



A MORE PLURALIST APPROACH TO EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY SUPPORT

Richard Youngs
and Kateryna Pishchikova



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Cover Photo: Ezequiel Scagnetti © European Union
Kairouan, Tunisia, 20 October 2011

European Union observers Ildiko Kosztolni and Juan Ribó Chalmeta monitor the electoral process in Kairouan city. Following the invitation from the Tunisia interim government, the European Union established an Election Observation Mission to monitor the upcoming elections for a Constituent Assembly scheduled on October 23rd 2011.

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Summary

European support for democracy is at a crucial juncture. Just as the eurozone crisis complicates the European Union's (EU's) efforts to support democratic reform around the world, new forms of political transition are confounding the EU's traditional approach to democracy building. The EU must embrace a wider variety of tactics, models, actors, and strategies, or it risks losing credibility and traction in the field of democracy support.

Challenges Facing the EU

- The EU's approach to democracy support still relies heavily on exporting its own technical rules.
- The eurozone crisis, which has not been managed very democratically, has dented the EU's external image. This undermines the appeal of the EU's brand of democracy.
- Today's political transitions are diverse, making it even more difficult for the EU to apply the same strategies to all regimes.
- Governments attempting to hold on to power have become more adept at restricting outside support for democratic reform, and EU governments have not developed tactics to get around regime clampdowns.
- The EU focuses on elite-led reform and has not adequately adapted to new types of grassroots activism.
- European democracy-promotion efforts are further stymied because the strategies of member states and EU-level institutions are not well coordinated.
- The transatlantic community needs the support of rising democracies for its policies; at present, those states tend to be more concerned with respecting sovereignty than promoting democracy.

Next Steps for Europe

Stop primarily relying on technical rules to promote democracy. European policies must address states' internal political weaknesses that impede democratic reform.

Push back against regimes' restrictions on civil society support. To neutralize accusations that democracy supporters are meddling in countries' internal political affairs, EU institutions and member states should be transparent, inclusive, and impartial when working with civil society.

Ensure policies reflect local contexts. EU institutions and member states must partner with a wider range of civic actors and social movements, and better appreciate the eclectic dynamics of political change.

Learn the lessons of the eurozone crisis. Efforts to improve the poor health of democracy within Europe must be dovetailed with external democracy support.

Better synchronize member-state and EU-level initiatives. Member-state actions should not undercut or compete with common European democracy support objectives. All actors should coordinate their policies and harness national initiatives more creatively and dynamically.

Cooperate more systematically with rising democracies. Europeans should take advice from these states about promoting democratic values.

Introduction

The EU's support for democracy across the world confronts a daunting array of challenges. Some arise from factors specific to the changing state of the European Union (EU). Others derive from changes in the broader context with which democracy support has to grapple.

The EU has traditionally played its strongest role in democracy support through enlargement and other initiatives in parts of its immediate neighborhood, while also offering relatively high levels of democracy and good governance funding in developing states. There are many strong elements to this democracy support profile, which EU institutions and member states have incrementally established. But the combination of ongoing internal and external trends raises two pertinent questions about the current approach. First, how should the EU modify those elements of democracy support that are specific to its distinctive nature as a foreign policy actor? Second, how should the EU respond to the need more broadly to rethink the effectiveness of democracy support given a changing world?

The need is not simply for more rather than less democracy promotion, but rather for the EU to recast the way in which it encourages political reforms around the world. The EU needs more *pluralist* democracy support: assistance that involves a wider variety of tactics, actors, instruments, partners, and recipient organizations.

The EU-specific challenges are various. The eurozone crisis, which has shaken the foundations of the European system, makes it even more difficult to export technocratically oriented EU rules. Disseminating specificities of the EU model is less straightforward now, as the crisis has raised doubts about Europe's own democratic vitality. The crisis has also altered the balance between different member states as well as between the national and EU levels of foreign policy—with implications for democracy support.

The more general challenges flow from changes in some of the core parameters that condition democracy support. The transitions under way across the world seem to follow more varied paths than in the past, which calls into question the current understanding of how regime changes take place. The demand for external support is likewise more varied. In addition, nondemocratic regimes more assertively seek to restrict external support for reform. And with global power shifting, democracy support can no longer be as effective without Europe and the United States building partnerships with non-Western democracies.

