

# THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY: A Menu of Commitments

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With planning for the global summit for democracy well underway, numerous governments and [democracy supporters](#) around the world are reflecting on what they would like the summit to achieve. The government of the United States has clearly indicated that they expect commitments to be made at the summit which they will host at the end of 2020. Based on statements made by the Biden administration, it seems increasingly likely that invitations to the summit will be linked to a set of concrete commitments by participants.

Nevertheless, at present, there is a startling lack of discussion on these potential commitments in the public domain. If the summit is to be a short-term and a long-term success, the commitments made before, during and after the summit need serious thought. From our discussions with various government officials and democracy practitioners in recent months, it appears as though many are asking the same questions: What commitments can be made? What commitments do governments want from their peers? How can commitments be followed up?

As a consequence, **we have come together as a grouping of democracy support organisations to offer a series of ideas for commitments that would help to make the summit for democracy a success.** These are by no means an exhaustive set of ideas, but they offer a menu for governments, civil society and the private sector. We believe all of these potential commitments would be beneficial for democracy around the world. States may also think of this menu as a series of thematic areas in which they can choose their own commitments based on the general ideas below.

The paper first sets out some guiding thoughts on what would make strong commitments before turning to the menu of options.

## Key tenets of potential commitments

We suggest using the following 3 principles as guidance for establishing commitments for the summit. Commitments should:

1. Be based on a clear output where possible. Vague assertions on the value of

democracy are unlikely to have any real-world impact;

2. Establish a deadline or schedule for implementation. Time-bound commitments are much easier to implement and to monitor over the long-term;

3. Avoid the temptation to reiterate existing goals like SDG16. Given the urgency of the need to protect and support democracy, a significant proportion of commitments must be new.

In thinking about commitments, decision-makers may also want to avoid limiting themselves to certain themes. As a consequence, we recommend:

1. Mixing national commitments with commitments in foreign policy. For governments, these national commitments can reflect the ambition of each country and could be scaled up over time in a similar fashion to the Nationally Determined Contributions of the Conference of the Parties on climate change.

2. Mixing collective commitments where numerous actors come together with individual commitments specific to themselves;

3. Not being afraid to commit *not* to do something. In light of democratic backsliding around the world, 'negative commitments' are also important;

4. Ensuring that bold top-level commitments are complemented by more technical commitments on the practical side of providing support to democracy at home and abroad.

## Commitments

We take it as generally accepted that the summit must come out in support of clear democratic principles as defined in multiple international agreements.<sup>1</sup> We suggest that the summit re-endorses the “essential elements of democracy” as agreed to by the United Nations General Assembly in 2004 in order to underline a shared understanding of a minimal definition of democracy.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the preamble of the summit communiqué should list the common challenges to democracy so as to underline the fact that participants recognise the same fundamental issues that have created the necessity for the Summit.

More specifically, we suggest that the Summit commits to a selection of the following suggestions that are divided between 9 different sections: Cooperation at the international level, cooperation at the regional level, structures for supporting democracy, democratic practice, foreign policy and international development, democratic backsliding, digital policy, corruption

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<sup>1</sup> International covenants, Universal Declaration HR

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations, Resolution A/Res/59/201 (2005). See <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/59/201>.

and finally, monitoring and follow-up.

## Cooperation at the International Level

We recognise that many challenges to democracy need to be tackled at the international level through a wide coalition of nation states. Some of these challenges will require specific legislative efforts but other issues need a concerted effort towards new thinking. These could be to:

1. **Create a new democratic futures forum that looks at democratic innovation.** One of the core advantages of democracy over other political systems is the ability of democracies to innovate and adapt without collapsing. In order for democracy to effectively deliver for citizens in the 21st Century it must be able to adapt to changing circumstances. In the same vein as the new U.S.-German futures forum, the Summit can kick-start a new forum looking at democratic innovation around the world compiling best practice and ideas for future pro-democratic reforms. This forum could be embedded in an existing democracy support organisation in order to improve effectiveness.
2. **Create a DAC code for democracy.** At present, it is difficult to accurately quantify the amount of support provided by OECD states to democracy around the world. The creation of a specific purpose code under the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) would allow policy-makers and researchers to obtain a more realistic picture of democracy support and improve the understanding of what works and what does not in financial assistance to democracy.
3. **OECD Action Plan on Democracy.** A new DAC code could be complemented by an OECD democracy action plan that can better link democratic governance to economic, social, environmental and anti-corruption policies agreed to at the OECD.
4. **Launch an international peer review mechanism on democratic practice.** The European Union recently began an annual review mechanism that looks into the Rule of Law in European Union member states. The OECD DAC uses a process where two member states peer review a third member and provide recommendations. The Summit could launch a similar mechanism where participating states peer review each other on a specific set of democracy criteria on an annual basis.
5. **Set up an annual meeting between Regional level bodies with a democracy mandate.** In some instances, cooperation at the regional level is likely to be more fruitful than initiatives that try to bring together a multitude of states, the summit could lead to a commitment to an annual exchange between these regional bodies on democracy (AU, EU, Council of Europe, Venice Commission, Inter American Court and Commission, ASEAN etc.).
6. **UN Special Rapporteur for Democracy.** States may agree to work towards the creation of a new special rapporteur for democratic governance or a "special mandate"

working group under the UN Human Rights Council to be established by end 2023.

