

Team Europe Democracy (TED) Working Group (WG) 2

Webinar

27th of May 2025, 10:00 - 12:00 CET

Netherlands Institute for
Multiparty Democracy



Democracy Between the Ballots: Sustaining Engagement and Integrity Beyond Election Day

Strengthening institutions, engaging citizens and safeguarding democratic integrity between elections

A PRACTITIONER'S NOTE

Purpose and Context.

This practitioner's note synthesises the operational entry points and strategic reflections generated during the Team Europe Democracy (TED) Working Group 2 webinar "Democracy Between the Ballots," held in response to a growing recognition: that the periods between elections are not merely interludes, but pivotal phases in shaping democratic resilience and must be met with sustained, deliberate engagement.

The webinar brought into focus a critical yet often under-addressed question: **how can democracy support actors sustain civic engagement, institutional integrity and public trust between electoral events?** These in-between periods are where democratic legitimacy is either quietly rebuilt or steadily eroded; where state–citizen relations evolve, public frustrations accumulate or are addressed and the scaffolding of inclusive governance is either strengthened or allowed to deteriorate.

The session called for a decisive shift away from event-driven, short-term interventions towards a more sustained, inclusive and adaptive model of democracy support that responds to the complexity of political transitions, institutional weaknesses and social demands between elections. As one speaker noted, "*Democracy does not begin or end on Election Day*" - rather, it is in the intervening months and years between ballots that the democratic contract is tested and reshaped, often beyond the spotlight but with far-reaching implications. Without this ongoing investment, the threat of democratic decline increases and along with it, the loss of public trust that elections alone cannot restore.

To anchor these discussions in real-world dynamics, the webinar featured two in-depth case studies:

- **Mozambique**, presented by the [IMD \(Institute for Multiparty Democracy\) Mozambique](#), exposed the aftermath of the 2024 electoral crisis and the emerging opportunity for reform through inclusive dialogue;



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- **Guinea**, presented by the [EU Delegation](#), illustrated the uncertainties and contestations of a transition still unfolding, marked by constitutional limbo, institutional fragility and civic resilience under pressure.

These country experiences were complemented by contributions from key institutional actors - [ECES \(European Centre for Electoral Support\)](#), [NIMD \(Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy\)](#), [UNESCO](#) and [The Carter Center](#) – who shared operational insights and lessons drawn from their ongoing engagement across civic education, institutional strengthening, digital governance and international norm-setting. Their reflections highlighted the need for context-aware, politically conscious engagement during transitional periods.

The discussion was thematically structured around persistent and emerging challenges: the fragility of democratic infrastructure in-between election time phases (post, mid, pre), the shrinking space for civic action, the proliferation of digital disinformation and the need to move beyond technical support toward more principled and politically engaged forms of democratic assistance.

A key takeaway was that the “in-between” is not a vacuum. It is a politically charged and institutionally consequential phase that requires tailored responses. Navigating this period demands sustained, coordinated and forward-looking engagement from Team Europe actors, anchored in local realities but informed by shared democratic principles and strategic foresight.

This note captures the key takeaways, operational entry points and concrete recommendations that emerged from the webinar to support democracy practitioners, both within the EU and in partner countries - to inform the design and implementation of long-term, adaptable support strategies that endure between the ballots and reinforce democratic resilience where it matters most.

Setting the Scene.

Mozambique - From Electoral Unrest to Democratic Renewal.

Mozambique's 2024 elections marked not just a crisis of electoral legitimacy but a deeper rupture in the country's post-conflict democratic trajectory. The eruption of mass protests following the polls was not merely about contested results, it exposed a democracy hollowed out by procedural formalism, elite stagnation and the centralisation of judicial authority. Disillusionment had accumulated over years of unmet socio-economic expectations, political exclusion and institutional distrust, particularly among the country's youth. The crisis revealed a political establishment disconnected from public sentiment and a public no longer willing to accept a democracy that delivers neither accountability nor dividends.

Yet, the ensuing turmoil also created political space. The Political Agreement for Inclusive National Dialogue (PCIND) represents a turning

Guinea - Navigating Uncertainty in a Contested Transition.

