



Tailoring European Democracy Support to Contrasting Regime Dynamics

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Introduction

Political trends have become increasingly mixed and varied in recent years. While serious democratic regression continues to affect many parts of the world, some countries have experienced pro-democracy developments; the 2025 indices of the V-Dem Institute, Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit identify different mixes of autocratising and democratising countries.¹ Recent academic and policy work has begun to explore these contrasting dynamics. After more than two decades of intense focus on explaining autocratisation, there is growing recognition of the need to better understand cases of democratic resistance and instances where democracy has shown signs of positive recovery.²

Much has been written about negative trends away from democracy and towards autocracy around the world.³ Analysts debate which concepts and terms best capture these trends.⁴ While there is still disagreement on which kinds of such dynamics are most serious and what drives them, many writers have begun to unpack the different counterdynamics that point towards possible democratic resilience or recovery. A clear conclusion from these vibrant and unresolved debates is the striking degree of variation in political trends that has taken shape across countries. This variation is often lost from view when writers describe the era in terms of a single label – the era of autocratisation, for example.⁵

This report addresses an apparent disconnect between these debates about regime dynamics, on the one hand, and the world of international democracy support, on the other. While there are extensive analyses and monitoring of international democracy-support policies, these tend not to incorporate in any systematic way the ongoing debates about categories of regime dynamics. Critical analyses of how international democracy support has fallen short of its stated aims are usually somewhat generic and concerned with uncovering the broad dynamics of democratic governments' foreign policies.

In an attempt to bridge this disconnect, this report seeks to relate different kinds of regime dynamics to different kinds of democracy-support strategies deployed by the European Union (EU) and European donors. The report focuses on European policies in the sense of collectively agreed EU positions and strategies, the democracy-support actions of the European Commission, and the democracy assistance provided through member states' donor agencies.⁶ The rationale is to help European actors disaggregate and sharpen their democracy-support efforts.

The democracy-support community is undergoing dramatic change due to a decline in funding and political backing from the United States (US) as well as reductions in development-assistance budgets across Europe, including those in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK). As the democracy-support community now has fewer resources, it will need to prioritise more and select a smaller range of interventions where it can make the most difference. European donors will need to more carefully distinguish between categories of regime dynamics as they prioritise some contexts over others.

In light of mixed democratic developments and more limited political backing and financing for democracy support, there is a pressing need for new thinking on how democracy support can be advanced more effectively and efficiently across increasingly diverse contexts. Democracy supporters need to tailor their strategies more precisely to different kinds of challenge: pre-empting autocratisation, strengthening democratic resilience, and responding to moments of democratic opportunity. Some European governments have begun to allude to this need. For example, the German government's new development aid plan commits to tailoring development strategies to specific political contexts and to taking clear political action on cooperation with governments that have lost their legitimacy.

There is still no evidence-based standard guidance on when donors should withdraw or intensify their support, which interventions are most effective, or how best to engage with different political actors. It is widely recognised that the effectiveness of democracy support is highly dependent on the context. Political dynamics, overall fragility, institutional maturity, levels of civic engagement, and the risk of democratic backsliding vary significantly across settings, shaping which types of intervention are likely to succeed. Yet this general realisation still needs to be moulded into more operational and precise policy orientations for tailored democracy support.

Five regime dynamics

Political scientists have been arguing for years about definitions of different regime types and the distinctions between them. A cottage industry has built up around this endeavour, with whole careers dedicated to it. The primary focus here is on the dynamics of change, rather than regime types as such, since these dynamics most strongly condition the contexts in which European democracy support is implemented.

Politics are rarely static, and democracy support is planned with a projection of political change in mind. Regime distinctions unavoidably contain a degree of arbitrary judgment. Still, it is helpful to group policy challenges into five types of dynamic or movement in contemporary politics (see table 1).

