general regime of conditionality to cover breaches of the rule of law that do not only affect or risk affecting the financial interests of the EU.

The EU should also, in the next MFF, maintain the budget for the Citizen, Rights, Equality and Values Programmes (CERV) and other funding mechanisms that allow civil society and other actors to play an essential role in protecting and promoting the Union's values.

## 2. Ensure a coherent and efficient approach to information integrity

While the EU has taken bold regulatory steps to counter information manipulation, the changes to our information environment need a much bolder response in order to ensure proper implementation of legislation and a sustainable accountability infrastructure. This can be done in three key ways:

- The EU must **significantly increase funds to independent media in Europe** to keep up with other geopolitics rivals. EU spending on independent media for 2021-2027 amounts to EUR 1.42 billion while Russia [allocated the same amount](#) to state-controlled media in 2021 alone. Our media ecosystem is suffering, and it is vital to our public sphere.

- **Oversight and enforcement bodies must be properly resourced** to make sure that powerful technology companies, their representatives and owners are held accountable and respect their duties and responsibilities imposed by EU legislation. This would include for example the European Commission's Digital Services Act's enforcement team and the European AI Office.
- The EU should **create a fund dedicated to supporting actors that help ensure the success of EU regulations and core initiatives**, such as the European Media Freedom Act, the AI Act, the Digital Services Act, the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising and the planned European Democracy Shield (EDS). Academia and civil society are essential partners for monitoring and oversight but require sufficient resources to build evidence and conduct analysis. Strengthening the European Cooperation Network on Elections (ECNE) with more resources and an arms-length secretariat will help operationalize the EDS, improve resilience, and facilitate coordination among EU member states.

### 3. Put democracy at the heart of the enlargement process

EU Enlargement is now more important than ever, given the difficult geopolitical context of our times, our ability to directly influence the European security agenda, and the importance of ensuring all European countries have the same democratic values and rule of law standards. The provision of flexible democracy support remains critical and is one of the keys to unlocking progress.

The ability of the EU, in partnership with democracy organizations, to foster democratic values, push for reform, uphold freedom of expression, ensure genuine media freedom, fight corruption, and work to bring about cultures of accountability and transparency of public bodies and government will ultimately decide on the success and timeline of the enlargement negotiations. *Fundamentals First* is therefore an essential principle, and adequate resources should be dedicated in the MFF to make this a reality.

### 4. Embed democracy at the centre of Global Gateway for the EU's long-term strategic interests

As the European Commission seeks to prioritize economic development through taking Global Gateway to the next level in this mandate, it must not lose sight of the fact that a commitment to accountability and transparency is the key value-add of the EU's offer when compared to other offers like China's Belt and Road. To ensure its success, democracy needs to be embedded in the Global Gateway - as to all EU policies - both horizontally and vertically.

- The EU and Team Europe **should focus Global Gateway investments in partner countries with strong rule of law guarantees**. Yet, in 2024, [68% of new Global Gateway projects were implemented in hybrid or authoritarian regimes](#) where corruption tends to be widespread, where there is no independent judiciary and where the rule of law is weak.

Robust anti-corruption mechanisms and an independent judiciary provide a safer environment for EU investments to meet their goals and an incentive for the private sector to participate.

- Global Gateway cannot deliver without strong governance. We therefore recommend that **5% of each Global Gateway flagship be dedicated to oversight and accountability mechanisms**. Beyond ensuring project-level mechanisms, strengthening the independence of institutions and wider accountability frameworks in partner countries, together with the domestic multi-stakeholder community, will help to prevent and detect financial misuse as well as to boost the democratic climate in the country. Support to oversight and accountability mechanisms can be offered in many forms, including strengthening parliamentary oversight, support to independent government bodies as well as financing for media and civil society to support accountable investment environments.

## **5. Maintain instruments to support democracy, human rights and civil society in external action**

As we face a global surge in authoritarianism, it is imperative that the EU leadership stands firm in advancing its democratic values. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union calls for the promotion of EU values in the external agenda. Democratic values form the fabric of much of the multilateral system on which the EU's position in the world relies. Supporting democracy therefore means supporting the EU's global influence.

**This calls for maintaining the budget for democracy support in EU external action, reinforcing thematic programmes within the EU external action budget, and mainstreaming democracy in key partnership initiatives.** The Union's interests are better protected in a more democratic world.

Strong institutions, inclusive processes, rule of law, and an active civil society are the prerequisites and enablers for sustainable development and stability. In a global context that is increasingly hostile to democratic institutions, the EU cannot afford to cut back on support to its like-minded allies on all levels – from grassroots organizations to civil society coalitions and governmental institutions. Therefore, overall spending on democracy, human rights, and civil society must be maintained in the next MFF.

We welcome Commissioner Sikela's commitment to the European Parliament to support a differentiated approach and remain engaged in fragile contexts, support populations and promote dialogue in politically estranged contexts. The objectives set for the EU's external policy should remain comprehensive enough to address the vast diversity of democratic challenges faced by partner countries.

This should be done through **a strong Human Rights and Democracy thematic programme, as well as through ring-fencing funding for democratic governance in geographic programmes, aligning with a robust and ambitious EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.**

The EU should commit to investing at least 20% of the geographic pillar and at least 50% of the thematic pillar to support democracy, human rights and civil society in a new external cooperation instrument. Through this, the EU would dedicate adequate financial resources to democracy support, allowing it to support actors such as civil society and independent media and increase its engagement with representative political institutions, including parliaments and political parties.

## **6. Create a budget line for democratic openings abroad**

At present, the EU does not have dedicated funding that can respond quickly to political opportunities abroad despite having several budget lines for responding to crises (Global Europe: Rapid Response Pillar, Flexibility Cushion, Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention programme). At the moment, we have rapid reaction tools for bad news and none for the good news. This should be corrected.

Despite the fact that democracy is backsliding, democratic openings are [surprisingly common](#). In 2024 alone, citizens in Senegal and Sri Lanka voted out autocratic leaders, protestors toppled a dictatorship in Bangladesh and voters in Botswana and South Africa voted for changes to their executive branch. We have learnt from history that such momentum needs to be sustained and that new opportunities will emerge even at moments when the world is turning more autocratic. Supporting these actors will serve the strategic interests of the EU, including by opening new opportunities for strategic economic partnerships through initiatives such as Global Gateway.