## **National Structures for Supporting Democracy**

We are cognizant of the fact that good intentions require follow-up and manpower in order to be effectively implemented. As a starting point, therefore, individual nation states can each make specific commitments that enhance the potential for more effective support for democracy in the future by:

7. **Creating new departments for democracy within government ministries.** Various different countries do not employ staff within their foreign ministries or internal affairs ministries that deal directly with democracy. Rather, it is common to find staff that deal with democracy through the lens of other issues such as human rights, disinformation, rule of law or anti-corruption without an overview of the bigger picture of how these issues interact. The creation of departments with specific mandates to support democracy at home or abroad can make a major difference to policy implementation, especially mainstreaming democracy and ensuring coherence. This may not entail the use of new resources but a restructuring to reflect the urgency of action on democratic governance.
8. **Beefing up existing government structures on democracy.** Where departments do exist it is important for them to benefit from expertise that cover a wide range of different policy priorities such as support to democratic institutions like parties and parliaments, fighting foreign interference, disinformation, autocratisation and corruption as well as supporting emerging technologies and transparency.
9. **Nominating an Ambassador for democracy.** Some governments, such as Sweden and Finland, benefit from a high-level individual from the foreign ministry assigned to coordinate efforts in support of democracy. This should be extended to other participating nations in order to create a cadre of ambassadors with like-minded goals and clear pro-democratic mandates.
10. **Creating structured dialogue mechanisms and communities of practice on democracy support.** In many countries, governments involve practitioners and academics alongside policy makers in joint thinking on 'development cooperation'. Similar mechanisms with regard to democracy support are still missing in most countries.

## **Democratic practice**

Each participating country has different experience with democratic governance and specific particularities within its political system but each share the common need to nurture democracy

within their own borders.

11. **Common commitment to democracy as a compulsory component of formal education.** Participating states can commit to the creation of courses on human rights and democratic practice (core principles and core institutions) that form part of school curricula within their education system. This is similar to the mandate of the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (Federal Agency for Civic Education) within the German government. We know that democracy requires nourishment through debate and discussion and protecting democracy is a long-term endeavour. Children and adolescents should be taught the basics of democratic practice and have the opportunity to discuss the merits and challenges of democracy in an open manner within schools.
12. **Hold a Citizen Assembly on a specific topic.** In order to promote greater deliberation and participation within democratic systems beyond elections, participating states could make commitments to form citizen assemblies on specific policy issues within a year of the Summit. Each state would be free to suggest their chosen topic and the breadth of different assemblies would allow for greater sharing of experience across different political systems.
13. **A commitment to institutionalise direct citizen participation and deliberation into formal decision-making processes.** Beyond an ad-hoc citizen assembly, countries could commit to stimulating increased civil dialogue, and ensure the long-term use of tools such as citizen assemblies, deliberative polling and citizen councils on policy implementation. This commitment should be complemented by specific actions for follow-up that may differ from country to country.
14. **Improve the position of women within political decision-making.** While several states around the world have taken important strides to improve the political participation and leadership of women in recent years, in reality not enough is being done. Women remain an underrepresented group within a majority of democracies and participating states can make a variety of commitments to enhance their role such as committing to quotas within parliaments or promoting the work of women's rights organisations.

## Foreign Policy and International Development

Support for democracy within foreign policy is a multi-dimensional endeavour that needs to be factored into a range of different tools and practices such as high-level talks and official dialogues, trade and investment, economic sanctions, work within multilateral fora, development cooperation, cultural cooperation, and military and security support.

15. **Divestment from certain non-democratic regimes within 5 years.** A significant amount of funding from democratic governments flows to non-democratic regimes for a variety of both justifiable (such as on humanitarian grounds) and non-justifiable reasons. We believe that the main International Financial Institutions (World Bank, European

Bank for Reconstruction and Development) must divest from support for non-democratic governments particularly when those states are guilty of widespread and endemic corruption. Funds can then be redirected to support the population through international organisations and/or civil society.