Table 1. The characteristics of five types of regime dynamic

Regime dynamic	Characteristics	Example country
Full autocracies becoming more autocratic	- No competitive elections - State-controlled judiciary and media - Extensive abuses of civil liberties - Censorship and suppression of criticism of the government	Egypt
Declining democratic quality	- Accumulation of power in the executive - Illiberal parties in parliaments - A combination of autocratic and democratic elements - Somewhat competitive elections and public commitments to democracy alongside stifled pluralism and more or less captured state institutions	Tunisia
Autocratic dynamics in conflict states	- A context of spiralling violent conflict - Weak state institutions leaving space for autocratisation - Repressive rule in power vacuums	Sudan

Gradual democratic improvement	Reformist governments with different degrees of commitment to pro-democracy reforms, with different levels of success and speed	Armenia
Democratic opportunities	- Concrete episodes of democratic opening or opportunity through election results, societal mobilisations, or both - An aftermath that may lead to more democratisation – or not	Bangladesh

Full autocracies becoming more autocratic

While absolute autocracies are rare, political scientists point to monarchies and dictatorships that have become more severely autocratic in recent years. In these regimes, abuses of civil liberties are extensive, there are no competitive elections, the state owns or controls the media more or less completely, the regime has full control of the judiciary, and criticism of the government is almost entirely stifled.

These autocracies are rooted in different power logics. Some take the form of a dominant party in command of a strong state. Others consist of more personalised rule based on patrimonial control over weak institutions. In yet others, army rule underpins autocracy. While there is variation, the general trend in this category is that nearly all the regimes have been stable and resistant to collapse and, indeed, are becoming more absolutely autocratic.

Example: Egypt

Egypt is a full autocracy, specifically one in which the military and security apparatus controls most aspects of public life. Since President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power through a coup in 2013, there has been an increasingly systematic stifling of dissent through prosecution and imprisonment as well as tight restrictions on civil liberties and widespread human rights abuses committed by security forces, such as enforced disappearances and deaths in detention. Meaningful political opposition has become practically nonexistent. The regime has centralised power in the presidency through securitisation, and the parliament lacks any meaningful capacity to check the power of the executive.

Other examples of this dynamic are Algeria, Belarus, China, Cuba, Nicaragua, Russia, Rwanda, Singapore, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Declining democratic quality

A large number of countries are suffering a decline in democratic quality. Some of these are regressing from relatively solid levels of democracy, while others are hybrid regimes losing their democratic elements. These are slightly different types of dynamic but with enough overlap to be included in a single category for the purposes of this report.

Many democracies are experiencing a gradual democratic regression without transforming into autocracies. Different dynamics of backsliding are apparent. Some countries regress when strong leaders accumulate power through the executive; in others, democratic erosion is more rooted in an illiberal party gaining power in parliament. In some of the latter cases, other parties oppose the erosion, while in others, some of them buy into coalitions with the illiberal party. Governments can also get public authorisation through referendums for backsliding steps, and these states tend to tip furthest into autocracy. These dynamics often appear in combination with censorship and limitations on the freedom of expression (including, but not limited to, states' creeping control of the media and press), as well as declines in pluralism, the media, and public spaces. The implication is that donors need a different strategy of democratic action for each of these scenarios, as proposed below.⁷

Hybrid regimes exhibit a combination of democratic and autocratic elements. This category engenders most disagreement among analysts, who offer different ways of capturing this combination.⁸ Some refer to this category as “hybrid regimes”; other terms, like “competitive authoritarianism”, overlap with this. These regimes hold regular elections while suffering from significant flaws in democratic processes and institutions. They typically hold elections with some degree of competition but no level playing field. They offer limited checks and balances, but these are outweighed by executive capture of the legislature and other institutions. There are some critical voices from political parties, civil society, and the media, but these are restricted in scope.

The trend here is that most of these hybrid regimes have become less genuinely competitive in recent years. That is, they have gradually restricted the space for meaningful pluralism and ensured that state institutions and the media de facto serve the regime's political interests. Some political scientists find that there are now few new cases of authoritarianism but that within this hybrid category, pluralist space is contracting.⁹ Previously, many analysts defined hybrid regimes as a temporary status en route to full democratisation. In recent years, these countries have taken on what appears to be a quasi-permanent status as a separate regime type. Most of them have remained hybrid while their autocratic elements have expanded relative to their democratic features.

Example: Tunisia

Tunisia was the democratic success story of the 2011 Arab uprisings, but it has gradually slid back towards autocratisation. Since 2021, President Kais Saied has led the country on a firmly autocratic trajectory.¹⁰ The use of emergency powers, the dismissal of the legislature, and the systematic undermining of the judiciary, the electoral commission, and other independent institutions – in combination with the repression of free press and civil society organisations (CSOs) – have undermined Tunisia’s democratic quality and, more recently, the country’s hybrid element of democracy.

Among other examples of this dynamic are Argentina, Bulgaria, Côte d’Ivoire, El Salvador, Georgia, India, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, Serbia, South Africa, Tanzania, Turkey, the US, and Zimbabwe.

