



SUPPORT TO MEDIA AND THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT IN A SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

by Marie-Alexandra Kurth, Klara Panther, and Vivien Schoenberger

DEMOCRACY IN A NEW STRATEGIC ERA

While democracy promotion has long been an important element of Europe's external engagement, Europe now finds itself in a constrained environment characterised by geopolitical shifts and an increasingly distorted information space. Democratic systems are under pressure from multiple fronts, with transitional and long-established democracies alike exposed to new vulnerabilities.

The worldwide shift towards autocratisation is not a recent phenomenon; it has been unfolding since the early years of this century. However, the new sense of urgency is rooted in the worrying fact that the

number of autocratising countries is not declining but increasing.¹ The strength and independence of democratic institutions around the world continue to weaken while the political rights and civil liberties of citizens deteriorate,² leading to a global landscape where autocratic countries now outnumber democracies.³

The key drivers of this democratic decline stem, on the one hand, from context-dependent domestic socio-economic and governance challenges, with populist and anti-democratic narratives exploiting citizens' growing frustration with inequality, corruption, and, in some contexts, persistent violence.^{4,5} Conversely, a strengthened network



of authoritarian cooperation, in which regimes support each other economically, militarily, and in terms of autocratic expertise – for instance, with regard to strategies for restricting media and civic space – has become a crucial factor in sustaining autocratic regimes.⁶

Recent indicators suggest that autocratising regimes increasingly rely on media censorship as their primary instrument of control, followed by restrictions on civil freedom, electoral manipulation, and the repression of civil society.^{7,8} Much of today's democratic engagement takes place in the digital sphere, where civic engagement, political discourse, and advocacy are shaped by online platforms and information flows. However, the digital sphere is more and more contested, with authoritarian regimes using disinformation and state-sponsored propaganda to discredit democratic norms and promote their own political models as credible alternatives.⁹

Despite growing evidence and continued advocacy on the importance of free and independent media, financial support for development cooperation, including assistance for independent media, has stagnated or declined over the past years.¹⁰ In some cases, it has even been withdrawn altogether, as illustrated by the recent closure of USAID projects and drastic cuts in U.S. funding, which has fundamentally affected independent media in particular.¹¹

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by enhanced democratic backsliding worldwide, access to independent, reliable information becomes even more vital for democracy and must be protected – and promoted. However, the pluralistic and independent nature of the information environment is increasingly constrained by economic pressures on independent media outlets and by the growing prevalence of disinformation. Against this backdrop, this article explores how media support can be ensured as a strategic element in safeguarding information integrity and democratic resilience during times of crisis. Outlining the work of the Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative on information integrity shows that breaking down silos, enforcing multistakeholder engagement, and mainstreaming information integrity across sectors are essential steps forward.

BOTTOM-LINE-UP-FRONT

Diverse stakeholders engaged in the support for freedom of expression and access to information need to adopt collaborative approaches and harness resources effectively.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

How can we ensure media support as a strategic element in safeguarding information integrity and democratic resilience in times of crisis?

SO WHAT?

In safeguarding media freedom and pluralism, freedom of expression, and access to information, the Team Europe Democracy Initiative has a critical role to play. As a joint EU initiative with 15 Member States, TED is uniquely placed to serve as a platform for coordination and joint action and needs to harness this potential going forward, reasserting democratic governance as a foundational pillar of EU external action.



Together, these developments emphasise the need for European democracy promotion efforts to adjust their support strategies. These efforts need to safeguard democratic values and healthy information ecosystems while maintaining the integrity of information, even in challenging political circumstances with limited financial resources.

A CONTESTED WORLD: IMPACTS ON INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Authoritarian actors around the world are investing in state-aligned media systems, disinformation infrastructure, and information control strategies – both domestically and across borders.^{12,13} Evolving technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) can exacerbate the risks of information ecosystems being used against democracy – rather than for it.¹⁴ Simultaneously, economic pressures, repression, and platform-driven revenue¹⁵ losses are undermining the viability and independence of public-interest media worldwide.¹⁶

A pluralist and independent media landscape that provides trustworthy, reliable information is essential not only for enabling informed citizen participation, but also for strengthening democratic resilience—the ability of democratic institutions and societies to withstand polarisation and attempts to undermine trust in democratic processes.^{17,18} The power of information flows as a democratic tool is underlined by the increasing use of internet shutdowns to suppress civil society and free speech in autocratic countries.¹⁹

Furthermore, the flow of information is becoming increasingly confined by the prevailing media crisis, which is being driven by financial and economic constraints on independent media outlets. 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 2024.²⁰ While domestic repression, political pressure, and the increasing dominance of Big Tech are partly responsible for this drop, a major driver for the worsening situation of press freedom is financial pressure.²¹ The massive decline in funding for independent media, particularly following significant cuts in U.S. support as highlighted in the Crisis in Journalism Report (June 2025), and coinciding with fewer advertising revenues, is contributing to the worsening of the economic situation for independent journalists. This trend is worrying, evidenced by recent assessments of democracy support, which show that targeted assistance to free media tends to have a stronger positive impact on democratisation than other forms of development aid.²² Independent media is crucial for anti-corruption measures, transparency, and accountability, as it has an oversight role enhancing public engagement with political and commercial processes.^{23,24}

