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REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND DEMOCRACY SUPPORT

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is the result of discussions and consultations held through Working Group 2, which brought together former government representatives and experts from regional and international organisations, civil society, academia, research institutions and philanthropic foundations. The process was led by Richard Youngs and Elena Viudes Egea of the European Democracy Hub, a joint initiative of Carnegie Europe and the European Partnership for Democracy.

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The recommendations reflect the collective input and exchanges that emerged from these discussions and consultations and do not necessarily represent the individual views of all participants.

The report was authored by Richard Youngs and Elena Viudes Egea. It is intended as a contribution to the work of the Global Commission on Democracy and Multilateralism and to the broader debate on the protection and renewal of democracy and multilateralism.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many governments, diplomats, and democracy-support practitioners have had high hopes that regional organisations might help circumvent the current problems of global multilateral cooperation. Such organisations offer certain advantages in the field of democracy support, as measures designed within regions can enjoy greater legitimacy and nuance than those from outside.

At present, regional organisations' democracy policies and practices present a mixed picture. In general, their democracy-support record is cautious and underdeveloped. All regional organisations contain member states with authoritarian and hybrid regimes that have diluted or outright blocked pro-democracy strategies.

The regional organisations discussed here mostly have strong normative commitments to democratic principles and mechanisms aimed at dissuading coup attempts. They are less robust towards some of the major challenges to democracy.

This report shows the advances in and limitations of regional organisations' democracy policies in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe. It notes some recent improvements while also pointing to the ways in which political and geostrategic tensions have militated against fully developed democracy strategies. The report finds positive regional progress in election monitoring and anticorruption, an emerging focus on digital rights, but less developed strategies to protect the rule of law and civic space.

The report examines the main regional bodies in the four continents before zooming out to offer a comparative cross-regional assessment that points to the more generic strengths and weaknesses of the regional dimension of democracy support.

The report finishes with ten policy recommendations. Some of these target specific themes, while others widen the policy lens and consider additional political factors. The former set includes ideas for more democracy funding, upgraded electoral missions, more support for young democracy activists, more focus on digital democracy, and upgraded involvement of civil society. The more ambitious recommendations are that governments committed to democracy develop subregional clusters, share best practices on democracy support across regions, frame democracy as central to regional security, use regional commitments within multilateral bodies, and explore regional variations in democracy.

Regional organisations cannot single-handedly rescue international cooperation on democracy. They can, however, make modest changes to their existing structures that might offer some improvement in their democracy policies. To have a more significant impact on strengthening democracy in their respective domains, regional bodies would need to consider more ambitious, structural changes – notably by framing support for democratic governance as indispensable to such goals as economic integration, political stability, and public security.

INTRODUCTION

Amid a general trend towards greater regionalism in international affairs, regional organisations offer much potential as vehicles for democracy-support policies if their members choose to pursue it. In principle, these bodies offer several advantages in enhancing strategies for defending democratic norms, and most have a range of formal commitments and mechanisms to carry out this aspect of their operations.

This report assesses the evolution of regional organisations' democracy commitments in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe. The analysis draws from interviews and conversations with experts and regional organizations' officials that formed part of a working group set up to help in the report's preparation. The report does not run systematically through every regional organisation but rather focuses on those with the most influence among their members and the most developed democracy toolboxes.

For each region, the report unpacks the organisations' general approaches to democracy support, their democracy-funding mechanisms, and their use of suspension and sanctions mechanisms. It homes in on the six cross-cutting themes identified by the wider Club de Madrid project of which this report is part: electoral integrity, civil rights and freedoms, anticorruption, the rule of law, digital rights, and responses to constitutional breakdowns. The report draws out the strengths and weaknesses of member governments' use of regional bodies and reflects on what these reveal about the potential to strengthen democracy-support policies in the future.

The report concludes with thoughts on how member states might better use regional organisations to improve democracy support – and, more widely, how regional actions might dovetail more effectively with complementary dynamics of multilateralism examined in other strands of the Club de Madrid project. The report is not starry-eyed about the potential of regional organisations: these suffer from deeply rooted structural impediments to democracy support. Yet while many core problems and shortcomings are unlikely to be resolved in the current context, there is scope for member governments to make modest and achievable improvements to regional bodies' democracy strategies. In particular, more mutual learning across different regional organisations on civil rights, digital democracy, and youth democratic participation would be feasible and valuable.

REGIONALISM TRENDS

An increasingly common argument heard among policymakers and experts is that regional cooperation will be vital in many policy areas in the future. As geopolitical rivalries hinder all-inclusive multilateralism cooperation, and with great powers moving towards more hostile and competitive relations with each other, the regional level has become more pivotal. This seems especially clear in trade, economic matters, security, and other domains. An intriguing question is whether it might also be the case for democracy support. In this area of policy, not only is the United Nations (UN) constricted but the pivot by the United States (US) away from democracy promotion also strongly reinforces the potential significance of regional democracy-protection initiatives.

Certainly, the many states that today challenge the liberal order expressly advocate firmer rules on non-intervention in internal affairs, such as democratic politics, regime type, or governance system. Of significance to this paper, many of those deeply sceptical of global cooperation on sensitive issues like democracy and human rights hold regional organisations to carry greater legitimacy in such areas. Regional blocs may emerge as the only place where thicker norms like democracy can be tackled. Many states seem more willing to work on democracy with their regional peers than to accept global initiatives on democracy that involve countries from other regions – especially western nations and former colonial powers.

In this sense, regional organisations serve as the first line of defence for democracy protection, combining regional legitimacy with a capacity for sustained engagement that global organisations and bilateral relationships cannot match. Yet transferring this general sentiment into concrete and operational democracy-support strategies is acutely challenging. Indeed, member states have so far been reluctant to use regional organisations to do so.

The regions studied here – the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe – differ greatly in terms of the institutional arrangements of their organisations and their approaches to securing democracy. There is also regional variation in the democratic challenges faced, from autocratic consolidation and repression to a loss of trust in institutions. But equally, there are overarching challenges common to all regions: executive overreach and weakening checks and balances, election manipulation by internal and external actors, rule-of-law erosion, threats to digital rights and freedoms, and corruption.

THE AMERICAS

Members of the Organization of American States (OAS) have adopted a formally well-designed and richly layered institutional edifice of democracy support. Support for democracy is nominally at the core of the OAS, whose five pillars are promoting democracy, defending human rights, ensuring a multidimensional approach to security, fostering integral development and prosperity, and supporting legal cooperation.[1]

In 2001, OAS member states adopted the Inter-American Democratic Charter, with the central aim of strengthening and upholding democratic institutions and practices. The charter enables the OAS to apply sanctions to address violations of democratic norms and breakdowns of democratic institutions in the organisation's members. The charter can be applied if there is a forcible overthrow of a democratically elected government, an interruption in the democratic order, or an erosion of that order.[2] Although a soft-law instrument, it is legally binding on member states, and it is the most explicit commitment to democracy of any regional organisation.

Still, OAS members' general approach has been to use the organisation for dialogue and mediation, although they have recently considered a new peer-review mechanism, a systematic monitoring framework, and more preventive activation of the charter to pre-empt autocratic relapse. In 2025, the overall budget allocated to the OAS was $92 million, of which only $5.2 million was allotted to the organisation's Secretariat for Strengthening Democracy; the small annual democracy allocation is normally supplemented by some case-by-case contributions.

The second administration of US President Donald Trump has opened much reflection on the future of the OAS's democracy efforts. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has promised US support for democracy through the organisation in principle, committing to work "to uphold the OAS's core mission of defending democracy [and] promoting and protecting human rights" and stating that "the OAS must remain firm in its commitment to promote free and fair elections, and safeguard fundamental freedoms consistent with its founding charter and the Inter-American Democratic Charter".[3] For now, the US has continued its role as the leading funder of the OAS.

However, tensions have appeared. The Summit of the Americas that was due to be held in December 2025 in the Dominican Republic was postponed because of its host's assessment of "the deep divisions that currently complicate productive dialogue in the Americas".[4] Trump's military actions against alleged Venezuelan drug-trafficking boats without due process and the 2026 US extraction of President Nicolás Maduro had divisive spillover effects for the Americas' whole regional system.[5]

Regional experts fear that the OAS's focus on democracy seems to have passed its peak. Many predict that Albert Ramdin, inaugurated as the organisation's secretary general in May 2025, may shift the body's priorities away from democracy protection towards development and other less controversial issues. The current geopolitical tension that derives from the second Trump administration has weakened many Latin American states' acceptance of US-influenced regionalism, and this has negative ramifications for democracy. While OAS officials remain highly active, governments increasingly struggle to reach consensus, and most members have deprioritised democracy in recent times as they focus more on security issues and fighting criminal networks. The challenge for the OAS is to be seen not to act at the behest of a disruptive US administration yet keep the US on board – an extremely thin line to walk.