The EU needs more pluralist democracy support: assistance that involves a wider variety of tactics, actors, instruments, partners, and recipient organizations.

European support for democracy and human rights around the world has evolved in recent years, which bodes well for its capacity to adapt further. The EU has inched toward new forms of positive conditionality, responded more critically to serious abuses, intensified dialogue with civil society actors, and widened democracy assistance. In the challenging circumstances of economic crisis, it is notable that many new initiatives have prospered and that resources dedicated to human rights and democracy have so far largely been maintained. European donors gave €4.3 billion (\$5.8 billion) for “government and civil society” programs in 2011; this was higher than in 2009 and more than the United States allocated.¹ Of a total European Commission aid budget of €13 billion (\$17.6 billion) in 2012, €2.5 billion went to “government and civil society.”

New opportunities have opened up to broaden the scope of democracy support in a select number of Arab states and elsewhere. Aid has been moved away from middle-income, rising powers and shifted to more low-income, reforming states. Under the European Neighborhood Policy, both Armenia and Georgia have seen their aid bumped up specifically in response to progress on democracy. In Africa, Malawi has won similar aid increases; and aid packages have been suspended in places like Guinea until the holding of free elections.

The EU perseveres in the most resistant states, for example, funding a new series of rule-of-law projects in Azerbaijan and even convening a meeting of European and Central Asian justice ministers in December 2012 to press judicial reforms. Democracy and human rights have returned to the top of the

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EU policy agenda under a new action plan that promises nearly 100 improvements by the end of 2014. Human rights strategies have been compiled for nearly 140 states, all with the involvement of civil society. EU delegations and European security missions now have human rights and democracy focal points.²

However, while in some senses the European commitment to assisting democratic reforms has strengthened, in other ways it remains weak or has even diminished. The challenge is to move toward a sufficiently *qualitative* updating of European democracy support.

There are seven primary ways in which the EU and its member states can begin to develop more pluralist forms of democracy support:

- As the eurozone crisis has left a dent in the EU’s external image, efforts to improve the poor health of democracy within Europe must be dovetailed with external democracy support.
- Unable to rely so much on exporting its own rules and technical acquis as the primary basis for encouraging democratic reform, the EU must home in on the political obstacles to the democratization of power.

- A better synchronization of member-state and EU-level initiatives is needed because the crisis has shifted some influence back to national capitals.
- The EU and member states need a nuanced appreciation of the more eclectic dynamics of political change, with transitions becoming more diverse in nature and more liable to atrophy in a variety of democracy-autocracy hybrids.
- The EU needs to develop a strategy for pushing back against regimes' restrictions on civil society support. This strategy should be based on transparency, impartiality, and inclusion.
- Democracy support must incorporate a wider range of civic actors and new social movements, and it should be more open to variations in democratic models.
- The EU must cooperate more systematically with rising democracies—in a low-key fashion on practical projects—being responsive to their ideas of how best to promote democratic values.

These seven suggestions for building a more pluralist democracy will help address the currently pressing challenges that are both specific to the European Union and more broadly affect global trends in democracy.

Updating the EU Identity in Democracy Support

The EU has constructed a distinctive identity in the field of democracy support. It has tended to work outward from its own institutional rules and regulations. It conceives of its “neighborhood” as part of a natural and immanent Eurosphere, drawn to the magnet of EU formal institutional standards and processes. It assumes that relatively technocratic governance support can help in an incremental process of democratization in which small steps accumulate like a rolling snowball into far-reaching and meaningful change in the essence of a political regime. The EU preference has been to work with and not confrontationally against regimes. While it is not the only actor to do so, critical European pressure tends to be particularly oblique rather than direct and frontal. European support has centered on economic development as a precursor to broader social and political modernization.