Guinea's current transitional phase illustrates the complexity of democracy support in contexts where the future political order remains undefined. Nearly four years after the 2021 coup, delays in constitutional reform, electoral preparations and civic inclusion have eroded public trust. The absence of an independent electoral body, suppression of dissent and continued political repression have narrowed legitimate political space and intensified citizen scepticism. Here, the challenge is not only technical but existential: **who defines the rules of democratic engagement and who is allowed to participate?** In this contested terrain, international support must avoid legitimising elite-driven processes while ensuring that grassroots actors remain engaged and protected.



point, introducing multi-stakeholder reform processes with civil society at the table and a mandate to tackle constitutional and governance reform. The case underscores the necessity of investing in democracy as a process, not just a periodic event. Civil society's assertive participation, beyond tokenistic inclusion, will be vital to prevent co-optation.

For **Team Europe actors**, Mozambique highlights the risks of ignoring early warning signs in seemingly "stable" electoral environments and the importance of sustained engagement that links democratic legitimacy not only to ballots cast, but to structural outcomes that improve people's lives.

The EU's response - through the *Projet d'Appui au Renforcement de la Démocratie (PARD)*, *Cadre de Dialogue Structuré (CDS)* and *Association des Blogueurs de Guinée (Ablogui)* support initiatives - demonstrates how democracy support can be reoriented to centre civic agency, education and digital resilience. Training, political backing and protection mechanisms for bloggers, journalists and youth-led initiatives have proven essential in defending civic space amid repression. Guinea's transition remains uncertain, but the lesson is clear: support between ballots must be principled, persistent and designed to empower local actors shaping their democratic futures. The aim is not just to prepare for an election, but to ensure that the political institutional architecture and civic environment in which it takes place are genuinely inclusive, trusted and accountable.

Strategic Takeaways.

Democracy Is Defined Between Elections. Periods between elections are decisive moments of contestation, negotiation and potential renewal. Mozambique's post-election unrest in 2024 and Guinea's pre-constitutional limbo illustrate that trust, legitimacy and resilience are forged, or lost, during these phases. Democracy support must extend beyond procedural engagement, such as election logistics or short-term observation, and invest in institutions, actors and narratives that shape democratic legitimacy over time.

Cultivating Civic Maturity, Dialogue and Agency. A key strategic insight from ECES' contribution is that civic engagement must be rooted in lived realities, not abstract templates. By focusing on Electoral Political Economy Analysis (EPEA) and locally grounded coalitions, ECES shows how to embed democracy meaningfully in everyday civic life. Their approach connects youth creatively (e.g. mobile cinema campaigns, youth parliaments), community leaders and women's groups through cross-border networks and inclusive dialogue, while using calm periods between elections to invest in leadership, trust-building and conflict transformation. ECES' experience demonstrates that civic maturity cannot be rushed or externally imposed or accelerated; it must be cultivated locally, through sustained support for citizen voice, digital literacy and regional collaboration as the backbone of resilient democratic cultures.

- [A European Response to Electoral Cycle Support \(EURECS\)](#)
- [Electoral Political Economy Analysis \(EPEA\)](#)
- [Leadership and Conflict Management Skills for Electoral Stakeholders \(LEAD\)](#)
- [Prevent and manage Election-related conflict and Violence \(PEV\)](#)

Strengthened Institutional Architecture for Democratic Stability. NIMD's experience in Somaliland and Somalia underscores that trust in democratic institutions is not rebuilt through reactive, one-off interventions but through sustained, politically attuned engagement across the electoral cycle. From supporting electoral commissions and parliamentary oversight bodies to reactivating political dialogue platforms in Somaliland, NIMD illustrates how structured, inclusive dialogue and institutional co-ownership can de-escalate tensions and



prevent future crises. Their creation of the Political Parties Task Force and its collaborative approach to civic education, designed with local civil society organisations (CSO) reflects a broader lesson: that electoral credibility relies as much on institutional continuity and inter-election trust as on the conduct of election day itself. Institutional stability is a long-term investment in the political culture of accountability.

Safeguarding Information Integrity in the Digital Era. UNESCO's analysis reframes the electoral integrity challenge for the digital age: democracy is now conducted in a 24/7 online environment where disinformation circulates faster than institutional responses. Their call to treat digital platforms as electoral actors and to embed digital literacy, anticipatory interventions (such as pre-bunking/early warning) and youth engagement into electoral support reflects a strategic shift from top-down regulation to participatory digital governance. South Africa's example, where civil society negotiated platform commitments, demonstrates that anticipatory, multi-actor models are feasible. The overarching lesson: electoral resilience today requires digitally literate institutions, empowered civic actors and a principled, norm-based responses to information threats - including proactive measures against digital manipulation and information blackouts.