The OAS has itself become highly politicised and caught in the hemisphere's left-right political battles, with many in Latin America now shifting their attention to subregional frameworks that do not include the US. Experts interviewed for this report said that it was increasingly unrealistic to disentangle democracy instruments from this troubling state of play. In late February 2026, the Trump administration set up a military cooperation initiative with right-wing leaders from across the Americas, with a stated objective to combat drug trafficking. Not all OAS members are involved, and there is a concern that this initiative might reinforce autocratic dynamics in the region.[6]

The OAS has a relatively robust human rights system. In 1979, the organisation established the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to apply the American Convention on Human Rights and other relevant treaties. An Inter-American Commission on Human Rights monitors and reports on human rights abuses. These institutions provide a supranational route for individuals to seek redress for violations of their rights. Cases that involve human rights defenders are frequently taken to the inter-American system. In 2024, the commission defined election observers as human rights defenders, in an important linking of the democracy and human rights agendas.[7]

Venezuela withdrew from the human rights convention in 2013, triggering a legal debate over whether the court still has jurisdiction over violations there.[8] In late 2024, Guatemala asked the court for an advisory opinion on whether states are "obliged to guarantee and promote democracy as a human right protected by the American Convention on Human Rights" and pushed for an affirmation of such a right to democracy.[9]

In addition to the OAS, Latin America has several subregional bodies. Mercosur was inaugurated in 1991 as a regional trade agreement between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. In 1998, in response to an attempted coup in Paraguay, Mercosur's members approved the Ushuaia Protocol. This protocol established the full functioning of democratic institutions as a prerequisite for membership of the bloc and cited the "breakdown of democratic institutions" as grounds for suspending a member.[10] While not as developed as the OAS's human rights protection architecture, Mercosur agreed a binding human rights protocol in 2005 and holds Meetings of High-Level Authorities on Human Rights.[11]

By comparison, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), another regional bloc that includes most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean but not Canada or the US, is much less focused on democracy than the OAS. Democracy is not a requirement for membership of CELAC, and Cuba has been a member since the body was founded.

Meanwhile, the Andean Community (CAN), which comprises four member states, has a democracy policy in the form of a protocol that was agreed in 2000. This protocol establishes democratic institutions and the rule of law as essential for integration within the community and stipulates a range of measures to be taken against members in democratic crises, such as suspension from the CAN's various bodies.[12] The CAN also operates an Andean Charter for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

Electoral integrity

OAS election observation missions are especially well regarded and represent a significant part of the organisation's toolbox. The OAS has deployed 340 such missions since 1962, including 12 in 2025 alone.[13] The OAS Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation has an annual budget of around $1.7 million.[14]

These missions are widely respected leaders in this field and have been highly critical of many elections. OAS missions are seen as pioneers in observing gender participation, media balance, electoral technology, and campaign financing. They have provided substantial technical and administrative support for electoral processes. For example, the OAS assisted Bolivia with technical aspects of updating its voter register and provided Paraguay with an audit of its register, along with recommendations for improvements. Assistance with these activities may reduce real or perceived opportunities for electoral manipulation.[15]

OAS missions are also strong relative to those of other regional organisations in providing quick vote counts, photos of tally sheets, and assertive debunking of fraud claims. In Venezuela, national, regional, and international observation worked well and made a crucial impact in the 2024 presidential election, with the OAS teaming up well with the US Carter Center, for example.

Still, missions require government invitations, and when missions have been critical of elections, some member states limit follow-up. Funding is also tight; the OAS receives only a small percentage of the European Union's (EU's) funding for election observation missions in the region.

In Guatemala's 2023 general election, observers were able to work effectively with local democratic actors. The Honduran general election in late 2025 was more problematic, with rival claims of fraud from different parties. This case represented what is becoming a common situation: elections in Latin America that are broadly free but not entirely fair and fall short of high standards. Here, experts interviewed said that governments needed to keep more of a focus on such concerns between elections in addition to the well-regarded OAS monitoring missions.

Subregional bodies add to this funded support. Mercosur contributes very modestly to election integrity through ParlaSur, its legislative organ. ParlaSur has a Democracy Observatory charged with protecting and promoting the democratic principles established in the Ushuaia Protocol.[16] This body has sporadically held election observation and support missions in 2021, 2022, and 2023 in Ecuador, Brazil, and Peru, respectively.[17]

Civil rights and freedoms

While election observation and technical support for electoral integrity are the best-known aspects of the OAS's work on democracy, the body also offers some support to civil society.[18] This dimension has developed in several Latin American bodies in recent years. Mercosur and the CAN have consultative forums that involve subnational governments, municipalities, and Indigenous groups. Mercosur engages with organised civil society through various avenues, particularly on labour rights.[19] Civil society organisations (CSOs) have in some places been able to influence democracy protection and support, using the regional level to amplify concerns over deteriorating civic freedoms.[20]

In 1999, an OAS resolution defined ways for CSOs to engage formally with the organisation. Registering with the OAS allows CSOs to attend the organisation's Permanent Council and closed-door meetings and gives them some consultation and recommendation functions.[21] To date, more than 700 CSOs have registered with the OAS.[22] Experts note that while this is positive in terms of CSO representation, the formal provisions have not translated into a substantive influence on civil rights.[23] Despite its formal commitments to civil society, the OAS does not have a meaningful, ringfenced budget to support civil rights issues, as the body's member states are not keen to fund such work.[24] Countries beyond the main contributors of the US, Canada, Mexico, and Brazil have been reluctant to step up with higher funding support for such regional programmes.

Meanwhile, CELAC engages with civil society notably through the EU-CELAC Civil Society Forums, which are held alongside high-level summits between the EU and CELAC.[25] In 2025, the forum issued a joint statement calling for greater attention and resources to be allocated to defending civic space and an enabling environment for civil society. Still, CELAC itself has no dedicated fund for civil society on these issues.

The Inter-American Human Rights System includes a special rapporteur on the freedom of expression, whose mandate covers monitoring and promoting the freedom of expression throughout the Americas and producing country and thematic reports.[26] Experts reported in interviews that follow-up from such reports was not significant in terms of concrete improvements in civil rights.

Overall, permanent, funded civil society mechanisms are limited; the role of CSOs in regional organisations in the Americas is mostly consultative; and civil society has a modest formalised influence on democracy-support programming.

Anticorruption

Corruption is a critical issue for democracy in Latin America. Regional bodies in the Americas have some formal programmes on anticorruption, a notable commitment being the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption and its mechanisms of national monitoring and reporting. OAS members adopted the convention in 1996 as the first international anticorruption treaty, and they have made a series of commitments on best practices to fight corruption, including through criminalisation.[27]

Through mutual evaluation and reporting, the mechanism for the convention's implementation supports signatories to review their anticorruption frameworks and undertake legal reforms.[28] Some modest funding goes to the convention and specific measures, such as a mission to support anticorruption in Honduras.[29]

In CELAC, anticorruption strategies include high-level ministerial meetings on preventing and fighting corruption and a working group set up in 2022.[30] In 2018, Mercosur members launched an initiative to enhance cooperation on the identification, freezing, seizure, and forfeiture of assets resulting from transnational organised crime, corruption, and drug trafficking.[31]

The rule of law

Latin American regional organisations allocate small amounts of financial support to training and capacity building for judiciaries. Insiders report that the OAS provides very little funding for rule-of-law issues. Backsliding in many states in the region hinges on political control of judicial authorities, and OAS members have not supported strong regional competencies that might have real bite. There is little funding and there are no conditionality mechanisms tailored specifically to democratic backsliding that occurs when states gradually tighten control over judiciaries. Member states have not responded to this increasingly prevalent trend with concrete responses at the regional level.