Current work on EU democracy support has a flavor of public policy analysis that is absent from the more high-political tone of debates over U.S. positions on human rights and democracy. The analytical concepts are familiar. Most conceptual assessments of European democracy support focus on what leads states desiring membership in the EU to comply with certain rules. This

is closely linked to assumptions that the EU's main source of influence is the conditionality it places on its unique ability to offer grades of inclusion into its own governance space. The EU's normative influence is generally said to flow from the model it stands for as much as the purposive actions it undertakes. Its external policy is qualitatively different from standard foreign policy in the sense that it exports the governance rules that guide relations between member states. Critical voices argue that the EU conflates democracy support with free-marketization of a type that underpins European integration. And most writers attest to a progressive Europeanization of democracy support that is based on an evident common European identity.

Yet, a number of assumptions that underlie this identity are less than solid. The nature of the EU itself has changed. Rebooting the EU's foreign policy identity is thus at the core of rethinking its support for democracy. It requires three dimensions of change.

Learn the Lessons of the Eurozone Crisis

First and foremost, given the financial turmoil and tensions of the last five years, the EU must understand how the eurozone crisis impacts its external image. The crisis raises questions about the EU's claim to have struck a balance between deepening European democracy and managing deep economic interdependencies.

With European influence over global democracy flowing in part from the example of the EU integration experience, a clearly present fear is that the current crisis could seriously undermine this appeal. To many European states, the eurozone crisis has not been managed very democratically. Elite-made, opaque,

and technocratic-style rules set the economic policy agenda. With social protesters across Europe complaining that citizens have negligible sway over EU decisionmaking, it is harder for European democracy support policies to appear credible in pushing other countries around the world to be more open to popular pressures.

The erstwhile narrative that "Europe is the solution" is no longer quite as convincing to the EU's immediate neighbors. This is not to ignore the enormous value that EU rules still provide in regulating cross-border relations. Nor is it to suggest that the eurozone crisis renders all EU

processes malign for democracy. However, while other powers certainly still seek to learn from the European experience, they also now approach the EU at least in part as a strategic challenge to be managed. It is, unsurprisingly, proving difficult for governments and policymakers to make the switch from a mentality that assumed the EU provided the gold standard of governance to which others should aspire. Yet, democratic backsliding in Hungary as well as rising populism and challenges to governability in countries like Bulgaria and

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Italy mean that democracy now needs to be more assiduously defended internally as well as internationally.

In some ways this offers an opportunity to legitimize a broader “democracy agenda” as something more tangibly relevant to European citizens. Academics have often argued that the internal and external aspects of the EU’s distinctive identity should be seen as mutually conditioned; but in practice this link has rarely been expressed within concrete policy initiatives. If global democracy support were more actively backed in the public space, those policymakers often battling skeptical realists within European parliaments or governments would clearly see their positions bolstered.

Of course, the danger is that the constrictions of the economic crisis make citizens more introspective and defensive of their own claims on national resources and less supportive of active foreign policies. Both leftist and rightist populism—fused in confusing combinations in today’s European politics—exhibit such a strand. The question is whether the EU can turn the challenge of the financial crisis into an advantage—demonstrating an open way of dealing with crisis and the fact that the democracy agenda is not about “us and them” dichotomies but about shared problems.

This might seem a fanciful notion at present. So far, governments have seen social protests as something to be contained. They have done little to foster links between European civic actors and those in other parts of the world that could inject dynamism into the search for better-quality democracy both within and beyond Europe. Many European actors have launched initiatives to reenergize debates over what effective democratic accountability means in an age of acute economic interdependence. But these efforts have not been harnessed as a potentially positive asset for EU external influence and reputation.

At a policy level, the need to link internal and external democracy-related challenges has received little attention: global action is still seen as a residual product, not an integral part, of pro-democratic internal developments.³ One example of the growing dissonance is that the EU and United States both fund a vast number of external democracy projects that purport to build inclusive coalitions, help consensus formation, and make party systems less fragmentary—all while their own domestic politics have become more fractious and polarized. The EU institutions and member states must work harder to bring the internal and external aspects of their democracy efforts into line.

Move Beyond Exporting Rules and Conditions

In a second area of necessary update, the EU must move from reliance on its standard concepts of normative power to an approach that is more individualized, especially in the way it conceives of its immediate neighborhood.

