Team Europe Democracy (TED) Narrative Paper

Democracy Support in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

Context

The post-Cold War assumption that liberal democracy would serve as the default model for governance is no longer sustainable. Democratic systems are facing mounting pressure on multiple fronts, with both transitional and long-established democracies exposed to new vulnerabilities. Global democracy indices consistently point to the same trend: a decline in the number of democracies worldwide and a weakening in the quality of democratic institutions.[1] For the first time in over two decades, autocracies (91) now outnumber democracies (88).[2] The decline in democracy in so many different contexts is no coincidence – instead, it is driven by a combination of domestic socio-economic and governance challenges, and profound shifts in the international order that have both empowered and emboldened domestic populist leaders and political parties as well as authoritarian international networks. Regional and international organisations are increasingly at risk of being dominated by non-democratic or authoritarian governments, which have serious consequences for the logic of aid and diplomacy.

Increasingly potent global networks now connect aspiring authoritarian leaders,[3] channelling funding, repressive technology, and autocratic know-how to allies around the world.[4] This includes the export of anti-democratic legislation, surveillance technology, and spyware. Partly as a result, global indicators[5] also reveal growing censorship of the media, restrictions on civil freedom, electoral manipulation, and the repression of civil society.[6] These attacks have been reinforced by parallel regressions in the rule of law and the weakening of judicial systems, eroding the checks and balances designed to constrain executive overreach.[7] Since 2005, 27 democracies have collapsed into autocracy – a stark reminder that once autocratisation takes hold, the survival of democratic institutions is the exception rather than the rule.[8] This is a worldwide trend, with autocratic trends coming in well-established democratic societies as well as in fragile contexts.

An **independent and vibrant civil society** is central to democratic accountability, yet civic space is also under attack. A wide range of governments have deployed demonisation, intimidation, and restrictive laws that target NGOs' funding and operations.[9] In the past five years alone, more than 70 countries have introduced over 270 initiatives designed to constrain civil society.[10] This dynamic has often gone hand-in-hand with attacks on women's rights, LGBTQ and marginalised communities. Authoritarian regimes use such attacks to weaken pluralism and justify repression, often through legal, technocratic and gradual changes that have profound and lasting effects on societies. These measures are not isolated moral campaigns but rather part of a broader strategy designed to erode hard-won rights and liberties.

Justice systems are equally under strain. The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law (HiiL) and the International Development Law Organisation (IDLO) underscore that people-centred justice – accessible, fair and responsive – is essential to social cohesion and peace. Yet, the 2024 Rule of Law Index shows a global decline for the seventh consecutive year, while oversight institutions, from audit bodies to anti-corruption agencies, are being systematically weakened.[11] This helps to explain why creeping authoritarianism has fuelled corruption,

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eroding democratic institutions, weakening accountability, undermining citizens' trust in government and serving as a tool for state capture.

These changes have collectively had a dramatic impact on **freedom of expression, independent media and information integrity** and the prospects for free and fair elections.[12] Election campaigns are increasingly marked by disinformation, disputed results, unfair constraints on opposition parties – which in some cases has led to low voter turnout.[13] Held in this way, elections become tools to try and legitimate authoritarian power grabs[14] rather than genuine opportunities for citizens to select their leaders.[15] Sadly, growing restrictions on media freedom, including emergency measures, further reduce the chances of election abuses being exposed another critical component of a thriving democracy.[16] According to the Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, the number of countries rated "good" for press freedom has fallen from 26 in 2015 to just 8 in 2024 .[17]

Yet despite growing evidence of a concerted attack on democratic values and practices, financial support to elections, civil society and media from democracies has stagnated or fallen. Official Development Assistance to independent media has remained below the 1 percent,[18] and recent cuts – most notably from the United States but also from a number of European countries – have further destabilised fragile media ecosystems in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and the Western Balkans. This represents more than a funding shortfall: it marks a democratic inflection point, carrying the risk of sustained reversals in civic freedoms, transparency, and public trust.