However, it is worth mentioning the Justice Studies Center of the Americas (CEJA), created by the OAS in 1999. This mechanism offers technical studies on judiciaries and provides training and technical assistance to governments, judiciaries, public prosecutors' offices, and other judicial institutions. It also facilitates inter-American cooperation and the exchange of experiences and best practices at the regional level.[32]

Digital rights

There is no publicly available information on any OAS strategy for digital democracy as such, and insiders and experts do not seem aware of this being a priority in any concrete sense. However, in October 2025, the OAS published a report on the impact of digital surveillance on the freedom of expression in the Americas that stressed the importance of regional coordination on this challenge.[33]

Meanwhile, CELAC in 2023 launched the EU-LAC Digital Alliance, securing €45 billion ($52 billion) in EU investment for Latin American digital infrastructure until 2027. The alliance focuses on areas including cybersecurity cooperation, e-governance, and data governance, but not so much on digital rights.[34] In May 2025, CELAC countries participated in the China-CELAC Internet Development and Cooperation Forum in the Chinese city of Xi'an, bringing together 400 representatives to discuss cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI) governance, and opportunities for the digital economy.[35]

Responses to constitutional breakdowns

In 1991, OAS member states adopted a resolution that obliged the organisation's Permanent Council and secretary general to act in the event of a "sudden or irregular interruption of the democratic political institutional process or of the legitimate exercise of power by the democratically elected government of any of the OAS member states". Member governments have invoked the Inter-American Democratic Charter on several occasions when democratic constitutions have been threatened. The charter includes mechanisms of consultation and sanctions if a member breaches democratic principles. In 2009, for example, the OAS suspended Honduras after a coup.[36] This was the last clear-cut application of the charter, as political polarisation has made its use impossible since then.

In most cases, the charter merely requires the government concerned to request OAS assistance; the document's lack of a firm definition of democratic breakdown has made it hard to invoke. Meanwhile, the charter's much softer article 20 permits any OAS member or the secretary general to request a collective assessment of the situation. This mechanism was first used against Venezuela in May 2016. But the two-thirds majority of OAS members needed to suspend Venezuela did not materialise, as Bolivia, Nicaragua, and some Caribbean states blocked the move.

Nicaragua voluntarily withdrew from the OAS after its 2021 general election, because the organisation condemned the outcome of the vote. This was the first voluntary exit in OAS history.[37] The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights continues to report democratic abuses in the country, including arbitrary detentions and closing civic space.[38]

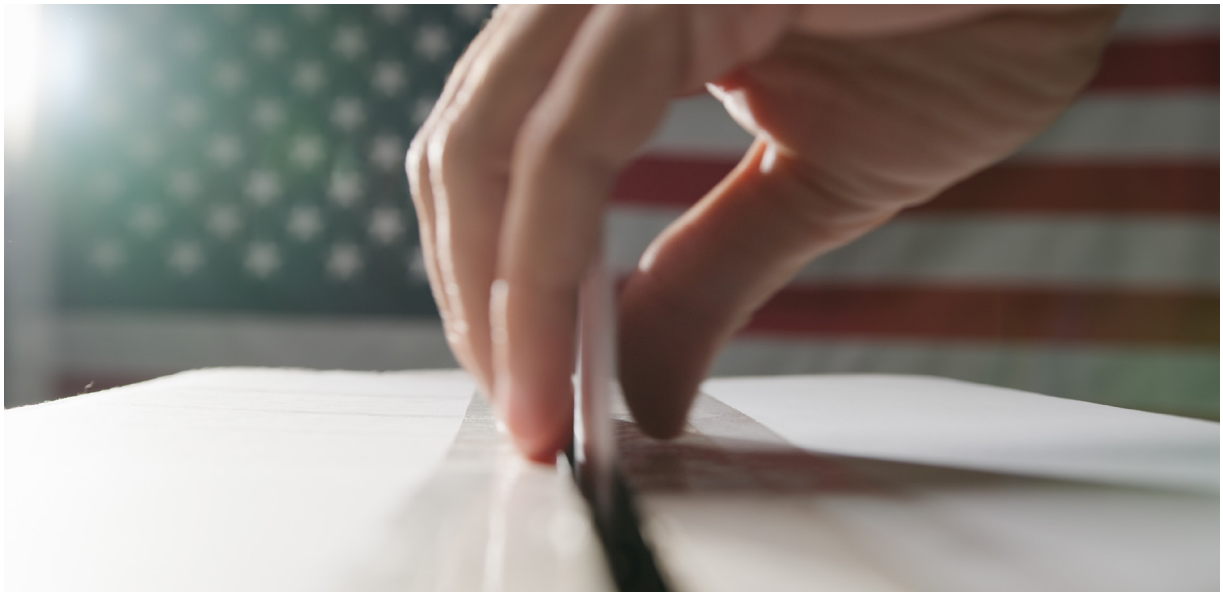
Guatemala, by contrast, was a case of successful pressure. When the Guatemalan government banned opposition forces and attempted to block Bernardo Arévalo's inauguration as president after his 2023 election victory, a comprehensive OAS observation mission – combined with diplomatic pressure and public statements – supported the country's redemocratisation. Observers praised the role of the OAS in Guatemala's political transition as essential for the peaceful establishment of democracy in the country.[39] The body's election observation missions, statements, and pressure urging a peaceful restoration of democratic governance, as well as the mediation of then OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, were factors in driving opposing factions back from mounting tension and looming instability.[40]

The OAS has been critical of the pronounced autocratic drift of El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele. An OAS observation mission documented concerns including a lack of judicial independence, media attacks, and political violence around elections in 2023. Yet OAS governments did not agree to any concrete measures in response to these concerns, despite El Salvador's step-by-step constitutional breakdown.

A common view in the region is that sanctions within the inter-American system now primarily serve a signalling function. Observation reports increasingly identify democratic deterioration without being able to trigger any follow-up action. The region's suspension mechanisms were designed to protect against military takeovers of democratic administrations, not incremental regression by democratically elected governments. These mechanisms help democratic governments appeal for protection from possible coups but do not help countervailing democratic powers against incumbent governments. US disengagement with democracy promotion reinforces this trend. Insiders report that suspension has often prevented the OAS from being able to mediate in crises, and members are now more reluctant to contemplate this option.

In terms of subregional bodies, Mercosur has the broadest commitments to democratic governance but does not have specific standards of constitutional law or processes to determine responses to constitutional breakdowns. Paraguay was suspended from Mercosur from 2012 to 2013 in response to the unconstitutional removal of President Fernando Lugo. Venezuela became a full member in 2013 but was suspended in 2016 – not through the organisation's democracy clause as such but because the Maduro regime failed to implement some reforms required by Venezuela's accession protocol. Since this step, the bloc's policy towards the Maduro regime has been inconsistent.[41]

Finally, the CAN has never invoked its democracy protocol to impose punitive measures. Its responses have been limited to declarations, for example in relation to political irregularities in Ecuador.



AFRICA

The African Union (AU) Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance entered into force in 2012. This was the first binding AU document that addressed democratic governance, condemned unconstitutional changes of government, required democratic elections, and prohibited coup leaders from participating in elections. One of its purposes is to foster continental and regional integration based on shared values. So far, 48 AU member states have signed the charter.

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is a self-assessment tool for democratic and other good-governance standards. APRM member governments agreed to expand the mechanism's mandate in the late 2010s and fully incorporate it into the AU. The APRM now has 43 members out of the AU's 55 countries, although only 26 have undergone a review.[42] The AU's April 2025 strategic plan stresses the need to focus on good-governance issues and align the mechanism with the AU's overarching strategy: "It is critical that the APRM addresses good governance and accountability as part of [the] implementation of AU Agenda 2063's Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan, with a focus on developing more responsive public institutions."[43]

AU member states' approach is rooted in voluntary self-assessment. Governments prefer loose commitments that allow them to maintain flexibility. The charter therefore avoids a tight definition of "culture of democracy" and does not define what constitutes an unconstitutional change of government.[44] Members have resisted various attempts to tighten these definitions and give the charter more teeth, for example through the Malabo Protocol, designed to expand the region's human rights court to include criminal acts, or proposals to give the AU Assembly a stronger role.[45]

AU experts consulted for the report point to the fact that the union is advanced in norm setting, with many formal mechanisms to protect democracy through electoral-integrity initiatives and standards, as well as human rights, but encounters difficulties with the implementation and enforcement of these principles.

The AU does not have a specific budget for democracy funding. Some projects indirectly related to democracy receive support from the AU Peace Fund. The fund stands at just over $300 million, with disbursements of around $15 million allocated in 2025. This fund covers work on peace, mediation, and preventive resolution; very modest democracy components are included in its institutional capacity building and peace-support operations. Two-thirds of the AU's budget comes from external donors, rather than local African contributions to democracy.