- [UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms](#)
- [Principles and Guidelines for Digital and Social Media Use in African Elections](#)

Norms in Action Beyond the Ballot. The Carter Center reminds us that democratic norms are not merely reference points for international actors; they are tools of domestic empowerment. In both Guinea and Mozambique, civic actors invoked global standards to demand accountability, even in the absence of electoral clarity. The strategic takeaway here is that supporting democracy between ballots requires more than technical inputs it demands long-term accompaniment grounded in principled diplomacy, civic education and norm diffusion. Especially in contexts of institutional fragility, resilience is sustained when norms are internalised by local actors, not just embedded in laws. Democratic reform is most durable when driven by citizens who see themselves as owners, not subjects, of the democratic process. Hence:

1. **Civic trust and engagement between elections is foundational.**
2. **Norms must be lived, functional, not just legislated.**
3. **Information ecosystems are relational.**

Full Democracy Cycle Approach. The transition from a technical, event-based model of electoral support to a full democracy cycle approach marks a critical evolution in the field. As UNDP and International IDEA underscored during the Q&A, credible elections must be seen not as endpoints but as entry points for broader democratic consolidation. This requires sustained, pillar-based, cross-sectoral investment in civic empowerment, media freedom, institutional reform and inclusive dialogue before, during and long after the vote. Yet in practice, short-term funding and risk-averse programming still skew support toward pre-election phases. For this shift to materialise, democracy support actors must commit to locally led, politically grounded engagement that recognises transitions as complex, non-linear processes and prioritises the periods in between ballots as moments of genuine democratic opportunity.

- EU-UNDP ["Select – Sustaining Peace Through Elections"](#) resource hub.

Resilient Democracies Need Women. The rollback of funding for women's political empowerment is not just a gender issue; it is a democratic risk. As budget cuts threaten to erode decades of progress, women's political participation at all levels of public life is becoming increasingly precarious, especially in the face of digital gender-based violence and shrinking civic space. Resilient democracies require inclusive institutions and representative leadership; without women's full and safe participation, legitimacy and accountability are



undermined. Support for women political participation must therefore be integrated across the entire democratic cycle - from voter education to candidacy, from constitutional reform to protection mechanisms. Equity is not an add-on, it is foundational to sustainable, people-centred democracy.

The Added Value of Team Europe.

The Team Europe approach demonstrates its strategic value most clearly in politically sensitive transitions, such as in Guinea and Mozambique, where fragmentation among international actors risks diluting influence or reinforcing elite capture. By ensuring political coherence and unified messaging across the EU and Member States, Team Europe can safeguard neutrality, reinforce legitimacy and maintain principled pressure for reform. In Guinea, for example, coordinated EU-Member States positions can maintain credibility amid stalled transition milestones, while in Mozambique, alignment and key messages around post-crisis dialogue creates space for inclusive reform trajectories. Speaking with one voice matters, especially in contested, volatile environments.

Beyond coordination, Team Europe enables a pooling of resources and division of labour that multiplies impact. Pooling resources and expertise allow actors to connect thematically distinct but strategically aligned efforts, linking, for instance, civil society strengthening with institutional reform or migration governance with political participation. This has proved especially valuable under constrained budgets. The Guinea case illustrates how Member State-led support for grassroots civic actors was amplified by broader EU programming under the PARD framework. The result is a more coherent operational footprint, where each actor's comparative advantage feeds into a joint strategy rather than parallel streams.

An under-recognised strength of Team Europe is its capacity for joint learning and adaptive programming. In Guinea, strong national teams from multiple EU countries created a robust environment for mutual reinforcement through regular coordination, shared analysis and tactical knowledge exchange. In fast-moving political contexts, this infrastructure has allowed Team Europe to remain agile, adjusting strategies to local developments while maintaining a principled core. This model has potential to serve as a blueprint for future joint responses to democratic backsliding and reform windows in other contexts.

Finally, the Team Europe approach has shown that protecting and enabling civic agency, especially in digital and transitional spaces, requires more than project support. In both Guinea and Mozambique, Team Europe would be key in supporting civil society participation in institutional reforms and investing in digital resilience for youth-led actors facing online repression. Crucially, this support should combine capacity-building with political backing and, where necessary, protection mechanisms. By addressing civic space as both a physical and digital terrain, and engaging it with coordinated diplomatic and programmatic tools, Team Europe could help to embed democracy not just in institutions, but in the daily lives and choices of citizens.

Recommendations and Operational Entry Points.