Autocratic dynamics in conflict states

A prominent dynamic in recent years is when autocracy exists amid spiralling violent conflict or postconflict fragility. In these contexts, autocracy tends to be associated with weak state institutions. Institutional implosion enables autocratic leaders to fill a power vacuum and exert repressive rule. This dynamic is associated with severe autocracy but is almost the opposite of autocracy flowing from a strong state and an ideological project. Some of these regimes have captured power through coups and then descended into mutually reinforcing cycles of conflict and autocratisation.

Example: Sudan

Sudan combines state collapse, competing militarised power structures, and deepening human rights abuses. In the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, now in its third year, all warring parties have committed war crimes and widespread atrocities. The fighting has produced what the United Nations (UN) World Food Programme has identified as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, with 24.6 million people experiencing acute hunger.¹¹

Other examples of this dynamic are Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, and Somalia.

Gradual democratic improvement

Another group of states has registered some gradual improvement in democratic quality in the last several years. These are generally hybrid regimes and limited democracies in which relatively reformist governments have implemented some democratic measures. This group of states is not as large as the group suffering autocratisation, yet this positive democratic dynamic is still significant in global politics.

This kind of movement attracts little European media or analytical attention, certainly compared with the more dramatic cases of democratic collapse. However, it is a type of context that should not be ignored; indeed, European donors have a significant presence in many countries in this category, including Spain in Latin American improvers, Germany in eastern European democratisers, and France and the UK in several positive cases in Africa.

As autocratic movements differ in their dynamics, so do these cases of modest democratic gain. In some countries, reformist governments attempt an avowedly democratic agenda, while in others they are pushed by opposition parties or civic movements to adopt specific reforms. Some states begin from low levels of democracy to move into more mainstream hybrid terrain, while others start with a higher democracy score and move into higher-quality democracy. Some countries are on a fairly clear democratic trajectory, while others constantly switch between forward and backward movement.

Example: Armenia

Since Armenia's Velvet Revolution of 2018, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government has pursued democratic institution building alongside a reorientation from Russian dependence towards Europe.¹² Armenia has made significant progress in areas including judicial reform, anticorruption, media freedom, and police reform, although improvements have been uneven and the country continues to face deep structural vulnerabilities.

Among other examples of this dynamic are Bolivia, Botswana, Chile, Colombia, Fiji, Ghana, Malawi, Malaysia, and Syria.

Democratic opportunities

Finally, in a cluster of states, highly promising democratic opportunities or potential turnarounds have appeared in recent years. These are somewhat similar to, and partly overlap with, the category of gradual improvement but refer to more dramatic or episodic openings. These openings take shape through election results, societal mobilisations, or, most commonly, a combination of the two.

Such positive opportunities arise in different ways and appear from differing degrees of autocratisation. In some cases, the end result may be tantamount to a wholesale process of re-democratisation; in others, the outcome may be a more modest dilution of autocracy. Sometimes, autocratic dynamics may be relatively shallow, and the positive turnaround is akin to protecting democracy from deeper authoritarian potential; at other times, autocratisation may be strongly embedded over a long period, with a turnaround that pushes back against stronger resistance. In the long aftermath of the opportunity arising, some of these cases advance towards re-democratisation, while others atrophy and their window of democratic opportunity begins to close.

Example: Bangladesh

After Bangladesh's July 2024 student-led uprising, which overthrew then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and ended 15 years of increasingly authoritarian rule, an interim government entered office with broad public support and a mandate to restore democratic institutions, rebuild public trust, and ensure accountability.¹³ The interim government established an ambitious reform agenda, producing a sweeping constitutional reform framework known as the July Charter.

In the February 2026 general election, which saw a turnout of nearly 60%, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party secured a landslide majority in a credible and well-managed contest.¹⁴ Yet the turnaround remains fragile: the banning of Hasina's Awami League, persistent economic instability, and the risk that the new power-holders may replicate the authoritarian patterns of their predecessors all endanger the securing of democracy in Bangladesh.¹⁵

Other examples of states in this category are Brazil, Guatemala, Montenegro, Poland, Senegal, and Sri Lanka.