Electoral integrity

The AU supports more electoral missions than the OAS, as the AU does not require invitations from the countries holding elections to send observers. The AU deployed election observation missions to 13 out of 15 African countries that held elections in 2024. Yet there is rarely any critical follow-up. The AU was unable to wield a restraining influence in violent and fraudulent elections in 2025 in Uganda and Tanzania; however, it did have a positive impact in Ghana with local monitors, as there was little political manipulation.

The Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is also strong on election-assessment methodology. And in October 2025, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted a resolution that recognised civilian oversight through citizen observers as an essential pillar of electoral integrity.

Civil rights and freedoms

Civil society engagement is well developed in Africa compared with other regions. The AU's Economic, Social, and Cultural Council is a civil society advisory organ whose mandate includes promoting democratic principles; it involves thousands of CSOs and runs annual citizens' forums. A 2015 assessment found that the APRM functioned as a "unique platform for citizens to engage with officials on governance issues".[46]

At the subregional level, ECOWAS supports CSO capacity building for election observation and parliamentary-strengthening programmes. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has institutionalised committees that include civil society representatives. The Pan-African Parliament passes regular resolutions supporting democracy.

Yet actual funding for civic organisations to work on civil rights is negligible, and the AU does not provide information on any dedicated CSO budget. Experts interviewed for this report noted that regional norms on civic freedoms had not been respected by AU members, most of which have dramatically restricted civic space in the last several years. The experts further observed that CSO involvement in regional and subregional bodies was controlled and had done little to limit government clampdowns on genuinely independent civil society.

Anticorruption

On anticorruption, the AU plays a norm-setting role through the 2006 AU Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (AUCPCC), which established the African Union Advisory Board Against Corruption.[47] This autonomous body is charged with promoting anticorruption measures, collecting data on corruption, developing analytical methodologies, and monitoring implementation through states' annual reporting requirements.[48] State parties to the convention are obliged to report to the board annually, with civil society mandated to participate in the monitoring process.

ECOWAS has a Protocol on the Fight Against Corruption, which dates from 2001 but until 2019 faced challenges in reaching the required threshold to come into force.[49] In 2025, ECOWAS strengthened its anticorruption coordination through the Network of Anti-Corruption Institutions in West Africa, establishing a set of guidelines for cross-border cooperation on the investigation and prosecution of corruption.[50]

CSOs across Africa play crucial roles in monitoring implementation through initiatives such as Transparency International's toolkit for promoting the AUCPCC. This documents the advocacy tactics of the organisation's chapters in Côte d'Ivoire, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia focused on money laundering, illicit enrichment, political-party funding, and media engagement.[51]

The anticorruption mechanisms of both the AU and ECOWAS face significant implementation and resource constraints and limited enforcement capacity. ECOWAS has been specifically criticised for failing to address corruption as a root cause of the recent wave of military coups in the Sahel.[52]

The rule of law

The AU identified the rule of law as a central pillar of its Agenda 2063, published in 2013.[53] The AU's approach in this area is mostly centred on formal normative frameworks and judicial mechanisms, rather than concrete programmatic initiatives.

The African Court of Human and People's Rights has a mandate to protect human and peoples' rights by resolving disputes that relate to violations of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. Meanwhile, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights is charged with protecting rule-of-law standards. Although the charter does not refer to the rule of law, the commission has taken it upon itself to promote and

protect the rule of law through resolutions, country visits, and reports.[54]

The Africa Judicial Independence Fund supports rule-of-law projects, but this is not an AU initiative, as it is run by Afrobarometer, a pan-African research network funded by European donors.[55]

Digital rights

AU members have supported the development of legal regulations governing digital transformation, such as the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection, which entered into force in 2023.[56] The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights agreed a 2016 resolution that called on states to guarantee citizens' rights to the freedoms of information and expression on the internet. In 2019, another commission declaration established principles related to internet access, freedom of expression online, the right to anonymity, and privacy and data protection in the digital space.

Beyond formal declarations, the AU has limited means to address the dramatic rise of digital repression and its own member states' use of intrusive digital surveillance.[57] The APRM is currently being widened again to include digital issues and better enforcement, although experts interviewed for this report noted that member governments were reluctant to constrain their own digital actions and sovereignty. The 2025 AU strategic plan stresses digital tools as an opportunity for enhanced voter participation, youth engagement, and accountability.[58] It is not yet clear whether member states will agree to use this opportunity to inject more substance into AU digital rights policies.

Responses to constitutional breakdowns

The AU has used punitive measures against constitutional breakdowns more than other regional organisations. Since the union's inception in 2002, it has imposed sanctions, primarily suspensions, 23 times against 15 of its members.[59] The AU suspended six states – Sudan, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon – following coups from 2019 to 2023.[60] This represents a 92% suspension rate in cases of coups, with sanctions in general applied in almost 70% of such cases, making the AU the regional organisation that has been the most active in imposing sanctions on its members.[61]
Still, limitations remain. AU states agreed to reinstate Egypt after President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi took power in a 2013 coup, despite the charter barring such actions. AU members did not suspend Chad in April 2021 even though there was a military takeover after the death of President Idriss Déby. Zimbabwe faced no action in 2017 despite the military taking control of politics after the ouster of President Robert Mugabe and repressing pro-democracy protests.

In 2025, the AU suspended Madagascar when pro-democracy protests prompted the military to take power, while SADC did not suspend the country. Experts have warned that the AU needs to ensure the military government follows the agreed road map for a transition, given recent examples of military takeovers in west Africa.[62] AU member states did not support action in response to conflict, killings, and a breakdown of order in Ethiopia.

In terms of wider democratic breakdowns in other contexts, inconsistency prevails. Like the OAS, the AU has struggled to devise responses tailored to less dramatic breakdowns in democratic order, and its approaches are more reactive than preventive.

Subregional organisations show dramatic variation. ECOWAS has suspended west African members after coups, including Guinea in 2021, Gambia in 2017, Burkina Faso in 2015, and Mali in 2012. The bloc's 2017 intervention in Gambia, where ECOWAS credibly threatened military force, successfully pressured President Yahya Jammeh to accept electoral defeat and go into exile.

In response to the 2023 coup in Niger, ECOWAS issued an unprecedented seven-day ultimatum threatening a military intervention, imposed its strictest-ever sanctions (border closures, a no-fly zone, the suspension of financial transactions, and electricity cut-offs), and activated standby forces. But then the bloc did not act in follow-up to this, and sanctions fuelled support for the country's junta. Mali and Burkina Faso then formed a mutual-defence pact with Niger, warning they would fight the ECOWAS intervention. In September 2023, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso withdrew from the bloc and created the Alliance (later Confederation) of Sahel States. By February 2024, ECOWAS members agreed to lift most sanctions.

In response to the military coup in Guinea-Bissau in November 2025, ECOWAS members suspended the country and sent a high-level mediation mission, which was unable to reach a breakthrough.[63] The AU also suspended Guinea-Bissau. The country's military junta proposed a transition programme, including elections in December 2026, which ECOWAS rejected.[64] Stepping back from punitive sanctions, the bloc called for the release of political prisoners and a transition to an inclusive government, and proposed another high-level mission to the country to engage with the military authorities.[65]

A coup attempt in Benin in late 2025 prompted a strong response from ECOWAS, which deployed its standby force troops and the Nigerian Air Force at the request of the Beninese government.[66] The coup attempt was orchestrated by a faction of the Benin Armed Forces, which cited as its motive the worsening security situation in the north of the country due to active jihadist groups.

Critics have highlighted that the responses to both the coup in Guinea-Bissau and the coup attempt in Benin reflect a structural issue with ECOWAS's approach to democratic breakdowns in its member states. While responses to coups and violence can be strong, underlying democratic regressions that predate coups normally receive limited engagement from ECOWAS members.[67]

SADC has been weaker in its responses. A SADC electoral mission was highly critical of Zimbabwe's August 2023 general election, but the organisation took no further action. Zimbabwe arrested hundreds of activists, opposition members, and journalists ahead of SADC's August 2024 summit in Harare; rights groups called for the summit to be moved, but governments ignored this plea. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa assumed the SADC chairmanship despite democratic violations, and the organisation issued no public condemnation of human rights crackdowns.

