



# How Can Europe Help the Next Phase of the Summit for Democracy?

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The second Summit for Democracy was held over three days in the last week of March. The event did not attract much media attention and some observers judged the outcomes to be modest. Yet, the government leaders involved agreed that the summit process will continue and promised to explore ways of deepening coordination between democracies.

South Korea will host a third summit, opening the prospect of more global buy-in for what has been up to now a heavily U.S.-led process. European governments have engaged in the Summit for Democracy, although in most cases so far without according it high-level priority. The summit process could turn into an important strategic platform in the defense of global democratic norms or it could atrophy into irrelevance.

European governments still need to decide what they want from the initiative and, more generally, what importance to attach to international democratic coordination. Given all this, we asked noted experts and democracy practitioners for their thoughts on how Europe should position itself in relation to the Summit for Democracy and how it should seek to influence the evolution of the process.

Thomas Carothers

*Co-director of the Democracy, Conflict and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

With the second Summit for Democracy over and a third, to be hosted by South Korea, in the works, European governments need to decide what role they want to play in the process. Europe has thus far been divided. A few smaller, mostly northern European states have followed the United States' lead and played active roles in the organizing of side meetings and "cohort" processes around themes like media freedom, civic space, and tech for democracy. On the other hand, most European states—including the

“big four” of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom—have participated only ambivalently and largely perfunctorily. They have been hesitant to embrace the broad U.S. framing of a global divide between authoritarianism and democracy, and uncertain about the value of the summit process, but at the same time they have not been willing to give a full cold shoulder to the initiative.

The greatest value of the summit process so far has probably been its role as a spur for the establishment of various joined-up processes among governmental and nongovernmental actors to craft multilateral policy and aid platforms around some key themes. Accordingly, the smaller, more motivated European states should keep pushing to advance these processes and “own” some of them fully. As they do so, they can attempt to pull the less motivated European states into greater participation, encouraging them to see the next phase of the summit process as less about U.S.-led pageantry and more about taking targeted, concrete policy and aid actions. However, expectations about any significant change of heart about the summit process on the part of most European governments must necessarily be modest.

By doing the above, the motivated European governments can help the Summit for Democracy avoid the fate of an earlier U.S. initiative, the Community of Democracies—devolution into a ritualistic series of cumbersome, and largely empty gatherings driven by the United States and a changing cast of relatively small democracies that it enlists into hosting roles. In seeking to help achieve tangible policy progress on key themes and to help the summit process evolve into something of lasting substance, motivated European governments can play on their strengths in the democracy domain. These strengths are a proven commitment to and deep experience with pro-democracy multilateralism, cutting-edge thinking and action on some key regulatory policy areas such as tech and democracy, and an enduring consensus across most parts of the European political spectrum on the importance of international democracy support (in contrast to the unsettling of U.S. democracy policy during the presidency of Donald Trump).

## Nic Cheeseman

*Professor of Democracy and International Development at the Birmingham University*

The culmination of the Summit for Democracy in Zambia saw the end of another global democracy event. Many have been held over the last few years and many more will be held in the future. But key Western governments have yet to really grasp what effective democracy support actually requires, and what they need to do in order to move from platitudes to policies. Strengthening democracy can no longer be limited to the old-fashioned idea of simply investing in democratic institutions and civil society in every country in which a donor is active. It must also be about rewarding democratic governments with a greater share of aid and economic opportunities and insulating their countries’ political systems against backsliding.

European governments should prioritize the following three things in helping the next phase of the Summit for Democracy process address the challenges faced by fragile democracies.

### **Demonstrate the Value of Being a Democracy**

Governments around the world are unlikely to see the value of adhering to democracy if aid continues to be distributed with little regard for regime type. Democracies should receive more aid than authoritarian countries, other things being equal.