Democracy support by category

European democracy-support policies are not currently fully tailored to these different categories. A December 2025 assessment by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that international development partners had made some modest adjustments to their strategies for different regime types but had not modulated their aid flows in any systematic way to these variations in context.¹⁶

Autocracies

There has been no uniform pattern of European policies specific to the dynamic of autocracies becoming more closed and repressive. In some big autocracies, like China and Russia, the EU and member states have ceased to have any meaningful profile of democracy support, while in Belarus they have tightened sanctions and provided generous support for the opposition, with which it has sided decisively and proactively. In cases like Egypt and Vietnam, the EU collectively and many European governments individually have deepened their security and economic rapprochement even as regimes have tightened control, with a small number of soft democracy projects running in parallel with this engagement. In Cuba and Nicaragua, the EU has used a modest range of restrictive measures, held back from deep engagement, and eschewed any active support for democratic actors. European policies often lack clear aims and exhibit striking variation across different authoritarian regimes.

The 2025 OECD report found that in contexts of entrenched and worsening authoritarianism, donors mostly continued their aid – albeit with limits on the depth of their cooperation. Donors’ presumption is that they can help development and improve the prospects for democratisation further down the road, but they do so in a very general sense with no differentiated template for understanding when this is or is not likely.

Democracies backsliding

In general, European donors lack a fully specified model for responding to democratic backsliding. They tend to be stricter on this dynamic in nearby EU candidate countries than in distant, great-power backsliders. They invariably struggle to respond fully to backsliding until it is quite far advanced, missing its crucial early stages when the chance of halting and reversing a decline is greater. If this is a common feature across most countries in this category, commonality in European policies in this category is outweighed by strategic considerations.

The 2025 OECD report found that international development donors had made the fewest adjustments in response to very gradual erosion – just sporadic switches of modest aid shares into less political work, CSOs, and local-administration issues. There has been much focus in these

contexts on early-warning indicators – it is fairly easy to identify steps away from democracy – but little in the way of actual early action.

In some hybrid regimes moving towards autocracy, such as Georgia, European governments and the EU have stepped back, while in others they have increased general funding and some democracy support. In Serbia, for example, European support included the Human Rights, Democracy, and Civil Society Programme for Serbia 2024–2025 with a budget of €7.5 million as well as accession conditionality and negotiations as the main lever to promote democracy in the country.¹⁷ Given the deteriorating trajectory of Serbia's democracy, however, European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos announced in April 2026 that the commission was re-evaluating whether to suspend funds to Serbia over continued backsliding.¹⁸

In some places, European donors have channelled increasing support to regimes for security aims even as hybridity turns fully autocratic – as in Tunisia. In other places, such as Turkey, they have sought to divert more funding to civic actors.

Conflict and autocracy

Here, there is more of a common pattern of the EU collectively and European governments individually standing back and keeping clear of conflicts. Engagement has occurred in stabilisation and military capacity-building operations under Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in the Sahel, Libya, and Somalia, but such missions have become increasingly modest in their mandates and today rarely cover democracy issues to any significant degree. Still, European governments and the EU have employed different templates of conflict resolution across different countries in this category. In some, such as Mali or Sudan, Europeans have largely relegated democracy elements to an extremely low profile. In others, like Syria or Ukraine, support for democracy building or inclusive political settlements has become a more central part of European engagement.

Gradual democratic improvement

This is the category the EU and member state donors have most clearly overlooked – in diplomatic, funding, and strategic terms – in large part because the focus in recent years has been on the expansion of authoritarianism. European actors have increased their support for these good performers but not at game-changing levels – really high levels of funding sufficient to empower democratic actors to hold off authoritarian blockers – and without any guiding conceptual template.

For countries in this category, European democracy supporters fund generic civil society projects but have not developed a strategy that homes in on the main sources of pro-reform dynamics or on ways to weaken the main actors that limit reform momentum. But again, there is much variation across the examples and no common strategy for modest reformer states as a category.

Democratic openings

The EU and European governments have been quite committed to democracy support when moments of democratic opportunity appear but have not followed any common pattern for what comes after such junctures. In some cases, such as Brazil, Guatemala, Montenegro, or Senegal, the EU has kept up its support and pressure over the medium term, while in others, like Thailand or Zambia, it has slid back into indulging more authoritarian dynamics as and when the democratic opportunity evaporates.

No constant pattern

One significant factor emerges from all this variation. A standard criticism is that the EU and European governments adhere rigidly to a one-size-fits-all democracy policy. Yet it might just as convincingly be suggested that they are guilty of the opposite: a very ad hoc approach in which there is no constant pattern for particular types of regime dynamic.