The challenge today is not only to strengthen democracy, but to reassert and reimagine it in response to a rapidly changing global climate. Democratic governance must be placed at the heart of Europe's foreign policy, security, and development agenda, not treated as a secondary concern. The strength of TED lies in its ability to bring together Member States, EU institutions, and global partners to act collectively and strategically, while also equipping others to do the same. Democracy is not an optional extra: it is Europe's competitive advantage, and its most reliable guarantee of sustainable peace.

Reframing Democracy as a Strategic Imperative

Democracy must be recognised not as a normative luxury, but as a strategic necessity – central to security, stability, sustainable economic and social development and lasting peace. Not only are democracies less likely to experience civil war and instability than either autocracies or hybrid regimes, but they are also less likely to try and undermine other states through hostile actions such as physical and cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and interfering in electoral processes. Recent reports, for example, suggest that in 2024 alone there were 4,315 cyberattacks against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, most of which can be traced to Russia.[19] Meanwhile, sabotage operations targeting critical infrastructure in Europe have nearly quadrupled since 2023 according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).[20] These risks will only grow as AI and other technological developments increase the power of malign actors to promote conflict and instability abroad.

Yet as national concerns over defence, migration, and security intensify, too many policy responses remain reactive and fragmented. For the **EU and its allies seeking to advance democracy globally**, four factors must now be acknowledged.

First, democratic resilience and global security are mutually reinforcing. A more authoritarian world is also a more dangerous one, as repression on citizens will erode human rights based policies and trigger migration flows. Equally, disinformation campaigns and electoral

interference are not contained within national borders and can spill over, posing existential threats to democracies within Europe.

Second, democratic political systems are much better – on average – at managing many of the most pressing challenges facing European states. For example, current research has found that democratic decline tends to increase emigration.[21] For Europe, this means that supporting democracy abroad is not only a normative commitment but also a practical form of migration management, as individuals are more likely to try and flee authoritarian and conflict-prone states and often prefer to relocate to more democratic countries that are more stable. In this context, it should be remembered that democracy offers better conditions for open, market-oriented economic policy and for the consideration and balancing of the social interests of different population groups. This not only promotes national development but is also a further prerequisite for curbing migration.

Third, given the growing strength of authoritarian networks, only a collective response – along with the adoption of new pre-emptive strategies – can hope to match their reach and influence. This is key to not only protecting democracy but also safeguarding the ability of important global and multilateral institutions to uphold democratic norms.

Fourth, there are multiple pathways towards democratisation, requiring context-sensitive strategies. It is important to avoid the fallacy of thinking that because democracy is declining in a large number of countries at the same time that domestic drivers of this are the same everywhere. More effective global networking among practitioners must therefore go together with the careful design of locally appropriate strategies that reflect whether the greatest challenge is the abuse of power by the incumbent leader, a coup by the military or an election victory by a populist anti-democratic candidate.[22]

TED – Team Europe Democracy – has a critical role to play here. As a joint EU initiative with 13 Member States (plus Switzerland as observer), TED is uniquely placed to serve as a platform for dialogue, coordination, and joint action. It offers the collective potential to reassert democratic governance as a foundational pillar of EU external action and national security. It also has the capacity to explore the diverse paths towards democratization for our partner-countries and propose incentivisation towards the ones who resonate most strongly.

TED's distinctive reach and remit mean that it can also play a key role in raising awareness among Member State governments, international organizations, and within the European Commission about the strategic implications of a global decline in democracy. The high-profile behaviour of well-known autocrats, from invading other states and sustaining civil wars abroad, entails that both popular and diplomatic awareness of the costs of authoritarianism is likely to rise – but this process may be too little too late. TED can accelerate growing awareness – including among actors not usually involved in discussions about democracy, such as Defence Ministries and militaries – regarding the imperative of strengthening democracy abroad in order to strengthen it at home.