### **Support Democracies to Thrive**

Some of the opposition parties whose election victories have been the best news stories for democracy in recent years are struggling to retain popular support in government. One reason is that they came to power with impossible expectations placed upon them, but another is that many parts of the world are still suffering an economic form of long COVID, compounded by high food and fuel prices. As Zambia’s President Hakainde Hichilema recently warned, if governments like his are not supported in delivering services, there is a risk that citizens will turn their backs on democracy. To manage this, fragile democracies need not only aid but also privileged access to beneficial trade relations and debt relief.

## Build State Capacity

Insulating democracies against democratic backsliding means supporting them not only in delivering services in the short term but also in building more effective states. As Ken Opalo has argued, “weak state capacity is the most significant barrier to both political and economic development.” Constructing more effective states and stronger democracies must therefore go hand in hand.

These three goals form an agenda for the next Summit for Democracy where European states, some of which have a reputation for engaging more consistently and reflectively around the world, will need to play a prominent role—and are likely to be better placed to do this than the United States.

European countries with their history of having a more capable state are better suited to partner with fragile democracies around the world in this endeavor. But this will only happen if European governments pull their heads out of the sand and recognize the global rise of authoritarianism for the existential threat it is. Otherwise, what would be the point of organizing another Summit for Democracy if Europe and others do not listen to the warning of the government that co-hosted the latest one?

## Jakub Klepal

*Executive Director of the Forum 2000 Foundation*

After a period of creeping external and internal pressure on democracies, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and a more assertive China have made the global geopolitical landscape clearer. In this context, closer democratic coordination is quite clearly needed. It is not so obvious, however, that the two Summits for Democracy have charted the right path for doing so. Despite the time and effort invested in them, it feels like the process has still not properly started. Difficult questions remain unanswered: Is there actual progress in cooperation among democracies as a result of the summits? How sincere is the interest of democratic governments in deepening cooperation? And what are the main objectives of this initiative?

The EU’s involvement in the two summits so far was impeded by Hungary not being invited to either, but European democracies should take the initiative in shaping the next stages of the process. Recent security, economic, technological, and other developments have placed it in a vulnerable position, putting its prosperity and its democracy at risk. The EU needs to take a more agile role in global affairs, to look for new approaches, and to pursue its interests more vigorously. In this context, propping up the global rules-based order, strengthening the transatlantic partnership, and enhancing political and economic cooperation with democratic partners around the globe should be natural objectives.

The Summit for Democracy process has the potential to be an important platform for pursuing these objectives. European governments should focus on three areas: making the process more inclusive, embracing more fully partners and civil society from outside the Euro-Atlantic space, and making the process more strategically focused.

A recent Forum 2000 policy brief titled “What is the future for global cooperation on democracy?” stressed that democratic states outside the West need to have more ownership in steering the process. The United States’ decision to invite Costa Rica, South Korea, and Zambia as co-conveners of the second summit and to pass the leadership role to Seoul was a step in the right direction.

Civil society and other relevant nongovernmental actors also need to play an enhanced role. The mobilization of civil society organizations within the summit cohorts has shown that there is significant potential in their involvement. More inclusiveness would widen the reach of the process and deepen its roots. As the Forum 2000 brief suggests, a “shift from a process of democratic governments to one of global democrats,” allowing for more involvement by civil society from democratic countries and by democracy defenders from nondemocratic ones would make sense. A more substantial interface between governments and nongovernmental actors could also provide fertile ground for fresh ideas and informal networks to emerge and move the process forward. To enable more meaningful participation by civil society organizations with limited resources, the EU and other donors should assist them with sufficient

and flexible funding.

Finally, EU states should help the Summit for Democracy process achieve the difficult balance between being more strategic and addressing crucial topics such as Russia's war against Ukraine so as to remain credible and relevant, and including democratic actors from the Global South for whom taking strong positions on such topics is complicated. If such a balance is achieved, the summit process could become a platform where not just technicalities but also the strategic interests of democracies worldwide can be discussed and coordinated.