Towards a more targeted approach

European democracy supporters could usefully define a set of aims and modes of intervention specific to each category of political dynamic. There will be some generic aims and policy modalities that apply across categories: Germany's new development strategy suggests that support for civil society or the media will be needed as cross-cutting priorities, and that corruption concerns need to be addressed across contexts too. Yet European policies would benefit from greater differentiation in their aims, their choice of political instruments, and their level of prioritisation.

In line with the ethos of tighter selectivity needed in policy priorities, this section identifies three objectives and five or six policy guidelines for each category.

Full autocracies becoming more autocratic

Objectives:

- Do no harm: make sure European engagement does not actively enable autocracy.
- Support civic capacity for the long term to take advantage of moments when regimes may collapse.
- Work against authoritarian narratives that can give regimes an aura of legitimacy.

In this category, democratisation is unlikely and European policy aims are best defined in more modest terms. The EU and member state governments need to engage with many nondemocratic regimes for their security and economic interests, but they should ensure that this engagement does not directly empower authoritarian dynamics. In particular, they should make sure they do not feed into corrupt and clientelist structures or contribute to legitimising autocrats, and should deploy new mechanisms to independently monitor this variable. The EU and member states should use diplomatic tools, such as constructive dialogue and conditioned leverage, especially sanctions, at least to protect key democratic activists from being attacked or killed – something European governments have not been willing to do robustly.

None of this means that European efforts should not help prepare democratic actors for possible dramatic change. Autocracies are brittle and can often collapse suddenly and unexpectedly, even when they seemed strong and robust. This is often a matter of maintaining support for exiled democratic movements and individuals, not with any prospect of immediate political change, but to more indirectly foster features necessary for civic infrastructure.

The EU and European national governments need to do more to keep exiled activists and opposition movements safe and engaged. They need not only to enhance its traditional core or project support but also to help democratic actors develop better narratives that can weaken the foundations of authoritarian regimes. They can and should do more to bring relocated groups together to narrow their differences and plan for how they might take advantage of possible reform openings. For now, the EU collectively lacks the processes and rules to provide this relocated civic infrastructure, as this aim involves a very different style of support from standard democracy aid – an obvious area of improvement in EU policy preparedness.

Policy guidelines:

- Do not provide financial support to branches of autocratic governments, to avoid feeding into clientelism and corrupt structures or financing or enabling repression of citizens.
- Reduce diplomatic relations to a minimum.
- Carry out independent assessments of European policies – not only multiannual country programming for democracy but also areas other than democracy, such as development, trade, or mining – to judge whether they meet the “do no harm” principle.
- Fund pro-democracy civic infrastructure – forums, societies, and community hubs where citizens can meet, organise, and engage in collective deliberation – to keep a modicum of civic space alive.
- Offer specific support mechanisms tailored to the needs of democratic activists exiled from these regimes.
- Craft a new democracy-support narrative that tackles these regimes’ claim that autocracy is better than democracy at delivering economic growth, stability, and community identity; work with exiles, individual bloggers, activists, and small independent media outlets in country to amplify this narrative.

Example: Egypt

Egypt is a clear illustration of the EU and member states taking an ad hoc and strategically contradictory approach to a full autocracy. Rather than apply meaningful conditionality, the EU signed a Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership with the country in 2024, accompanied by a €7.4 billion financial and investment package for 2024–27; a memorandum for a further €4 billion in macrofinancial assistance was signed in October 2025.¹⁹

The EU and its members have prioritised economic and defence cooperation with Egypt because of their own economic, migration, and security interests in the region, but they have failed to apply the democratic conditionality embedded in all of these other sectors. European donors have also failed to adequately realise, or act on, the fact that democracy is an underlying strengthening factor for all of those other policy areas they are prioritising in Egypt and other overtly autocratic countries.

The EU should draw lessons from other cases in which it has taken a stronger stance against autocrats, such as Belarus, and launch a programme to support the now mainly exiled Egyptian civil society community. It should use its diplomatic leverage and conditionality on modest but specific and achievable issues that would push the Egyptian regime away from its highly repressive attacks on civic leaders and allow at least a modicum of local space for open debate and civic infrastructure.

Declining democratic quality

Objectives:

- Improve the early identification of subtle trends in backsliding.
- Pre-empt deeper autocratisation and prevent modest illiberal restrictions from becoming aggressive repression, including in digital spaces.
- Identify actors – citizens, civil society, the media, activists, and opposition parties – that support efforts to prevent backsliding and maintain islands of liberal pluralism.