Europe’s international projection has been predicated on a geopolitical vision of concentric circles, largely insulated from one another. EU liberal

democracies are at the core, then come those likely to be upgraded to the club, then the broader neighborhood, then the rest of the world.

However, the world beyond the EU is now more fluid. Trends in the neighborhood cast doubt on how useful it is in terms of operational policy to work around broad categories of countries based on their geographic proximity rather than their essential political nature. The “neighborhood” concept constructed by the EU has failed to unleash deeper regional cooperation among the different neighbors. The assumptions are questionable that each ring brings systematically distinct problems and that influence and ambition should naturally diminish as one moves outward from the EU pivot.

Crucially, the concentric-circles model is predicated on the assumption that leverage over an inner circle flows from exporting EU rules. Politics in those states can be influenced through conditionality attached to the offer to bring states into the EU area of policy jurisdiction. The fluid evolution of events across the neighborhood does not completely negate such influence, but it does raise questions about whether the EU can rely quite so heavily upon it in the future.

Many voices have suggested in recent years that the design of the European Neighborhood Policy needs to keep pace with changes in the region it covers. Developments in both the Southern and Eastern neighborhoods cast doubt over the potency of the EU’s chosen form of leverage. As a starting point for more context-variegated democracy support, it would be useful to disaggregate the neighborhood and rethink some of the parameters of the concentric-circle model of leverage.

To the south, for instance, it is doubtful that the Middle East and North Africa can best be conceived as the “next layer out,” given that few in this region see the EU as a central reference point for reforms. In response to the Arab uprisings that have spread across the region, European policies have become more flexible, more varied, and more multidimensional. Traditional long-term, development- and governance-focused European Commission initiatives have been ratcheted up alongside shorter-term and political interventions led by constellations of member states. Diplomats insist a more flexible approach has been adopted toward the export of EU rules and standards.

Yet, each of the EU’s steps toward a more pluralist form of democracy support has been relatively limited. Three years have passed since the beginning of the Arab Spring, and official promises of a new type of EU strategy have generated only relatively marginal results. The EU’s upgraded policies have not sufficed to break through the obstacles that have blocked more far-reaching reform in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa. Egypt’s downward spiral is only the most dramatic example of this. Libya remains outside the sphere of EU regional forums; Algeria remains largely uninterested in new agreements with the EU and is resistant to pressure for reform; Jordan and Morocco play the EU expertly with well-presented but shallow change; and

Lebanon absorbs EU help that is of too limited a magnitude to reverse deepening internal factional fragility.

Reformers within the region are critical of European policies on familiar grounds. To them, the support is a heavy-handed imposition of EU governance rules that have little directly to do with democratization. The region's reformers also criticize the frequency with which efforts of the member states, the European External Action Service—the EU's foreign policy arm—and the European Commission and Parliament cut across each other.

The diversity of Arab nations' trajectories acts against the kind of regional dynamics upon which much EU policy is predicated. Regimes are more reluctant to base reform commitments on importing EU rules, which appears to have left Europe bereft of ideas. European governments have not been able to offer any significant counterweight to the factors that increasingly atrophy political liberalization in most states in the Middle East and North Africa.

In a similar vein, many insist that replicating the same rule-based conditionality cannot fully succeed today in the East. In preparation for November's Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, the EU is debating how to respond to increasingly assertive Russian diplomacy in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus. Armenia has recently chosen to participate in Russia's Eurasian Union rather than prioritize a new association agreement with the European Union. The EU has offered to include Belarus in the Eurosphere, but this has failed to shift the elite in even this small, highly repressive state. In Georgia, preparations are well under way for a new association agreement with the European Union, but the country's supporters of more liberal democracy are today less swayed by the prospect of orientation toward the EU.⁴ With Ukraine, the EU's focus has been on whether to sign an association agreement with or without requiring Kiev to meet strict political conditions. Even when this agreement is concluded, the EU may not be able to overcome opposition to deeper reforms in Ukraine; it has signed many other association accords with regimes that then resist reform and see the offer of moving closer to the EU's rule-based system more as a disincentive than a motivating drive to reform.⁵ Russia has offered \$10 billion to Ukraine, and Ukrainians can already travel between the two countries without a visa.⁶ Against this kind of background, the EU's policy cannot be fully effective if dominated by a largely political expansion of a sphere of EU rules.