And, if the Summit for Democracy is to function properly, it should be convened in-person. Online and hybrid events have their merit but nothing can replace the depth, the lasting experience, the strong network-building effect, and the media dynamics of high-level personal encounters.

## Julia Leininger

*Head of the Transformation of Political (Dis-)order research program at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)*

As if in two parallel worlds, China and the United States recently hosted two international democracy events. Their goal was supposedly the same—to foster democracy. While the U.S.-initiated Summit for Democracy aims to protect freedoms and core democratic institutions, the Chinese-driven International Forum on “Democracy: The Shared Human Values” seeks to defend “democratic diversity” and countries’ right to separate development paths.

This was an expression of the rivalry between China and the United States over political orders. But in contrast to the Cold War, today the development of countries in all world regions depends on winning the economic competition in an international capitalist system regardless of their political and ideological orientation. What is more, the global economy potentially provides a space in which interdependencies could at least mitigate conflict, but economic and political rivalries also fuel each other and may promote a downward spiral away from multilateral cooperation toward exclusionary intergovernmental relations. What does this imply for the European Union's role in the next phase of the Summit for Democracy process?

## Becoming More Credible

The international and national dimensions of political order have become inseparable. Zambia recently offered a good example of this. While its government co-hosted the recent Summit for Democracy, the opposition used the Chinese forum to denounce the United States for its double standards in international relations. This also reflects the waning credibility of Western states.

In the current geostrategic constellation, the EU needs to further develop its role as a credible supporter and protector of democracy worldwide – and if used in the right way the Summit process could be one arena for meeting this goal.

For this, acting credibly means standing up for democratic values without being tainted by the United States' sometimes questionable reputation. While the EU has a difficult historical legacy given its member states' colonial past, as a supranational actor it can develop a different stance than individual governments. With its Global Gateway initiative, it has already announced a geostrategic initiative that has democracy support as a central element. The EU can also achieve geostrategic strength and credibility by clearly positioning itself at the working level of the summit process rather than by co-hosting a highly visible summit on the superficial frontlines of global rivalry.

## Do No Democratic Harm

Leading by example is the most promising approach to advancing democratic values. For the EU, this includes promoting democracy in its autocratizing member states and making the case for democracy in

all its external fields of action. Conflicting objectives are natural in foreign policy; dealing with them openly and managing them is the real art. For example, greater trade or official development assistance can strengthen autocracies and counteract democratic objectives.

“Do no democratic harm” must therefore be a key guiding principle for the future of the Summit for Democracy process, applied in a coordinated fashion within and among all external policy fields by democracy-promoting governments. Germany has made an initial push in this direction in its development policy strategy for Africa. For the EU, it should mean breaking down policy silos and connecting policy areas and the work of different directorates. In the Summit for Democracy process, the EU could use its convening power to form a cohort with standard-setters such as OECD GovNet and regional organizations to develop a norm of “do no democratic harm,” involving decisionmakers from various policy areas, in particular trade and security.

*Refined Democracy Narrative.* Amid the current global wave of autocratization, democracy support and protection can no longer be based mainly on interstate relations. Many pro-democracy champions are not governments but civil society actors. Where democracy is in danger or where autocracies repress human rights, people fight for a democratic life even across borders. Solidarity with the aspirations of societies becomes a central motive for democracy promotion. The Summit for Democracy needs to pay greater attention to this dynamic.

A contemporary narrative justifying democracy promotion needs to consist of three elements: intrinsic motivation, the instrumental value of democracy, and solidarity between societies rather than states. Although civil society had an important role in the summit cohorts, it is necessary to give nongovernmental organizations from the Global South a more leading role in its next phase. Protecting and supporting democracy under the current conditions requires full buy-in from nonstate actors. The EU can advocate for such a narrative with its networks and based on the lessons learned from its various programs to foster civil society. This could give it more credibility in the eyes of its strategic partners in the Global South.