The EU and member state governments are unlikely to have the leverage to fully reverse declining democratic quality or the autocratic draft of hybrid regimes, but they should aim to respond far more quickly and correct its tendency to underreact in the early stages of such processes. This does not mean simply working on early-warning methodology but being politically willing to take firm action even when individual illiberal moves might not yet seem that serious. The aim here might not be to achieve democratisation but to help limit the pace and depth of autocratisation, and the EU should formulate policy indicators accordingly.

In contexts of diminishing democratic space, the EU and member state governments can realistically aim not at system-level improvement but at support for small clusters of liberal action. In some countries, this may mean using cooperation on apolitical issues, like administrative reform or sectoral development policies, to build in modest guardrails for open, pluralist space. The EU as a whole tends to gravitate towards this kind of good-governance angle but needs sharper indicators to ensure such indirect policies limit more than they assist democratic regression.

As in the first category, work on reframing narratives should be a prominent part of the EU toolbox to make it harder for governments to legitimise their backsliding – as many have succeeded in doing.

Policy guidelines:

- Support and train civic activists and academic institutions to identify early regression towards autocracy.
- Devise a permanent early-warning and early-action mechanism specifically tailored to early democratic backsliding in the form of weakened institutions and independence, obstructed civic space on- and offline, illiberal actors in power, and leaders accumulating power through the executive.
- Help craft the alliances between institutional, civic, political, and economic actors that are necessary to work effectively against incremental backsliding.
- When protests erupt on specific policy issues, provide background support to on- and offline social and civic movements involved to help them endure over time and build links to an agenda of stopping or reversing democratic backsliding.
- Address backsliding concerns within high-level diplomatic engagement even when this does not appear to be at a serious level, before it is too late to react; stop treating these regimes as underperforming democracies, as they can easily become more fully autocratic.
- Provide consistent and continuous core funding for independent, pro-democracy media and training to address autocratisation and stimulate democratic, pluralist discussions.

Example: Tunisia

In Tunisia, current European policy meets few of these guidelines despite an urgent need for early-warning mechanisms tailored to backsliding. Even if some degree of engagement with the regime is necessary for security and migration concerns, the above guidelines could help ensure the union does not fuel further autocratisation of a kind that undermines its own interests. The EU and the member states engaged in Tunisia need to start providing a meaningful and concerted level of support to civil society, the media, and cultural, economic, academic, and judicial actors seeking to halt the autocratic slide. Europeans should make this a diplomatic priority and work with local actors to identify where further restrictions are likely.

Autocratic dynamics in conflict states

Objectives:

- Disempower violent militarised actors.
- Stem power vacuums that enable autocratic power.
- Encourage early recovery inclusion to help conflict stabilisation and inclusive peace building.

In this category, European aims will most often need to focus on mediation that helps set in motion inclusive political reconciliation. This is unlikely to equate to templates of wholesale democratisation but should rather be measured by how far it helps rebuild legitimate state capacity, democratically controlled security provision, and, eventually, decentralisation of power to citizens. The EU often positions itself to mediate and lead humanitarian relief without specifying this more political set of aims in any detail, and this is a key area of improvement in the union's conflict policies.

Evidence from conflicts over the last two decades suggests that a key European aim should be to avoid ceasefires and peace deals locking into place power-sharing arrangements that militate against democratic politics in the long term. In the specific case of conflict, the EU and European donors should set their sights not on the standard democracy-support template but on a form of early recovery that builds in indicators of political inclusion and is flexible enough to open political competition if and when conditions stabilise.

Policy guidelines:

- Build and support cross-factional dialogue on inclusive reconciliation, transitional justice, and conflict transformation processes.
- Offer economic and social support, such as socio-psychological work with victims, to palliate the grievances that drive authoritarian conflict dynamics.
- Use all foreign and economic policy instruments to incentivise different actors to include democratic elements in peace talks, mediation efforts, and accords.
- Support power-sharing forms of democracy, but ones that are not as rigid as in previous decades, since these tend to inhibit long-term democratisation.
- Help build independent state capacity that gives sufficient institutional capacity for democracy building to gain traction.

Example: Sudan

Sudan's conflict shows no sign of improvement. The EU and national donors have allocated more humanitarian aid, advocated accountability mechanisms, such as the ongoing investigation by the International Criminal Court into acts committed in Darfur, and called for a full arms embargo on the warring parties.²⁰ But major positive change is unlikely, and the more modest guidelines for this category would push the EU and its member states to engage with the conflict parties on a core minimal institutional template for mediation. Such a template could focus on community-level grievances and the shared practical interests of different communities; it should avoid promoting any peace accord that replicates the kind of rigid power sharing that has been shown in other contexts to perpetuate autocratic instability.