1. Institutional Architecture and Public Trust.

- Sustain institutional capacity beyond election day: move from a peak-resources model to continuous institutional engagement to address the permanent nature of digital campaigning and evolving challenges to electoral integrity



- Enhance transparency of electoral bodies (Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs)): support real-time communication strategies, public briefings and online transparency dashboards to build credibility and pre-empt misinformation.
- Strengthen multi-level political dialogue mechanisms: facilitate formal and informal platforms for political actors to engage across the electoral cycle (e.g., national dialogue forums, local-level roundtables).
- Support political party reform and accountability by promoting transparent candidate selection, inclusive structures, and enforcing codes of conduct against hate speech and online abuse.
- Develop digital protection mechanisms for women in politics: support hotlines, reporting systems, and legal aid for women targeted by online violence or harassment.

2. Voter Education, Media Literacy and Civic Engagement.

- Co-create civic education campaigns with CSOs and media: focus on rights, voting procedures and media literacy, particularly targeting first-time voters and digitally active populations.
- Deploy long-term voter education through schools and communities: include civic and media literacy modules in school curricula and community outreach via radio and local influencers.
- Empower community media and trusted intermediaries: support hyperlocal media and community leaders to spread verified electoral information in native languages or dialects.
- Support the formation of civic coalitions bringing together youth groups, community leaders, women's associations and others to organise, gain legitimacy and engage with institutions (e.g. structured dialogue mechanisms) to address critical issues such as women's participation, the fight against GBV, youth inclusion and engage in governance oversight.
- Encourage cross borders platforms for regional peer-learning and solidarity networks, crucial and build their capacity in monitoring and advocacy techniques to contribute to the formulation, implementation, monitoring of public policies and engage in more coordinated and strategic public advocacy.
- Build capacity in leadership and conflict management skills among different stakeholders to find constructive ways to engage in durable democratic dialogue.
- Promote youth engagement through digital literacy, fact-checking and early warning and rapid response initiatives with creative formats like mobile cinema campaigns and youth parliaments, giving young people the tools, platforms and confidence to take part in public life with agency and accountability (*"nothing for youth without youth"*).

3. Media Integrity and the Role of Digital Platforms.

- Recognise social media platforms as new electoral actors: encourage EMBs and regulatory bodies to engage directly with platforms for transparency on political advertising, algorithmic impact and content moderation.
- Refer to cases like South Africa's platform engagements for adaptive regulation.
- Build capacity of emerging content creators: offer targeted training for influencers and digital content creators on:
 - Election laws and disinformation
 - Basic fact-checking tools
 - Human rights awareness



- Social responsibility in communication
- Support independent journalism and information integrity units: fund cross-sector coalitions of journalists, fact-checkers and technologists to monitor and respond to dis/mis/mal-information campaigns.

4. Addressing the Challenge of “Permanent Campaigning.”

- Update campaign finance monitoring frameworks: extend monitoring beyond formal campaign periods to cover continuous digital spending and influencer-driven messaging.
- Create regulatory sandboxes for digital campaign oversight: pilot flexible and adaptive frameworks to test transparency tools, political AD libraries and content tracing mechanisms with platforms and regulators.
- Institutional collaboration on digital oversight: encourage tripartite collaboration between EMBs, CSOs and digital platforms to anticipate and mitigate electoral risks stemming from always-on campaigning.
- Civic education and voter engagement: lead inclusive voter education campaigns. Partner with CSOs to develop targeted, grassroots voter education initiatives, especially for marginalised groups (youth, women, rural communities).
- Train community facilitators and media ambassadors: build CSO capacity to train local influencers, teachers and religious leaders to act as trusted intermediaries on electoral information and rights.
- Develop mechanisms like participatory feedback tools and public engagement scorecards to bridge institutions and citizens.
- Facilitate dialogue between citizens and EMBs: enable CSOs to host town halls, citizen report cards and local consultations to improve public trust in electoral institutions and processes.
- Monitor and report on human rights during elections: strengthen CSOs’ role in documenting electoral violence, digital abuse and political repression, including threats to journalists and content creators.

Conclusion.

How do you intend to use the knowledge gained from this webinar in your own work and/or programming?



The cases of Mozambique and Guinea demonstrate that democracy support must adapt to complex transitions, institutional fragility, and contested legitimacy. It must be long-term, people-centred, digitally responsive, and politically - informed. Moments between ballots offer



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not just risks, but opportunities to recalibrate institutions, rebuild civic trust and reimagine democracy as a lived process, not a periodic event.

The Team Europe approach is uniquely placed to lead this shift, combining technical expertise, political leverage and shared values. Through coordinated and principled engagement, TED WG2's members and fellow democracy practitioners can help operationalize Team Europe's democracy support – strengthening coordination and building resilient democracies from the ground up.



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