ASIA

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 with a mission aimed mainly at accelerating economic and social development through trade and maintaining peace. The association's key rationale was to stand against external intervention by large powers, and democracy promotion as such was not part of its agenda. ASEAN was founded on a premise of noninterference in the internal affairs of its members as a key principle for collaboration.[68]

In 2007, member governments agreed to revise the ASEAN Charter to include a formal commitment to democratic principles. Pushed by Indonesia and the Philippines, this move seemed to represent a "cautious liberal turn" and a new era of democracy support.[69] This commitment is based mainly on nonintrusive, informal dialogue between governments – habitually referred to as "the ASEAN way". Consensus rather than intervention or pressure is the core approach.[70]

ASEAN commitments have evolved over the years. Indonesia, in particular, has pushed rights issues onto the agenda, and the organisation has issued declarations and adopted frameworks on matters such as human trafficking, transnational crime, migrant workers, and disability rights. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) has gained some traction, and ASEAN commitments have been a factor in the creation and strengthening of national human rights commissions in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand and committees in Cambodia and Vietnam. The commissions of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand have acquired accreditations that they are independent according to UN standards, while the institutions of Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam have not.[71]

ASEAN has less than $5 million of direct institutional funding at its disposal. There is an ASEAN fund for the AICHR that supports some human rights dialogue programmes, although the association does not have a dedicated democracy budget as such. Unlike the other regional organisations examined in this report, ASEAN has no formal suspension mechanism, no binding human rights court, no enforcement tools, and no way to tie the benefits of membership to democratic compliance. With the bloc operating by consensus, any member can veto action. ASEAN has five authoritarian members: Myanmar (a military junta), Cambodia (a one-party dynasty), Laos, Vietnam (communist states), and Brunei (an absolute monarchy).

Timor-Leste, considered one of the strongest democracies in the region, joined the bloc in October 2025.[72] Myanmar's military junta was initially opposed to this because of Timor-Leste's engagement with the shadow government and resistance groups in Myanmar.[73] However, after a rapprochement, membership was finally granted to Timor-Leste as the group's 11th member.[74] Democratic reformers hope that the country, whose history of liberation from colonialism and conflict has made it an outspoken advocate of human rights and democracy, will bring a new democratic impulse to the organisation.

Indeed, in February 2026, authorities in Timor-Leste initiated legal proceedings against Myanmar's military junta under universal jurisdiction for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The action came after a submission from the Chin Human Rights Organization, which represents the rights of the Chin minority in Myanmar.[75] The move is unprecedented in ASEAN's history and was applauded by human rights groups in the region, like the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights.[76] Myanmar's military junta retaliated by expelling Timor-Leste's head diplomat and accusing the country of violating the ASEAN Charter's fundamental principle of nonintervention.[77] Human rights observers and organisations have urged ASEAN to support Timor-Leste's pressure against military atrocities in Myanmar.[78] Yet regional experts consulted for the report say this is highly improbable given ASEAN's diplomatic tradition of noninterference.

Many of those involved in ASEAN continue to see the association's informal and consensual approach as a strength rather than a weakness, and a counter to what they see as the western neocolonialist approach to democracy promotion: a distinct form of regional corporatism that prioritises consensus and noninterference over more interventionist policies. ASEAN members' inclination to emphasise sovereignty is seen as a foundational principle that allows democratisation processes to occur at the national and regional levels.[79]

Electoral integrity

There is no formal framework or mandate for regional election observation in Asia, although ASEAN debates often help build attention on key elections.[80] The ASEAN Regional Forum – a multilateral venue for official consultations on peace and security – sent election missions to Myanmar and Timor-Leste in 2012, but a 2015 push by the Philippines for an ASEAN network of election monitoring bodies and a new remit for election observation on the organisation's political cooperation agenda won little support from other members.[81] In 2016, the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025 proposed merely that member states share information and best practices on electoral observation.[82]

There is a concern that ASEAN's authoritarian members have been able to use the few election observations that have been deployed to legitimise their power. In October 2025, ASEAN declined an invitation to send observers to Myanmar's December 2025 elections for this reason and insisted that the elections must be preceded by a cessation of violence and inclusive political dialogue.[83]

In Asia, electoral integrity is supported mostly through nongovernmental organisations and grassroots movements, such as the Asian Network for Free Elections, Lokniti in India, and the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections in the Philippines.[84]

Civil rights and freedoms

There has been a proliferation of civil society engagement in southeast Asia through groups such as the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, who are vocal in their advocacy of a more democratic ASEAN and a more direct approach to human rights and democracy in ASEAN members.[85] The ASEAN People's Forum provides annual gatherings alongside official meetings, albeit with limited formal influence. Parallel civil society summits are run through the ASEAN Civil Society Conference.

However, these organisations operate outside ASEAN's formal decision-making structures, and the bloc focuses overwhelmingly on state-to-state diplomacy and cooperation. Funding for democratic activists is not offered at significant levels. The possibility of support for Indonesia's protesters in 2025 did not make it onto the ASEAN agenda because of member states' opposition. Some writers have expressed concern that ASEAN's nondemocratic members have increasingly helped each other in recent years by extraditing democratic opposition figures or preventing them from travelling.[86]

Anticorruption

The anticorruption agencies of ASEAN members cooperate through ASEAN Parties Against Corruption. This network emerged from a memorandum of understanding among some national agencies and evolved into a more structured institution with multiannual strategies and regular meetings. Through this forum, member states share best practices, conduct capacity-building workshops, and coordinate on transnational corruption issues.[87] Members have declined to develop concrete support and conditionality mechanisms, however.

The rule of law

The rule of law is formally enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. Judicial cooperation occurs through the ASEAN Senior Law Officials Meeting, the ASEAN Conference on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, and the Council of ASEAN Chief Justices. The latter collaborates with the AICHR on sharing technical expertise and good practices on human rights matters, particularly concerning children, women, and disabled people.[88]

Digital rights

ASEAN has several frameworks for digital governance, including the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030 for digital development in the region. The association has some formal measures relating to online disinformation and harmful content, like the ASEAN 2035 Vision on the information and media sector and the ASEAN Guideline on Management of Government Information in Combating Fake News and Disinformation in the Media.[89] However, CSOs note that these measures are ineffective in protecting citizens' digital rights.[90] Digital policies in the region do little to include nonstate actors or address democratic rights issues online.[91]

Responses to constitutional breakdowns

As the ASEAN response to constitutional breakdowns continues to be shaped by the norm of noninterference, the organisation uses punitive measures less frequently than many other regional bodies.

In Myanmar, the ASEAN leadership insists it is committed to supporting "the principles of democracy and constitutional government, respect for fundamental freedoms, and the promotion and protection of human rights".[92] An ASEAN special envoy has overseen mediation and humanitarian assistance and the agreement of a five-point plan with Myanmar's government.[93] Some experts consulted stressed the value of this process of dialogue and mediation between government authorities and ethnic groups.

Since 2022, ASEAN has barred Myanmar's junta from its summits, despite the absence of formal suspension mechanisms, although a nonpolitical permanent secretary attended the October 2024 summit in Vientiane. Still, the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights advocacy group has been especially critical of the organisation's lack of concrete action in the face of flagrant violations of human rights in Myanmar and other authoritarian regimes.[94]

EUROPE

Democratic values are enshrined in the EU treaties and have long been a core part of the union's self-identity. While other regional organisations are largely concerned with democracy in their own regions, the EU has both an internal and an external democracy commitment. For many years, the EU's democracy support was focused almost exclusively outside the union; this has begun to change quite dramatically in the last several years as democratic regression has become a challenge in Europe too.

The situation in Europe is complex, as there are several institutional layers of democracy policies. Some aspects of policy are centralised in the European Commission, with notable supranational elements, unlike other regional organisations. At the same time, most EU member states run their own national democracy policies separately. Nearly all European governments have introduced some form of national democracy plan in recent years, and over half have external democracy-promotion strategies as well. This division can work both to democracy's advantage and to its disadvantage: when the EU cannot act, individual members often advance democracy support on their own; conversely, some members regularly undercut the EU's regional democracy commitments in their national foreign policies.

The EU is currently undergoing a shift towards a more security-focused identity, as it feels increasingly threatened by a realpolitik world for which it seems ill equipped, underscored by Russia's attacks on Ukraine's democratic aspirations. The EU often frames this shift as necessary to protect democratic values, but the geopolitical and democracy strands of the union's identity sit increasingly ill together. This shift has wider implications for the broader question of how far regional organisations can help protect democratic norms.