Gradual democratic improvement

Objectives:

- Incentivise further pro-democracy reforms across all sectors through financial aid and market access, among other strategies, depending on the context, and positive conditionality.
- Empower the full range of democratic and civic actors, including academia, the media, and populations.
- Institutionalise democratic commitments – in parliaments, judiciaries, local administrations, and political parties – to outlive the political cycles of individual reformist governments or leaders; specifically, support the strengthening of checks and balances through independent oversight institutions, incentivising this reform with financial support.

When political change is moving in a more democratic direction, even hesitantly and partly, the EU's aims need to be defined in a qualitatively different manner from the previous three categories. The EU needs to offer enough far-reaching support to incentivise more ambitious reforms and meet the commonly heard requests from local actors in these conditions for more generous and wide-ranging democratic assistance.

An important aim in such circumstances should be to help balance state-led and society-led reform momentum: it is where these two levels fail to advance in parallel with each other that democratic potential easily atrophies. Although democratising actors may be useful in these scenarios in attaining democratic change by joining institutions and governments directly, fostering space for independent civil society detached from governments is crucial to maintain democratic trajectories and avoid capture.

The goal in this category should be to help ensure that the beginnings of democratic reform reach all parts of a population and that democratic standards are institutionalised in ways that make them harder to reverse under future governments. Failure to address these two issues in the past has made democratic reforms more susceptible to reversal. The EU and member states should do a lot more to build carefully modulated incentives into their diplomatic tools and conditionalities and, most crucially, take on board the specific advice of local reform-oriented actors, who invariably push European powers for these kinds of steps.

Policy guidelines:

- Directly fund democratic and oversight institutions, such as electoral commissions, ombudspersons, and parliaments.
- Support state capacity to implement specific pro-democracy reforms.
- Enhance trade and investment to help democratic reforms translate into better outcomes.

- Support structural change in, and the meaningful institutionalised participation of, civil society and the media.
- Identify those who may feel excluded from the gains of democratic reform and support them to pre-empt their possible turn to illiberal, populist candidates later on.

Example: Armenia

In Armenia, the EU has made good use of its leverage, becoming the country's largest donor and a key partner in its reform agenda.²¹ EU support for democracy in Armenia has included the Country Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society for 2021–27, budget support for anticorruption and border reforms, and technical support for electoral legislation.²² Still, the EU could offer far higher levels of more tightly tailored support to maintain faltering reform momentum and reduce the risks of de-democratisation.

The EU's early-stage transition support has been helpful but not enough to propel deeper reform or address the specific strategic challenge related to Armenia's 2023 defeat to Azerbaijan in the long-running war over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Many reformers and activists see the EU's low-key border mission and even-handed stance between Yerevan and Baku as unhelpful. Armenia formally launched its EU accession process in 2025 after a successful citizen initiative, but the union has not yet responded in a favourable way.²³ The EU needs to help design democracy-support infrastructure that can survive a change in government.

Democratic opportunities

Objectives:

- Embed new democratic potential in concrete institutionalisation as quickly as possible.
- Empower the full range of democratic, civic actors beyond new reformist leaders or governments.
- Institutionalise democratic commitments to outlive the political cycles of individual reformist governments or leaders.

The number of dramatic democratic turnarounds may not be extremely high, but they offer potentially the clearest reward for generous European democracy support. It is in this category that European aims can and should be most ambitious. One of these aims should be to react

quickly and with the full range of diplomatic, economic, and aid instruments when moments of democratic opportunity appear. This means taking a lead not only from newly installed democratic governments but also from civil society actors keen to keep these authorities true to their democratic promises. A distinctive challenge in these contexts is for the EU and national governments to help map out what kind of actions are democratically legitimate in de-capturing state institutions from outgoing antidemocratic forces – tactics likely to differ from the other four categories identified in this report.

Another European aim in this category should be to help reduce the risk of new democratic momentum slowing down and authoritarian dynamics returning to the fore. This is a reasonably common occurrence, and EU donors have fallen short in responding to this scenario of negative turnarounds following on the heels of democratic ones. This requires more pre-emptive actions and the aim of having democratic norms firmly spread across a political system rather than directing support to one nominally reformist leader or government.