While independent media is under pressure, information is increasingly being weaponised, with pre-election phases particularly vulnerable to anti-democratic propaganda and polarisation from domestic and foreign actors.²⁵ On the one hand, this can manifest as meddling with voting preferences by disseminating false information about candidates, including through AI-generated deepfakes.² On the other hand, it can entail direct interference with the voting process through false information aimed at unsettling voters' perception of the legitimacy of the electoral process and potentially reducing turnout.²⁶ Claims of electoral fraud based on false information are increasingly common, impeding public trust in electoral integrity and the democratic institutions and

processes associated with it.²⁷ This can, in turn, further contribute to an increasingly polarised society.²⁸ Political polarisation and disinformation are two reinforcing factors that feed into each other and further entrench autocratisation processes and, in some contexts, also feed into violent uprisings.^{29,30}

Aside from carefully measured regulation of online platforms, an adequate counterweight to disinformation is pluralistic and independent media,^{31,32} but as established above, the media sector finds itself in a highly constrained environment. In this context, the European Union and its Member States face a strategic challenge: to ensure that development, foreign policy, and democracy assistance efforts adequately respond to the fragility of the global information integrity environment.

The EU has made strong commitments to media freedom and pluralism in its Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative, which is tasked with implementing these commitments through programming and operational frameworks, as well as coordination mechanisms across institutions.

HARNESSING TEAM EUROPE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The TED Initiative plays a critical role. As a joint global Team Europe Initiative with 15 Member States, including Switzerland as observer, it aims to coordinate the European response in support of democracy. The strength of TED lies in its ability to bring together Member States, EU institutions, and civil society organisations to act collectively and strategically, while also equipping others to do the same. As an interface connecting key EU institutions, Member States, and like-minded European organisations to collaborate and address the implications of the global decline in democracy collectively, TED facilitates the exchange of best practices needed to ensure democratic resilience.

On an operational level, TED equips 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 – aiming to position democracy's strategic relevance across other sectors as well.

A key component of the initiative is the Team Europe Democracy Network, which is organised through three thematic Working Groups. These groups facilitate joint learning, peer training, practical guidance and good practices, as well as coordination and collaboration for enhanced collective impact and focus on specific thematic priorities: namely, rule of law and accountability, political and civic participation, and information integrity. Within the working groups, members engage in strategic dialogue, enhance cross-regional collaboration on democracy promotion and support joint initiatives on the thematic priorities.

Working Group 3 on Media and Digital aims to enhance democratic resilience through safeguarding information integrity, supporting media independence, and promoting human rights online. By prioritising these key areas, Working Group 3 seeks to address the growing challenges posed by the capture of media independence, threats to journalist safety, declining public trust in journalism, collapsing media business models, growing authoritarian restrictions to free and independent media, and disinformation.



In light of the aforementioned geopolitical shifts, adjusted priorities, and the far-reaching impact of funding reductions in support for independent media, a collaborative approach that breaks the silos and harnesses resources to protect democracy and information integrity is crucial. Effective coordination and collaborative approaches are essential for Working Group 3 to deliver coherent, evidence-based, and impactful contributions to EU efforts on media support, information integrity, and digital governance.

The TED Initiative's support to partner countries seeks to complement existing EU modalities such as the Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy Multi-Annual Indicative Programming 2021-2027, the global thematic Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA) to support independent media, and the EEAS Strategic Communication Task Forces, including those focusing on foreign interference and information manipulation (FIMI).

Safeguarding information integrity is critical in both fragile and stable country contexts. In fragile contexts, access to reliable information is essential for effective and timely responses and for preventing harms, while countries in stable contexts are increasingly faced with challenges of disinformation, foreign interference, and information manipulation (FIMI). To engage in these differing contexts, TED Working Group 3 will develop practical information products that can be used by EU Delegations and Member States involved in fragile contexts to better understand how they can support access to reliable information in the face of instability. The Working Group will also support the strengthening of EU Delegations' and Member States' coordination on topics of disinformation and FIMI in stable contexts.

SAFEGUARDING INFORMATION INTEGRITY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Information integrity is essential to healthy, vibrant democracies that are anchored in transparency, accountability and inclusivity.³³ Numerous studies, and the practical experience of the European Union and its Member States, highlight the urgent need for more coherent and cohesive cooperation between EU institutions and Member States to address the challenges facing today's information ecosystems.³⁴

Cooperation among democracies is essential because the threats to democracy today, such as disinformation, foreign interference and authoritarian influence, are transnational and cannot be effectively addressed in isolation.³⁵ By working together, EU member states can pool limited resources, share best practices, coordinate responses and present more credible and consistent messaging. In a rapidly changing political and media landscape, enhanced cooperation within and across sectors helps to prevent fragmentation, duplication, and incoherent messaging, ensuring that support for democracy is more timely and effective.