At the core of the EU's general approach to democracy support is enlargement. The EU sets democracy conditions for states wishing to join the bloc, and this has been by far the EU's most effective democracy-promotion tool, helping central and eastern Europe states democratise. The EU launched a widened enlargement process in 2022, with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as new candidates alongside the western Balkan states and Turkey. The EU's accession offer has prompted democratic reforms in some states, like Moldova, Ukraine, Montenegro, and Albania, while in others it has failed to stem autocratic trends: Turkey, Serbia, and Georgia. The EU is currently sharpening its enlargement processes to make them more effective in incentivising democratisation.

The commission's large-scale funding for candidate countries finances democratic reforms as part of its wide-ranging programme of preparing states for EU membership. EU funding related to accession has been especially notable in protecting Moldova's democracy from Russian interference and in maintaining some democratic momentum in Ukraine in the midst of war. This funding is heavily geared towards formal institutional reforms while supporting civil society in helping countries prepare for membership.

Adding together commission funds and member states' democracy aid, total European funding for democracy is around €3–4 billion ($3.5–4.6 billion) a year. Several EU members, including high democracy spenders like Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark, along with France, and non-EU donors like the UK, Switzerland, and Norway have all reduced their bilateral democracy aid in the last two years. European aid for democracy is a tiny share, well under 1%, of overall European funding for development, migration control, security, and climate change.

Beyond the EU, the Council of Europe is a regional organisation that largely overlaps with the union but includes additional members. The EU channels some of its funds through the Council of Europe to implement some rule-of-law work. One of the Council of Europe's main features is its European Court of Human Rights, which is fundamental to the human rights protection architecture in Europe and has extensive jurisprudence that protects political and electoral rights, notably the freedoms of speech, assembly, and association.[95]

The Council of Europe was seen as a way of covering work in Russia and other eastern European states outside the EU. The council suspended Russia in 2022, and with political problems and backsliding in other states too, the body has faced a difficult challenge to maintain momentum. It is currently working on a Pact for Democracy with parameters that states might use to assess their own democratic quality, but this is a voluntary notion and not a direct means of imposing conditions for reform.

Electoral integrity

The EU deploys between eight and 10 election observation missions a year in third countries; in 2025, it carried out eight. Like other organisations, the union has developed sophisticated methods for these missions, deploying them over long cycles and focusing on online operations around elections. In recent years, however, the EU has often not implemented concrete measures when its observation missions have detected serious electoral irregularities.

The EU does not fund election observation programmes in Europe. Elections in Europe are observed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which has 57 members across Europe, the Americas, and Central Asia. The OSCE's democracy-support work is coordinated mostly through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which is best known for its election observation work. The 1990 Copenhagen Document gave the OSCE a mandate to carry out election observation missions in all member states and outlines binding commitments for members regarding democratic governance and election observation.[96] The ODIHR also supports the modernisation of electoral technology.[97]

Geopolitical factors have sapped momentum from the OSCE, and practitioners in the field concur that the organisation has lost relevance in recent years. Resistance from authoritarian members has complicated its work on electoral integrity and other issues.

In line with their mandate, OSCE missions offer detailed descriptive and technical reports. The OSCE itself is not an actor that takes political action, but its reports inform EU and national governments' responses. In Georgia in 2024, the OSCE mission helped reveal the extent of the incumbent government's election manipulation, and although its own report was worded carefully, the EU eventually followed through with a critical response. Still, given its membership, the OSCE is generally seen as being in crisis and not highly relevant to a future-facing, positive revival of democracy support.

Civil rights and freedoms

The EU is the only regional organisation considered here that allocates significant amounts of its own funds to civil society for both internal and external democracy projects. The commission runs a Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values (CERV) programme in EU members, with €1.5 billion ($1.7 billion) for the period 2021–27.[98] This supports civic pluralism, online protections, and local civil society groups through sustained, long-term funding.

Externally, the EU has two relevant budget lines under its Global Europe aid framework, each worth €1.5 billion ($1.7 billion): one for democracy and human rights, the other for civil society. A key feature of EU funding is that it can be spent without approval from third-country governments, unlike most UN funding. In the EU budget for 2027, both of these programmes are set to disappear. The commission insists that democracy funding will be mainstreamed under standard aid programmes; democracy groups are not reassured.

Both internally and externally, EU funds have gradually shifted to smaller, grassroots civic organisations, and the bloc has found innovative ways of getting money to such groups. The EU has struggled, however, to support protest movements as these have spread – and, indeed, most European governments remain ambivalent about such protests.

The rule of law

The rule of law is also a notable EU focus. Since 2020, the union has adopted yearly rule-of-law reports to assess each member state's shortcomings across four key areas: the justice system, the anticorruption framework, media pluralism and freedom, and other institutional issues related to checks and balances.[99] In 2022, these reports started to include nonbinding recommendations and also examined candidate countries.[100]

The Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law, known as the Venice Commission, helps states at the technical level to bring their legal and institutional structures into line with European and international standards in the fields of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The commission does not have material instruments of democracy support but issues opinions and lists rule-of-law criteria that can then be used diplomatically by Council of Europe members – or, most often, the EU.

The European Commission has somewhat belatedly begun to deploy reactive punitive conditionality measures related to rule-of-law violations.[101] In 2022 and 2023, the commission used multiple instruments to withhold €28 billion ($32 billion) from the Hungarian government from various funding streams, and in 2024 it removed €1 billion ($1.1 billion) of this funding permanently.[102] The commission has also launched multiple legal proceedings against Hungary and imposed fines on it for rule-of-law infringements. In 2023, the commission froze €110 billion ($126 billion) in funds to Poland in the run-up to a key parliamentary election that saw the defeat of the autocratic Law and Justice (PiS) government. More recently, the commission has either temporarily held back funding or threatened punitive measures against Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia.

Rule-of-law conditionality is still subject to limitations. It applies only to a small portion of the EU budget and can be invoked only on specific, technical issues. The commission is currently pushing to extend rule-of-law conditionality to all EU funding mechanisms. If it succeeds in doing this, the widened scope could have a major impact.

Digital rights

Of the thematic issues examined in this report, the area of EU policy that has developed most notably is digital rights. In November 2025, EU leaders presented a European Democracy Shield, aimed at countering external online interference.[103] The shield is the most advanced effort to protect the information space; strengthen institutions, elections, and free and independent media; and boost societal resistance and citizens' engagement. It promises to combine existing measures under the EU's Digital Services Act with new provisions on AI. Under the shield's rubric, the EU will open a new European Centre for Democratic Resilience to support members and neighbouring countries alike in countering information manipulation.

Flanking the shield is a range of EU regulatory measures to influence the actions of large tech companies. The EU's Digital Services Act and European Media Freedom Act make large social media platforms more responsible for their content and toughen their transparency requirements. This is relevant to electoral integrity, as the commission has stepped up deployment of its legal instruments to protect key European elections from gatekeepers' distortive interventions.[104]

Responses to constitutional breakdowns

Debates in the EU have centred on responding to incremental democratic regression rather than outright constitutional breakdowns. Unlike the OAS and the AU, the EU has not ejected any members; coups and the like have not occurred, and anyway the EU has not had the will or instruments to expel countries like Poland and Hungary that have suffered the most pronounced backsliding.

In its external policies, the EU has been sparing in its use of strongly punitive measures related to major breakdowns of democratic constitutions. Every EU external agreement has a democracy and human rights clause that allows the union to suspend diplomatic relations. In practice, the EU invokes this clause only very rarely: it has not been used for nearly a decade. The EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime has operated since 2020 but targets individuals rather than systemic breakdowns.

The EU also has a system of trade preferences – the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) – but has been reluctant to expel beneficiaries from this; the last time it removed trade preferences was in 2020 against Cambodia. The EU has recently tilted GSP conditionality towards partner countries' willingness to control migration, as this has become a more tangible priority than democracy support.

THEMATIC ASSESSMENT

Except for ASEAN, the regional organisations examined in this report have developed norms and tools that cover the six challenges to democracy. Yet the willingness of member states to use regional diplomacy as an important tool to address democratic crises and backsliding is circumscribed. It is striking that regional organisations allocate virtually no dedicated funding to democracy work. Nor have they developed especially effective or meaningful conditionality mechanisms directly attached to these issues; conditionality is anyway of limited potential when funds are negligible. The exception to this is the EU, but even its record is patchy in limiting democratic backsliding.

Breakdown of constitutional order

The use of sanctions and suspension clauses is inconsistent in all regional organisations. This is not to say these instruments have been entirely without bite. The OAS helped pull Guatemala back from an authoritarian swing, the EU helped nudge Poland back onto a more democratic path, and African bodies have helped keep pressure on nondemocratic regimes to some extent. Yet none of these organisations has found an efficient or consistent way of dealing with this issue because of their member states' varied stances on this question.