TED can also practically support this agenda by equipping Member States and EU actors with adaptable narratives, evidence-based messaging, and practical approaches. This includes guidance on how democratic support contributes to resilience, security, and governance outcomes – helping policymakers across defence, development and diplomacy domains articulate democracy's strategic relevance.

Protecting the Global Democratic Ecosystem

In the face of shrinking foreign aid budgets and civic space, TED and the EU must advance a values-based approach that goes beyond merely filling gaps. A sustainable global democratic ecosystem requires forward-looking investment in independent media, civil society, and democratic infrastructure. Early warning and rapid response mechanisms are vital – enabling the EU to react to democratic backsliding through legal support, strategic communications, or protective diplomacy before deterioration becomes irreversible. Additionally, supporting and promoting enabling environments that allows for civil society engagement in democracy support strengthening, rule of law and anti-corruption efforts.

Against a background of falling aid budgets, these interventions will need to be both more innovative and more selective. Working through TED, the EU, will need to both identify new synergies with other likeminded actors, and assess which investments are likely to have the biggest impact. This process should involve recognising **two core lessons from recent experience**: democracy aid and interventions are more effective when it comes *before* countries have become authoritarian, and second that the quality of democracy in countries that are more influential in their region – for example in terms of trade and political influence – is more likely to have a positive spillover effect in terms of preventing further autocratisation.

One way to do this is to build on and share recent democratic innovations within Europe itself. In addition to strengthening democratic and integrity frameworks from vested interests, TED's work on information integrity should be closely aligned with this goal. Legal instruments such as the *Digital Services Act (DSA)*, *European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)* and the Artificial Intelligence Act (EU AI Act) can also be operationalised. The DSA mandates large platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks like disinformation and election manipulation, while the EMFA enhances editorial independence and media transparency. Together, they create a regulatory ecosystem that strengthens democracy's digital and informational foundations.

TED can also help pro-democracy forces to understand how to engage with authoritarian networks at the global level. Protecting the wider democratic ecosystem will require democratic states to work more effectively to prevent their authoritarian counterparts from diluting the commitment of bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council to democracy and human rights. Unless these institutions are defended, it is not only civil liberties and political rights that will be under threat, but the liberal rules-based international order that emerged after World War Two.[23] **Defending democracy will require concerted action at multiple levels**: local, national and global.

Moreover, democracy support must reach beyond traditional actors and siloed approaches. A new generation of like-minded actors is emerging—from **social and environmental movements** and **youth leaders** to **private sector platforms**. Stronger collaboration across well-established actors as well as convergence with new emerging ones is urgently needed.

In an increasingly securitised world, it will also be critical to find ways to engage with influential political institutions that are often left out of conversations about democracy – including economic and security/defence institutions – by working with and through Foreign Affairs Ministries, and encouraging Member State governments to see democracy as a critical component of security and foreign policy – not least because their role and budgets are increasing in many countries. Mapping and engaging with this more extensive set of players is crucial to expanding the "coalition of the willing" for democracy support.

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Seizing the Potential of the Global Gateway

The EU's *Global Gateway* strategy should be seen as more than just an infrastructure and trade strategy – it is a **strategic opportunity to embed democratic values in global partnerships**. Delivering an estimated €300 billion in investments between 2021 and 2027,[24] the Gateway provides a values-driven alternative to authoritarian development initiatives that are currently growing in popularity. By insisting on inclusive and accountable governance, transparency, and sustainability, it not only delivers critical infrastructure in sectors such as digital, energy, health, and education, but also embeds democratic norms and accountability into development practice. Framed as an equal partnership rather than a dependency model, the Global Gateway strengthens civic resilience, empowers local institutions, and offers a democratic brand of global development—helping to secure stability at a time when authoritarian influence and disinformation pose growing cross-border threats. It can also be a powerful way to demonstrate that democratic governance, including rule of law, civic participation and media freedom, enables secure and inclusive development, while providing the most stable environment for (industrial/infrastructure) investment. . There are five main ways in which this can be pursued:

1. **Offering a democratic "brand" for global development**. TED's comparative advantages mean it has the potential to get traction for the idea of democracy as a strategic asset. By positioning Global Gateway as a values-driven alternative to authoritarian development programmes, it can project Europe's democratic identity and strengthen its global influence.
2. **Elevating democratic governance and rule of law**. Building on TED's ability to convene EU institutions, Member States, and local partners, it can play a role in channelling Global Gateway projects into vehicles for governance reform – embedding accountability and transparency where they are needed most.
3. **Enabling civic resilience through infrastructure**. TED's record of supporting civil society gives it a unique role in ensuring that investments in digital, health, and education systems also strengthen citizen voice and civic participation.
4. **Building strategic partnerships, not dependencies**. With its emphasis on coordination and equal partnership, TED is well placed to guide the Global Gateway strategy towards models that empower local governance and inclusive policymaking, rather than reinforcing dependency.
5. **Strengthening global stability**. TED's cross-regional networks allow it to anticipate and respond to authoritarian threats. By aligning Global Gateway with these efforts, it can reinforce the resilience of democracies against disinformation, power grabs, and transnational threats.

In this way, TED Network members can play a key role in supporting the mainstreaming of democratic values across sectors – climate, energy, digital and transport – within Global Gateway initiatives and implementation. Transparency, accountability and anti-corruption provisions for financial integrity are essential throughout all initiatives in order to ensure their contribution to broad development goals and standards compliance. Civic actors and local governments should be involved not merely as beneficiaries but as co-designers, monitoring projects and decision making, reinforcing awareness, trust and improving service delivery outcomes.

It is critically important to recognise that in the absence of an effective understanding of the domestic political context, large-scale infrastructure and trade strategies risk entrenching authoritarian leaders in power.[25] These risks can include marginalizing local authorities during decision-making processes if investment decisions are always made at the national-level, and the potential for apparently infrastructural and technical programmes to be subverted to

deepen a government's political control. Democracy assistance should therefore be designed and implemented in ways that avoid these risks. TED can play an important role in this process, for example by assisting those involved in Global Gateway projects to conduct democracy risk assessments to ensure that investments do not harm the struggle for political rights and civil liberties, and advise on how projects can be modified to reduce the risk that they become captured by non-democratic actors or inadvertently empower authoritarian leaders to remain in power.

By integrating good governance into investment frameworks, the EU can demonstrate the powerful relationship between democracy, prosperity and stability – and **that it is fundamental to the achievement of both of these critical goals.**

Next Steps

- **Advancing democracy through and beyond the Global Gateway Strategy:** Showcasing and fostering a new generation of evidence to encourage innovative approaches and inform policies that reinforce democracy support within – and beyond – the Global Gateway 360-degree framework. This can be done by highlighting concrete success stories alongside the overarching strategic vision, to demonstrate impact and explore how TED Members can play an active role in advancing the GG 360 approach to uphold democratic values worldwide.

- **TED Working Groups Policy Briefs:** Produce topic-specific briefs, building a strong evidence-based narrative, making the case for democracy as a cost-effective security investment. Provide Member States with strategic messaging and tools for integrating democracy into broader geopolitical agendas.

- **Curate multi-level and multi-institutional exchanges:** In order to foster more effective democratic networking to expand the "coalition of the willing" while also counteracting authoritarian networks, it will be important to bring together pro-democratic institutions across multiple levels. This might take the form of events, roundtables and workshops that start new conversations between local social movements, national civil society organizations, private sector and regional and global institutions about both how to build democratic resilience and how to disrupt and resist the most effective authoritarian networks.

- **Pilot projects:** Agreement on a series of pilot projects within the framework of the Global Gateway Strategy to identify actions and instruments that can be useful in achieving sustainable development *and* democratic policy objectives parallelly. The promotion of skills within the framework of specific projects should be geared towards a more comprehensive approach to human development, which focuses not only on technical aspects but also incorporates socio-political aspects.

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