Guided by the priorities stated in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2027 and the Human Rights Based Approach throughout all its activities, Working Group 3 pursues three main objectives: 1) strengthen learning through evidence-based research, both through disseminating relevant existing research and/or commissioning new research; 2) improve consultations through direct, honest and actionable dialogue, and 3) enhance coordinated engagement towards innovation and concrete advancement.

Working Group 3 seeks to fulfil these objectives through 1) coordination and collaboration with a specific focus on multistakeholder engagement; 2) capacity building, knowledge sharing and trainings; as well as 3) addressing cross-cutting issues and interlinkages between democracy topics. By integrating these strategies, the working group effectively leverages support for media and the information environment to safeguard information integrity and ensure democratic resilience during crises.

THE WAY FORWARD: ENSURING HEALTHY INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS

The backsliding of democratic governance and the rise of authoritarian tendencies clearly point to the need to safeguard media freedom and pluralism, freedom of expression, access to information, and the safety of journalists.

To adapt to the aforementioned global challenges, mainstreaming support for media and information integrity in other sectors will be crucial. To contribute to achieving this goal, Working Group 3 will establish interlinkages and promote synergies.

Moreover, Working Group 3 seeks to mainstream support for information integrity across other sectors and to address the interlinkages between human security, economic prosperity, and democratic governance.³⁶ One such effort of Working Group 3 and its members is the TED Media Support Toolkit, developed by the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD).

The OECD DAC Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment highlight that assistance to the media sector exerts a greater positive influence on democratisation than most other types of development aid. In November 2022, the DAC Network on Governance developed a new set of principles, "recognising a need to ensure that the international response to the crisis in the media sector fits better in a rapidly changing information environment."³⁷

To support the implementation of the OECD DAC Principles, the TED Media Support Toolkit provides concrete guidance to strengthen independent media and media pluralism, combat information disorder, and further integrate information integrity into EU and Member State policy and programming. It is a practical, user-focused resource to help EU institutions, EU Delegations, Member States, as well as other like-minded states and partners, to operationalise the principles across a range of policy and programming contexts. It contributes to bridging the gap between high-level commitments and the realities of implementation in the field – especially for non-specialist staff – and enables more strategic, coordinated, and sustained support to independent media and information ecosystems. The toolkit also facilitates embedding media and information integrity concerns across sectors – from digital development to peace building, human rights, environmental policy, and crisis response. It is a flexible tool that adapts support to different political contexts, including fragile, authoritarian, and transitional environments.

The toolkit includes operational recommendations, linked to each OECD Principle, with examples of how they can be implemented across different institutional settings, case studies and country examples highlighting diverse contexts and innovative practices, contextual guidance for applying the toolkit in varying political and media environ-



ments, as well as tools, checklists, and indicators to support programme design, donor coordination, and evaluation.

It is modular and evolving, adaptable to policy shifts and user feedback, and aligned with existing EU policy tools and external action frameworks. By providing these resources, Working Group 3 supports a robust and resilient democratic environment globally, ensuring the integrity of information and the protection of media independence in a world marked by disinformation and information pollution.

CONCLUSION

Democratic resilience requires investments in free and independent media, a vibrant and diverse civic space, and trustworthy democratic institutions. Democracy support must reach beyond traditional actors and across siloed approaches. Stronger collaboration among well-established actors, as well as convergence with new emerging ones, is urgently needed.

“To solve this complex and systemic crisis, stakeholders engaged in the support of the fundamental right to freedom of expression and access to information need to work together.”³⁸

This is where the Team Europe Democracy initiative comes in. With its focus on multistakeholder engagement through its wide-reaching network of like-minded actors and by its targeted support of EU Mem-

ber States, TED actively harnesses the vast knowledge of its network to guide Member States, EU institutions, and civil society organisations through challenging times. TED serves as a platform for dialogue, coordination, and joint action, offering the collective potential to reassert democratic governance as a foundational pillar of the EU’s democracy promotion actions.

The unique strengths of TED’s Working Group 3, working on Media and Digital, lie in bringing together a diverse set of actors to promote more coordinated and effective action to tackle current challenges to information integrity, tapping into its membership’s vast expertise. At the same time, Working Group 3 aims to integrate support for media and the information environment across other sectors – which becomes an even more important effort in light of the newly prioritised EU’s Global Gateway strategy, where key European development actors coordinate to combine resources and expertise through a Team Europe approach, among others in the digital sector.

The challenge today is not only to strengthen democracy but to reassert and reimagine it in response to disinformation campaigns and media crackdowns. A pluralist, independent media landscape that provides trustworthy, reliable information is essential not only for enabling informed citizen participation but also for strengthening democratic resilience.³⁹

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