The AU and the OAS have notably strong and assertive formal democracy frameworks but suffer from inconsistent application. Despite using sanctions against coups regularly, the AU still struggles with undemocratic changes of government.[105] Suspension mechanisms have been ineffective because they generally require unanimity, because many members are reluctant to adopt punitive measures against others, and because much autocratisation today is gradual rather than sudden.

Civil rights

Most of the regional organisations examined have gradually increased the involvement of civil society, and this has pushed democracy issues into a more prominent role. The exception is ASEAN, which has remained very statist, with notable civil society forums outside its formal structures. Still, in most cases, funding for civil rights issues makes up a small share of allocations and is almost negligible in its reach. Civil society involvement is limited: member state barriers persist in all cases, especially with closing civic space and governments using so-called foreign-agent laws to limit CSO operations in all of these regions.

Several regional human rights courts have developed jurisprudence that is helpful for individual civil rights cases, and human rights activists refer to regional bodies' basic norms in trying to protect their actions. Yet experts interviewed reported that this had not percolated to help for civic freedoms at a systemic level and, indeed, that regional courts were largely powerless in halting spiralling restrictions on civic space across all regions.

In particular, none of the regional organisations has done a good job of involving youth civic groups or protecting the rights of young people. Experts and practitioners in the regions agree this is an oversight and that young people are likely to lead democracy actions – as they always have done. Yet all interlocutors complained that regional integration bodies continue to be rather elitist, closed, and dominated by older generations.

It is important to not overly idealise young people. Still, the lack of youth engagement in regional bodies' democracy work is a glaring oversight that does not chime well with dynamics on the ground. None of the bodies has done anything to support the civil rights of Gen Z protests, for example, despite these being a driving force for positive change. Looking ahead, structures need to adapt to enable more engagement with such mobilisations.

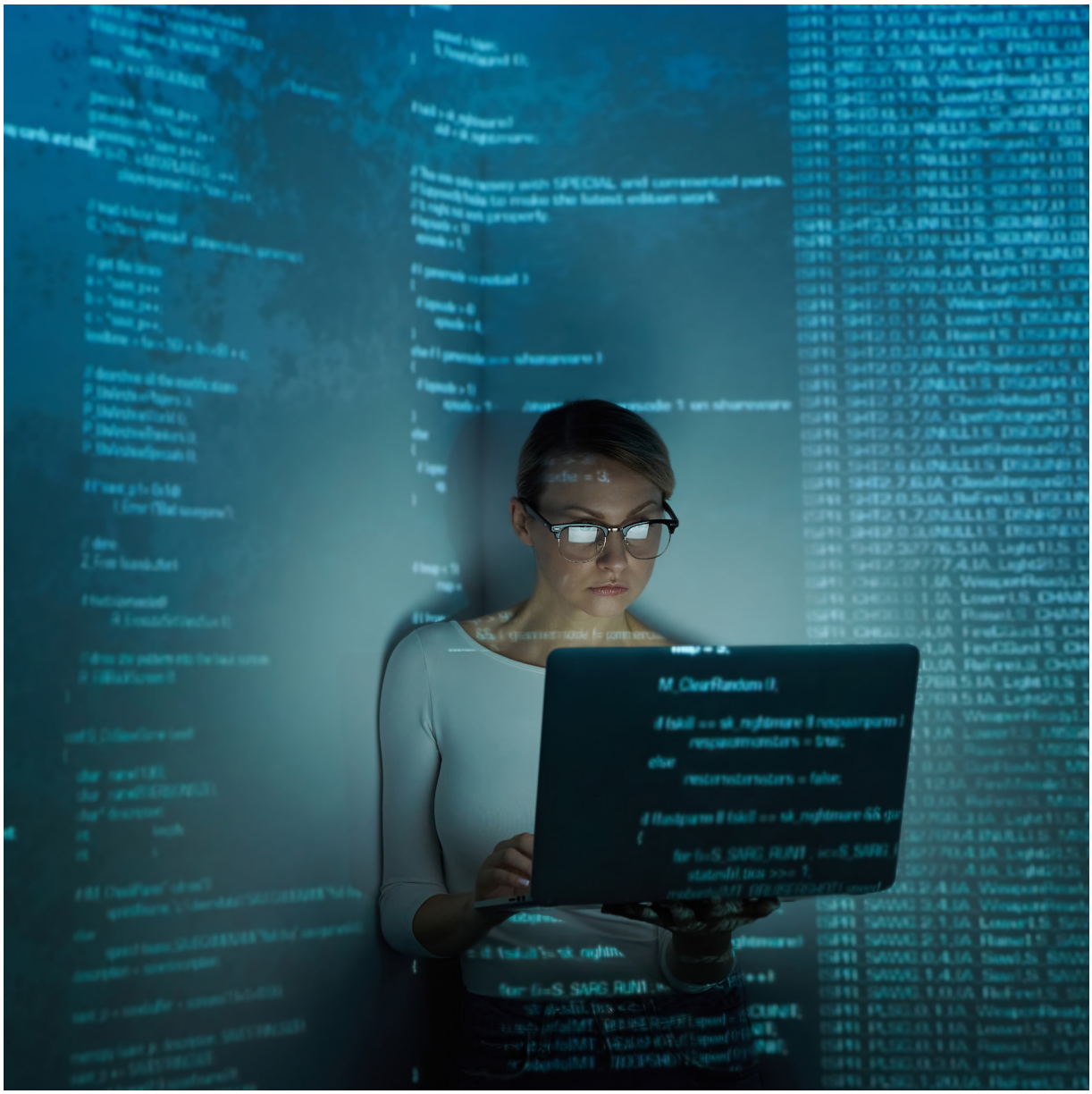
Limited support mechanisms

With the exception of the EU, regional organisations have not made any meaningful amounts of funding available for the themes of corruption, the rule of law, or digital rights. Member states have been reluctant to fund regional organisations to work in detail on anticorruption issues. While all blocs have formal commitments, statements, and conventions on anticorruption, they lack significant funding to support implementation, enforcement, or follow-up mechanisms that would make these commitments more than loose statements of intent. Experts interviewed expressed concerns that without such practical support, autocratic members often used regional conventions and general norm-setting frameworks to boost their own anticorruption drives in a way that protects nondemocratic power structures.

Similarly, while regional organisations have moved to define standards for digital issues, none – with the partial exception of the EU – has well-developed funded strands of work on the democratic aspects of digital issues, as member states seek to tighten their tech sovereignty. Their norm setting refers a great deal to cybersecurity and safety, but regional organisations have yet to focus on helping more citizens get online and use digital platforms in a positive way for better-quality deliberation.

Election observation is funded in the OAS and the AU, but even here with only limited amounts of money. Indeed, most funding for this valuable and more advanced thematic strand of work in the Americas and Africa tends to come from donors outside the two regions. The missions have become more sophisticated but have struggled to make headway against member states' own electoral manipulation. What is more, in interviews, experts expressed concerns that this heavier focus on elections than on other themes neglected the trend towards member governments allowing more-or-less free elections while tightening executive control through other means.

It is remarkably difficult to get information on funding from any of the regional bodies. Much of the funding that is made available comes from western donors, not from the regions themselves. This means that regional organisations' funded democracy programmes are, for the most part, really western democracy support channelled through regional bodies. The limited financing available means that regional organisations have a constrained capacity to engage in a strong, detailed, and sustained way on the specific themes identified by the Club de Madrid project of which this report is a part: election integrity, corruption, the rule of law, and digital democracy.



GENERAL POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The six themes cannot be considered in isolation from the deeper political factors that condition the role of regional organisations. Most regional bodies have added to and improved their democracy-support instruments over recent years. Yet all these regions have suffered ongoing democratic erosion, and national governments have prevented their respective regional organisations from tackling this trend in any decisive way. What is more, this backsliding has in turn rebounded to make regional bodies' democracy policies more contested and problematic.

It is well known that the EU has the most institutionalised and wide-ranging democracy toolbox, but the bloc has failed to deal effectively with autocratic trends in some of its members or the rise of far-right parties. The OAS has the most explicit regional democratic mandate and is admired for its professional capacity for election observation, but Venezuela's and Nicaragua's successful resistance to OAS pressure shows the bloc's weakness.