## Kirsten Meijer

*Executive Director of the Netherlands Helsinki Committee*

The second Summit for Democracy passed by without being noticed by those who were not involved professionally. The sense of urgency involved was not translated into a public debate. Europe must use the momentum behind the commitments made and take the outcomes of the summit to the next level by intensifying the defense, renewal, and strengthening of democracies on the continent and beyond.

More action on European democracy is needed in the next phase of the summit process. Not only to fight the rise of autocracy in countries where democracy and fundamental values are already extremely under threat, but also in ones like the Netherlands where democracy needs serious maintenance. The fact that about 30 percent of the population does not feel politically represented in a country that is in general considered a thriving democracy is a matter of grave concern.

The EU should lead by example by defending, renewing, and strengthening democracies in Europe and beyond, but it should only play a facilitating and modest role in the summit process. Other democratic champions, preferably from the Global South, should be in the lead, in solidarity with democratic activists from all around the world.

The EU could further support a meaningful summit process by backing demands for more transparency in it, by supporting its institutionalization and funding, by enhancing the role of cohorts, and by insisting on the engagement of civil society. European actors like the Democracy Under Threat civil society coalition in the Netherlands are ready to contribute, but the support of the EU as a guardian of democratic values is necessary.

Most importantly, the EU should lead by example within Europe itself. First, this means adopting an ambitious version of the Defence of Democracy Package being discussed. This is an important

opportunity for the EU to strengthen fundamental freedoms, civic space, free media, and the rule of law as mutually reinforcing principles that underpin democracy. The recently published joint recommendations of civil society and democracy organizations in this regard should be taken fully into consideration and feed into the third summit.

The EU should use the momentum of the recent Summit for Democracy and the commitments that were made. For example, the work of the Civic Space Cohort would provide a great opportunity for the EU to further strengthen its role as a champion in the field of strengthening civic space.

Democracy also needs investment. The EU could improve the functioning of its existing instruments to further strengthen civil society; for example, by providing core funding and by no longer requiring 10 percent co-funding for projects that are funded by its Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values program so as to ensure nondiscriminatory and sustainable access to EU democracy funding.

The EU should continue to use its Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism to the fullest extent. Though this instrument is intended to protect the EU's budget and its financial interests, it also helps put pressure on member-state governments to bring about reforms that are important for upholding democratic values. Corrupt elites undermine democracies to keep political power in their hands and comprehensive anticorruption strategies are key for pushing back against autocracy.

## Lisbeth Pilegaard

*Executive Director of the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy*

Hundreds of events have taken place during the recent Summit for Democracy and through its Year of Action. These have focused on important issues related to democracy and the threats that undermine it. Enormous efforts have been put in place by governments, civil society, and grassroots and democracy support organizations in many countries. So far, so good.

So why do I sit back with a slight feeling of disappointment, resignation, and worry? Have there been overall tangible results since the first summit in 2021? I am not sure. Those actors that were already engaged with democracy support in different forms—independent media, anticorruption, elections, civil rights organizations, political parties, and so on—have participated. But what is lacking is global joint leadership and a strong will to find new ways of working.

The data in the likes of V-Dem's annual democracy reports shows us that more and more people are living under autocracy and that the democratic backsliding is happening faster and faster. This is the case even within the EU. Do we have the right tools, approaches, and funds to counter this worrying development?

The democracy support sector needs to engage in critical self-reflection as to the ways it has worked and the way forward. Not to identify one single solution to fix the problem but rather to foster broader engagement across a group of leaders and countries that will drive this agenda. It is important that European countries show the way. For example, having a frank conversation within the EU could help change the fact that democracy has been like a red rag to a bull within the UN, where leaders avoid having this discussion.

For the next Summit for Democracy that will be hosted by South Korea, I hope for tangible leadership and ambition as to how to take the process forward. One way is a clear willingness among states and their leaders to include democracy and democracy support in their foreign affairs policies and strategies. Europe and others owe this to the 72 percent of the world's population living under autocratic regimes and who look for hope and concrete assistance to counter the oppression of their human rights and the lack of freedom to express themselves.