Policy guidelines:

- Provide economic and social support to help the early stages of possible democratic turnarounds to deliver concrete prosperity or wealth outcomes.
- Offer advice and support on the right sequencing and coordination of reforms.
- Remove any sanctions but maintain pressure and incentives; react quickly and firmly to signs of reform promises stalling or reversing in an autocratic direction.
- Make a special effort to fund civic watchdog groups, as in these contexts activists often move into government, leaving civil society weak.
- Devise activities to support crucial institutional reforms, such as justice and security-sector reforms, and strengthen the roles and independence of parliaments.
- Allow some space for tough, hardball actions to de-capture state institutions from the outgoing regime, but establish red lines to keep new reformist governments to due process.

Example: Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the EU was initially ambivalent about the protests that ejected the autocratic regime but then moved to offer supportive assistance. As Bangladesh moves into the tricky second phase of its transition, the guidelines above would push the EU to attach far greater priority to this country as a case with great positive democratic potential where external support can have a tangible impact. The EU and national donors could provide much more support on social and economic issues and more trade facilitation as well as more direct engagement to help ensure a fully inclusive political process. They need to help pro-transition activists to scrutinise Bangladesh's new leaders and ensure they do not exclude supporters of the previous regime in an antidemocratic fashion.

Prioritisation

Within this schema, prioritisation will be essential. European democracy supporters – whether government donors, EU institutions, or foundations – have limited resources and competing priorities, so are unlikely to address all aims in all categories. Platforms like Team Europe Democracy (TED) or country-specific Team Europe Initiatives can play an especially important role in coordinating reflections on prioritisation. TED can help support joint European action and reduce duplication through stronger coordination, knowledge sharing, and the expertise available across the network.

Prioritisation is a highly sensitive topic among donors and the democracy-support community. In consulting widely among such actors for this report, we found diametrically opposed views. Some European democracy supporters insisted that European funders will need to be far tougher in selecting priority cases and withdrawing from contexts where there is a lesser prospect of significant pro-democracy impact. Others were more reluctant to prioritise and argued that all our categories merit more attention and that selecting on the basis of regime dynamics is hard to justify in practice. They argued that even in the most difficult scenarios, donors should stay engaged to mitigate the worst effects of authoritarian repression and establish partnerships that might be activated if and when democratic opportunities appear in the future.

The choice of where to prioritise will depend on many political factors, but two logics can be distinguished.

One logic is to select priorities on the basis of wider strategic goals. If European donors choose this approach, their interventions are likely to continue to span all five categories defined above. In this case, they are likely to prioritise a certain number of countries in each category and can then usefully tailor their aims to the specific features of each. This might, for example, lead to Syria or Ukraine being prioritised because of the regional spillover effects of their political regime dynamics. Adhering to this approach, democracy supporters could usefully identify a modest number of cases of priority importance and dedicate real resources to them, commensurate with their strategic importance. The flipside – and the more difficult aspect of prioritisation – is to leave aside some countries and regions and not try to cover most regions in a formulaic way on the basis that everywhere is important.

The other logic would be to accept the need for prioritisation by regime dynamic and then carefully assess which categories offer the possibility of clearest successful impact. We would suggest that European democracy supporters can probably have the most valuable impact in two categories: stemming early democratic backsliding and taking advantage of democratic openings. This does not mean that the EU and national donors should withdraw completely from all other categories; but such prioritisation would entail being ready to devote significant levels of diplomatic effort, democracy funding, and other development-governance interventions in categories two and five.

Conclusion

The evidence of recent years suggests that democracy aid can have strong positive impacts in some cases but negligible effects in others, depending on many variables, including local political structures and the way in which aid is delivered.²⁴ This situation does not simply require different kinds of intervention across countries, as is commonly argued. It also obliges European democracy supporters to design a more systematic pattern of differentiation in accordance with the evolving regime dynamics that are now apparent around the world.

This report has suggested ways in which the collection of European actors involved in democracy support can tailor their interventions around five dynamics of change. Distinguishing between regime dynamics is complex; analysts and policymakers inevitably draw divisions in different places and in contrasting ways. This template is offered to foster debate and further contributions: the precise categories and distinctions needed may be debated and fine-tuned, but it seems clear that a general ethos of selectivity will be necessary.

To help take such an imperative forward, this report can serve as the basis for a more detailed assessment of current European democracy actions and further brainstorming among the European democracy-support community to imbue a more targeted democracy strategy with meaningful content.

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Notes

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