In Africa, the AU and subregional organisations have developed strong anti-coup norms, yet the 2020–24 Sahel coups showed regional bodies' inability to craft a successful defence of democracy. ASEAN's noninterference doctrine, authoritarian member vetoes, and requirement for consensus have reduced the effectiveness of democracy support and, in the case of Myanmar, have not halted gross human rights violations.

Internal not global

In nearly all organisations, democracy support is limited to policies focused on the respective region itself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the EU is the only regional body with a policy and funded programmes of external democracy support. In general, regional organisations have not emerged as actors engaged with an agenda of global democracy support. They focus on coups, elections, and standard setting in their own regions but have not emerged as actors with instruments relevant to defending democracy more globally.

Weak regional integration

Most regional organisations do not have a particularly deep level of supranational integration, and this lessens their potential for effective democracy support. Most regional bodies focus primarily on economic integration. Divergences among their members have weakened the responses to crises in particular countries. In all regions, large states often view the regional organisations primarily as instruments to amplify their own influence, which can constrain collective action on democracy.

Compliance with democratic norms set at the regional level is contingent on the wider benefits of regional integration, as elites calculate the costs and benefits of adhering to aspirational standards and commitments that mostly lack automatic implementation mechanisms. When democracy commitments are not embedded in a wider set of integrative commitments, benefits, and policy trade-offs, the incentive for member governments to comply is weaker.

A central need is deeper regional integration across the board, and democracy commitments would flow from this. It is difficult to develop strong democracy measures when regional projects themselves are so fragile and contested, and without democracy commitments being framed as core to regional security, stability, and shared economic prosperity.

Integral to this, in all regional organisations' substantive decisions, some members have blocked measures and initiatives on democracy. In some cases, just one or two states are the blockers; in others, they are in a majority. More specifically, there is one striking curiosity across the board: the most effective democracy policy of all regional organisations is the EU's enlargement process, and yet no other body is in a position to replicate this, as they do not have this expanding dynamic.

Noninterference

Member governments promote voluntarism in regional organisations as a strong feature, but it is hard to detect the benefits of this approach in terms of concrete democratic outcomes. The trend-setting African Peer Review Mechanism has suffered a loss of momentum in recent years as governments have weakened its bite. ASEAN prides itself on being a much looser, noninterventionist body, but it has scored few effective outcomes on democracy. Election monitoring is a strong point of regional bodies in Latin America and Africa, but this ethos of voluntarism and noninterference prevents them from having tangible impacts.

Geopolitics

Those involved in regional organisations point to the increasingly negative impact of US involvement. US dominance in the OAS creates imbalances, problems, and resentment among other members. With the Trump administration's current policies, the OAS is likely to be in for a rough ride in the next few years. The shift in US policies is also having a divergent impact among European, Asian, and African governments.

More generally, China has managed to drive wedges in all of these regional organisations, widening differences on many issues, including democracy support. Experts interviewed lamented that all regions were more internally divided today than a decade ago, with member states moving in different directions as they scramble to adjust to the new geopolitical context. While regional organisations offer potential to overcome blockages in global multilateral bodies, they are still infected by geopolitical rivalries and power shifts.

Regional vs. subregional bodies

In some regions, there is overlap between the main regional organisation and subregional bodies. This can be a strength: in some instances, the subregional bodies have acted in ways that the bigger, pan-regional organisation cannot. Yet at the same time, better coordination is needed to ensure that the regional and subregional levels do not overlap in harmful ways and that they coordinate their democracy work better.

Europe is an exception, as it has bodies with wider memberships – the Council of Europe and the OSCE – alongside the EU and might benefit from having smaller subregional groupings of informal democracy-related clusters.

Democratic renewal

There is still a disconnect between regional measures and debates about the need for democracy itself to change. Strangely, while all regions assert the importance of region-specific, non-western models of democracy – with most being highly critical of the western template of liberal democracy – there is no evidence that any of them have supported the practical development of such alternative models through concrete policy initiatives.

TEN IDEAS FOR PROTECTING REGIONAL DEMOCRACY

Most regional organisations are facing profound challenges to their core institutional templates for cooperation. These challenges are unlikely to be resolved in any definitive manner and will continue to militate against high-profile and decisive regional democracy strategies. In the absence of a far-reaching reinvention of regional integration projects, the most that can be achieved specifically for democracy-support policies is to sharpen existing tools and build stronger political will among member states while finding ways to circumvent the obstacles that have weighed against more effective regional policies in recent years.

We propose ten ideas to help protect regional democracy. The first five relate to the core themes of the Club de Madrid project, while the last five flow from wider political considerations.

1. Thematic democracy funds

Each regional organisation needs a dedicated democracy fund with ringfenced resources to give substance to the themes of civic freedoms, anticorruption, the rule of law, and digital rights. These funds should ensure that greater resources are allocated to formal and informal, governmental and nongovernmental, regional and local actors working on these core issues. Without such funds, regional bodies' democracy commitments will continue to lack weight.

The sums involved in democracy support are generally not large compared with other areas of government spending, and the members of regional blocs are well resourced enough to dedicate some money to these issues, which they declare rhetorically to be priorities. Additional funds might come from the private sector and philanthropists in the regions. Regional organisations will gain legitimacy if funds come from within each region rather than from the west.

2. Upgraded electoral missions

Regional organisations' election observation missions need more meaningful amounts of dedicated funding and better follow-through. More pressure is needed to ensure that independent national election bodies underpin regional election work. Rules for deploying missions need to be more flexible and designed for the long term. Missions must also be accompanied by follow-up, especially the capacity to mediate between rival political parties. More computer engineering capacity needs to be integrated into regional missions to contain digital interference in elections. And security for observers needs to be beefed up.

3. Civil rights through youth participation

The most effective agents for protecting and deepening civic freedoms are the youth groups that have mobilised across all regions in recent years, usually with no support from their respective regional organisations. Youth for Democracy initiatives could be set up across the regional blocs, with a focus on Gen Z mobilisations and leadership training for civil rights and core freedoms. A comparative initiative could work on factors that drive youth disillusionment across the regions. Links between emerging political activists should be cultivated through the regional organisations.

4. Digital democracy

All regional organisations need to move beyond their highly formal and technocratic approach to digital regulation and standard setting, which has been largely ineffectual. Instead, they should work much more on wider democratic renewal and civic education and, especially, explore how digital technology might foster new kinds of democratic practice and new models of democracy tailored to each region. One idea would be to fashion this approach as an outgrowth of the trade and economic cooperation that has blossomed recently within regional bodies – unlike the democracy agenda.[106]

5. Civil society scrutiny of core themes

Civil society bodies could develop their own more systematic monitoring of regional organisations' democracy commitments across the themes identified in this report. Governments have been reluctant to allow most regional organisations to make CSOs full partners in democracy policies; actors in the civic sphere could prepare systematic yearly reports that evaluate each organisation's strategies on the rule of law, digital rights, corruption, civic freedoms, and prevention of democratic breakdowns. Funds should be available for advocacy campaigns around these reports.

6. Subregionalism

States keen to upgrade their democracy support will need to focus more on subregional groupings as a way to circumvent blockages to democracy policies at the regional level. As autocracy rises and hampers the main regional bodies, smaller clusters of like-minded states might be the best means of developing more effective democracy support. They could help frame democracy as a precursor to cooperation on security and economic issues and regionalism's supposed core rationale. This might be termed "plurilateral regionalism".

7. Regional learning of best practices

Building on subregionalism, a network of civic actors from different regions should work together to draw out best practices from the regional bodies and push for stronger regional components to the global democracy agenda. This effort should focus, among other things, on best practices for democracy clauses with teeth and for anticorruption strategies, the latter being a particularly striking blind spot of regional organisations to date.

8. Regional security and democracy forums

The security agenda and geopolitics increasingly cut across democracy policies in all regional organisations, as democracy must increasingly be understood as integral to each region's key security aims. Each body should set up a regular forum to debate the changing relationship between security and democracy and explore how democratic security can provide the strongest resilience for each region. This framing would need to address not only classical military threats but also transnational crime and the threat it represents to democracy. Responses to these threats could include rapid reaction mechanisms when democratic crises generate major regional instability and geopolitical spillover.

9. Regional democracy policies within global multilateralism

A group of regional organisations could work together within the UN on a more structured basis to feed advances at the regional level into the wider multilateral sphere. This would link the multilateral and regional levels of democracy work.

10. Regional variations in democracy

Finally, an international initiative should be funded to explore region-specific models of democracy to explore what they might consist of, with the aim of incorporating such reflections more concretely into regional organisations.

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