16. **End arms and security sales to autocratic regimes.** Many democracies are ultimately complicit in human rights abuses perpetrated by autocratic regimes through the export of military technology, arms, spyware, and dual-use technologies. Countries can make commitments to end these exports or enact strict export controls following the summit.
17. **Mainstream inclusion and accountability into sectoral development programmes.** Citizens' voices need to be heard on issues such as climate change, global health, economic recovery and social justice yet development programmes frequently miss out on opportunities for improving inclusion. In practice this can be done through inclusive policy-making processes like citizen councils or citizen assemblies.
18. **Create a new international basket fund for support to independent media.** Independent media is under attack in a wide swath of countries around the world and frequently requires structural support to stay afloat. At present there is no worldwide fund for independent public interest media that can be used to support routine reporting on local government, investigative journalism, or provide support to press outlets, radio stations and TV channels when they are faced with financial pressure from governments. Such financing would be much better served as an international fund under the auspices of an international organisation rather than support from a specific overseas government.
19. **Clear funding commitments on democracy funding.** Donors can help to ensure more predictable long term support for democracy by committing specific amounts to sectors of support over a longer period e.g. a commitment that one-percent of foreign assistance goes to media development for 5 years.
20. **Coordinated sanctions in response to attacks on democracy.** While individual economic sanctions on regimes guilty of attacks on democracy can be effective in the short run, the power of such sanctions are maximised when democracies cooperate and coordinate their responses. This cooperation has increased in 2021 particularly between "Western" democracies but needs to be expanded to other democracies.

## **Democratic backsliding and autocratisation**

Numerous academic institutions and international indices have documented the slow but steady democratic recession over the last decade. This is one of the core reasons for convening the summit - democracy needs protecting and the key principles and institutions under threat need support.

21. **Support for the independence of electoral management bodies.** Electoral

management bodies need sufficient independence from the executive branch of government in order to manage electoral processes effectively. Governments must commit to the independence of action of their electoral management body in future elections from the appointment of senior staff to the ability to publish results.

22. **Coordinated solidarity with opposition movements in repressive contexts.** Recent years have seen an increasing number of activists and political leaders forced into exile through autocratisation around the world e.g. Belarus, Myanmar, Hong Kong. At present, there is no coordinated response to support these movements from democratic governments even if there have recently been increased efforts to coordinate in the case of sanctions. The summit presents an opportunity to commit to enhanced coordination between democracies in their response (visa facilitations, information sharing, emergency funding, sanctions) to repressive tactics against activists and the political opposition.
23. **Maintaining term limits.** The leaders of participating states can agree to respecting constitutional term limits. While this commitment would not hold legal weight in a national setting, it can serve a short-term function as leaders currently in power are required to make the commitment *themselves*.
24. **Develop an ‘Early Warning Democracy Observatory’ to spot democratic backsliding when it emerges.** The dynamic monitoring of all relevant attributes of democracy, the timely release of its findings, and public advocacy to counter regressive trends are crucial to stem backsliding early on in its development. The observatory would prompt governments to account for early symptoms of backsliding, and would help regional blocks to call backsliding countries in their region to order.

## Digital Policy

Due to the rapidly changing digital environment and the desire to get out in front of the potential damaging effects of certain digital technologies, we view the following potential commitments as beneficial for democracy:

25. **An open internet that is free from firewalls.** The internet is an open system that provides access to information for citizens around the world. Governments must ensure that they do not place artificial limits on the ability of citizens to freely access information.
26. **No internet shutdowns.** In recent years, several governments around the world have resorted to shutting down access to the internet when faced with major protests or challenges in an attempt to stifle criticism. In extreme cases a shutdown is used to suppress the sharing of information on government-backed or government-led crimes. Access to information is vital in ensuring that such atrocities are not committed in the

future.

27. **No online surveillance of political opponents and activists.** The Pegasus investigation has highlighted the desire of authoritarian governments and democratic backsliders to use online tools to snoop on their political adversaries and journalists, though these tactics have a long history dating back to the “Arab Spring” and beyond. The damage this can do to democratic governance is substantial, undermining privacy and freedom of expression and thereby fundamental freedoms.
28. **Commit to banning biometric surveillance technologies, particularly facial recognition and sentiment analysis.** The potential law enforcement or private security benefits of such technologies do not outweigh the major risk they pose to civil and political rights. A global coalition against facial recognition software by law enforcement and corporate actors would go a long way to condemning the use of these technologies by autocratic regimes and protecting fundamental freedoms at home.
29. **Create a new transnational organisation focusing on technology and democracy.** A majority of the digital challenges to democracy can neither be solved at the national level nor through short-term fixes. At present, there is no global fora to discuss such issues on a regular basis and the summit could herald the creation of a new body that can take a lead on agreements at the international level. Such a body could help in setting norms in cybersecurity, data protection and the regulation of social media platforms.
30. **Set global standards for the regulation of data** collection and processing, differentiating between the obligations and boundaries for public versus private sector use. These standards should include measures on the boundaries between personal and non-personal data, and outline necessary oversight measures as well as auditing requirements.
31. **Establish a coordination space regarding online platform regulation**, to facilitate global coordination among regulators, assess risks to democracy and mitigation measures, and set standards for national regulation of online platforms. Given the global cross-border nature of both online platforms, global coordination will be necessary to tackle the challenges to democracy head-on. For challenges ranging from online political campaigning and election interference to online harassment against women and foreign disinformation campaigns, global standard-setting, analysis and information-sharing are essential yet inexistent at present.