## Anthony Smith

*Chief Executive of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy*

A summit should by definition be a top-down event. But three conversations in southern Africa during the recent Summit for Democracy reshaped my views about this one. The first was with a taxi driver who in the time between two Johannesburg traffic lights skewered South Africa's political parties more neatly than any academic analysts I know had managed to. The second conversation was with a cross-party group of parliamentarians in Zambia about the climate emergency, to use their term. And the third was with a group of Zambian women activists who said that, with politicians failing them, they simply had to change their whole societies to bring true democracy.

None of these conversations took place in the formal summit sessions. But in different ways, the summit framed them, whether as a conversation starter or a side meeting. Leaders talking about democracy in Africa triggered meaningful conversations about the problems that people face and the failures of the political system in tackling them.

In the Zambia summit meetings, the voices were overwhelmingly African and their focus was clear—solving the multiple economic, energy, health, and education challenges through accountability, clean elections, and inclusion. They said that the focus had to be on the quality of government, deepening democratic culture, and relentlessly pushing for democratic institutions to do their jobs well. It was abundantly clear what would happen otherwise and no mystery to them why democracy mattered.

The summit process should definitely continue. There is no other global forum to discuss democracy in the world. We need to monitor the state of democracy and reinforce those working to deepen democracy at country level.

The summit process should first of all be a high-level, heart-on-our-sleeve signal that democracy matters to all of us across regions, faiths, and generations. We should review reports on the state of democracy in the world and use that data to identify key issues and to target support effectively.

The second aim should be to back those people who are working to strengthen their country's democracy and to encourage others to do so. Geopolitics shaped the Summit for Democracy process but European contributions to it need to help make a difference at the community level, defending democracy while helping it deliver. In this process, leadership needs to be widely shared beyond Western powers, whose should be more openly acknowledged. As the women I spoke to know, democracy is about behaviors and cultures, not just rules. A massive effort is needed to support community leaders who are changing behaviors, raising standards, and exposing hypocrisy.

The United States did an outstanding job in conceiving the Summit for Democracy and getting it started. But the impact of the process depends in large measure on Europe taking its turn to maintain the momentum. It can do this in partnerships and with thoughtful leadership that recognizes the long-term challenges that countries across the world face in deepening democracy and delivering for their people.

## Antonella Valmorbida

*Secretary General of ALDA—the European Association for Local Democracy, and Chair of the European Partnership for Democracy*

The Summit for Democracy united democracy supporters and made more tangible their conviction that democracy is not a form of governance exclusively for the West. And, based on the discussions I had around the summit, the message is clear and should be presented to any future one: democracy must be empowered and can deliver better when focused at the local level.

Participatory democracy needs to be prominent in the next phase of the summit process. Participative forms of democracy have immense potential for finding answers to local problems and building communities resilient to authoritarian regimes and forms of governance. The more citizens—in particular youth and women, for whom national politics is less accessible—are involved in local democracy by being elected to local government or in being actively engaged in local groups, the more they build up a DNA of democracy that is open to deliberation, negotiation, representation, and everyone's contribution.

As political parties in cities and regions try out different and interesting experiments with civic lists and citizens' movements, local democracy empowered by real decentralization can build or rebuild trust between citizens and institutions. Donors' focus on political parties—their accountability, transparency, and forms of representation—should therefore support their work at the local level.

In this context, a vibrant and aware civil society, engaged and representing the collective interest of the community, is key for democracy. This has been exemplified by the experience of Ukraine since Russia's invasion, with local authorities and civil society working together to become the strongholds of resilience and resistance.

The summit process has so far not paid sufficient attention to elections at the local level and needs to do more on this in its next phase. Local democracy and decentralization allow for an easier redistribution of powers and representation than is the case at the national level. Local elections can galvanize interest and engage citizens. The next Summit for Democracy and the implementation of past summit decisions must involve partners at the local level to a greater extent.

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