The EU should stake out a middle ground somewhere between heavy technocratic conditionality and apolitical modernization-based engagement. Officials insist the approach to external governance has become much more flexible in response to recipients' ambivalence, leaving the latter with the freedom to opt out of many areas of sectoral cooperation and to choose their own level of alignment with EU norms. These incipient changes are steps in the right direction.

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But more needs to be done practically to implement a neighborhood policy that is based on a more appropriate range of policy instruments. This means prioritizing those EU rules that have genuine democracy-enhancing potential and not indiscriminately lumping them together with those that simply add administrative burden to neighboring states for the EU's own convenience. It also means not assuming that the export of rules renders unnecessary a fully political approach to democracy support—that is, one focused on the highest-level impediments to a genuine democratization of power.

Harness a Range of Actors

Third, the EU should more positively and more systematically embrace a model of democracy support that includes a range of European actors. While the eurozone crisis has not (yet) completely wrought asunder the EU's mix of supranational and intergovernmental powers, it has shifted the complex balances between the role of national foreign policies and collective EU initiatives. The crisis has engendered calls and plans for deepening formal integration of EU foreign policy procedures. But in practice, national foreign policies should be the focus, as their weight has if anything increased in recent years. This polyphony of actors and voices needs to be embraced. If creatively harnessed, it can offer advantages for democracy support.

If the EU is indeed moving—formally or informally—toward a more flexible, variable geometry, the way in which external democracy support is carried out could be affected. Naturally, there will still—correctly—be calls for tighter EU unity. But the challenge will be to ensure that a larger number of actors, linked together in varying degrees of cooperative commitments, pull in the same direction and work in their varied ways to further rather than impede democracy. Agile and multiple-actor political engagements are likely to be the order of the day. This type of engagement will at least partially supplant the assumption that European influence is exerted primarily through EU-level institutional mimetism.

This requires that a higher priority be attached to making sure that member-state actions do not overlap with ostensibly common European democracy support objectives. It means paying more attention to the policies of an increasingly dominant Germany, which frequently acts as a swing state in EU debates between the Northern liberal member states that are generally seen as more committed to democracy and human rights and the Southern realists (although in practice this division is less clear-cut than often assumed). The more systematic and far-reaching policies of geoeconomic interest now deployed by member-state governments, such as in Germany and the United Kingdom, in particular, have an even greater potential to scupper common external democracy-related aims than national actions did before the crisis. The in-house review published by the European External Action Service in July 2013 also made the point that under the Lisbon Treaty, a greater number of institutional actors today have a role in

external policies, and the review acknowledges that coordination between these different departments has been insufficient.⁷

Efforts to ensure better coordination between member states are, of course, the very essence of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Yet, in the field of democracy promotion, the results are not as significant as they need to be and have not advanced far enough in recent years. Calls for greater unity are nothing new; but the *form* such unity takes should be rethought. Coordination should not be seen as reducing the role played by national policies and actors. Common EU strategies should be equated less with highly bureaucratized procedures run through a small number of Brussels institutions. More active national democracy strategies must not be seen as competitive alternatives to EU-level initiatives but coordinated in a more structured fashion as a positive-sum contribution to European goals. All relevant actors should coordinate their policies and harness national initiatives more creatively and dynamically to achieve overarching EU aims.

* * *

Combining these three strands, what the EU needs is not just a simple modification of individual policies in particular areas of the world. Rather, it needs to react to the eurozone crisis appropriately, move away from a one-size-fits-all normative approach, and include multiple actors in developing democracy support policies. That necessitates a collective rethink of some of the deeper, analytical descriptors of European approaches to normative questions in international affairs.

Some of the long-standing ways in which EU democracy support has been conceptualized must be revisited. And some of the received wisdom on the European identity in the field of democracy will benefit from being interrogated a little more critically.