## **Corruption**

It is important to confront corruption as a foreign policy problem because illicit cross border financial flows are a threat to national security. At the same time, it is just as important to tackle the causes of corruption, which lie in the financial sectors of many democracies rather than in



kleptocratic states. Corruption fosters repressive governments and sub-optimal economic performance in countries across the globe.

32. **Public procurement regulations.** Participating governments could all make specific commitments to ensure greater transparency of public procurement procedures and outcomes in line with open contracting principles. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the weakness of public procurement in emergency situations in many states.
33. **Guarantee transparency of property ownership.** Governments can agree to clear steps that remove the possibility of hiding the true ownership of property. Several democracies are guilty of aiding and abetting the obfuscation of wealth through opaque real estate ownership. It is widely accepted that this primarily serves the purposes of autocratic regimes and can corrode democratic systems from the inside.
34. **Ensure transparency of beneficial ownership.** Beneficial ownership through shell companies is used to conceal the true ownership of specific investments. Governments can agree to take steps to improve the transparency of beneficial ownership provisions to remove loopholes used by those seeking to hide their, often illegally earned, wealth.
35. **Introduce digital solutions for political finance oversight.** Governments can build online reporting and disclosure systems for the funding of political parties. They can follow the example of countries that already operate such systems, such as Finland, the UK and Lithuania, to provide the public with open and transparent data on political party and candidate income and expenditure.
36. **Establish and support (sub-)regional peer networks to monitor anti-corruption standards.** Such networks could provide forums to institutionalize common standards; identify national deficiencies; and offer peer support and the exchange of knowledge and experiences. Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and the Organization of American States' Follow-Up Mechanism for the Implementation of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (MESICIC) are examples of regional initiatives that could be followed and adapted elsewhere.
37. **Establish new multilateral agreement on asset recovery.** Stolen assets undermine the ability of governments to effectively mobilise resources for public services. The summit should kick start the establishment of mechanisms for effective and equitable use of recovered funds, primarily in the state where those funds were stolen.
38. **Improve the ability of the international legal system to deal with large-scale corruption.** This could be done through expanding the operations of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to cover large-scale corruption related crimes or the establishment of a separate international court on corruption.

## Monitoring and Follow Up

The long-term success of the Summit and the impact that the commitments made by governments will have on democracy is highly dependent on the work that will follow the Summit itself. This work will require follow-up from governments themselves, the private sector, civil society and citizens. It will also necessitate monitoring mechanisms like those used under the Open Government Partnership and the Conference of the Parties.

39. **Bi-annual discussion on democracy around the world.** Leaders should commit to a Summit of Democracy every two years to be hosted by a different nation. The summit should circulate between different world regions and can be used as a mechanism for both tracking commitments and helping to address future challenges to democracy worldwide. Regular meetings on issues of international importance currently take place on a regular basis on various different issues - anti-corruption, the environment, development - but not on democratic governance. The summit can help rectify this.
40. **Create a formal tracking mechanism for commitments.** The Summit should mandate an existing body (or a new body if that is deemed necessary) to monitor the commitments made at the summit and fund it accordingly. This monitoring body must be independent and publicly accessible. This exercise could be conducted on an annual basis or once every two years ahead of a new Summit.
41. **Provide incentives for implementation of commitments.** A range of different intrastate or non-state bodies that exist already would be able to track commitments and provide support to states in the implementation of specific commitments. The summit can set aside funding for such organisations to conduct this work in follow-up to the summit.

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This paper was coordinated by the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) and received valuable input from EPD members<sup>3</sup>, International IDEA, the EPD advisory board, members of the diplomatic community and independent experts.

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<sup>3</sup> Article 19 | European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) | Club de Madrid | French Media Development Agency (CFI) | Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) | Democracy Reporting International (DRI) | EDGE (Experts in Democracy, Governance and Elections) | elbarlament | Election Watch EU | ePanstwo Foundation | European Exchange | Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC) | Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) | The Oslo Center | People in Need (PIN) | The Universidade Católica Portuguesa | Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)