Pathways to Broader Rethinking

Being a unique foreign policy actor does not render the EU immune to a host of challenges that now menace democracy support around the world. It must make more of an effort to position itself at the forefront of broader debates on rethinking international democracy support. These challenges do not relate to the specificities of the EU's dilemmas but rather to the international context within which democracy support strategies today seek to retain traction and efficacy. The EU is far from adequately addressing the need to incorporate state-of-the-art thinking about new pathways to backing political reform.

Eclectic Scenarios of Political Change

The process of political transition is not as black and white as it once seemed to be. It is subject to many divergent influences that make it difficult to ensure that high-quality democracy unfolds smoothly. The way in which many transitions played out during democracy's third wave, which began in the 1970s, bred the view that small steps of political opening generate a self-sustaining momentum toward a natural end point of democratic consolidation. But the end of this "transition paradigm" was declared over a decade ago.⁸ Policymakers insist they no longer base their strategies on such assumptions. Yet in practical terms, transitions are still widely seen as imbued with a kind of inherent forward movement that transcends momentary setbacks.

Recent trends, however, suggest an even greater indeterminacy in processes of political change. They raise more serious questions about the idea that limited political liberalization incrementally and inexorably builds up to produce positive system-level reform.

In some countries it is difficult even to ascertain whether a "transition" is under way. Elements of democratization coexist with aspects of de-democratization. Forward and backward movement occurs simultaneously with the balance shifting over time.

Political actors formulate strategies against the background of a rich array of lessons learned from previous transitions—successful and aborted. This means that the pathways toward political change are today subjected to greater uncertainty, variety, and changeability. Recent developments in places like the Middle East and the post-Soviet states heighten the sense that hybrid conglomerations of democracy and autocracy are becoming more prevalent. These risk eroding the very meaning of democracy, as elections produce majorities unrestrained by the rule of law and able to curtail individual rights.

The challenge is not only that hybrid regimes appear more common but also that the ways in which governance systems are combined differ between countries. Hybridity is becoming more hybrid. Understanding these emerging mixes of liberal and illiberal features requires better contextual analysis of state-society relations in each country. Moreover, many recent experiences suggest that liberalism and democracy may not be quite the conjoined twins they have often been assumed to be. In Arab states, many advocates of democracy are not especially liberal, while many self-defined liberals remain disengaged from democratic processes.

These varied forms of political change require custom-made responses. The rhetoric of European democracy support has indeed been couched in such terms for several years; no one in EU institutions or member states would do anything other than fulsomely back country-specific variation. In practice, however, this is still an Achilles' heel of European approaches. Strategies for supporting democracy need to reflect the eclectic politics of reform and anti-reform, and they must go well beyond the now-routine calls for better political

analysis in recipient states. The good and bad in different forms of hybridity need to be better appreciated. A particular kind of democracy-related initiative might have a positive effect in one country but a harmful impact in another. While democracy may be reached by unfamiliar paths, familiar-looking reform paths may end up with illiberal ramifications.

The existence of multiple paths to reform has implications for the EU's reliance on a heavily technocratic approach to political change. These trends suggest that a more varied and flexible mix is required between selectively exporting technocratic rules and charting a political tack. Democracy support must seek a wider range of access points to foment reform, such as working with nonregistered civic organizations or more dispersed social movements. Support for bottom-up and top-down reforms needs to be harnessed in a more mutually reinforcing fashion to alter the underlying structures of state-society relations. It has been suggested that the impact of external policies that support democracy depends upon how well these fit around the array of specific domestic constellations that generate or impede transition.⁹ This places a premium on agile opportunism, which means being tactically flexible and quickly responding to slivers of reform opportunity as and when they appear. It calls for less reliance on standard building-block models of democracy building in which donors simply work methodically through capacity-building programs.

Despite these trends, many still believe that making democracy support more effective requires a less, not a more, political approach. Most European donors retain a preference for developmentally oriented policies that eschew engaging with political variation in this way. Granted, EU development cooperation has become more political in its stated aims, with a focus on societies in transition and frequently articulating political goals.¹⁰ But notwithstanding some minor changes, European development agencies remain ambivalent, at best, over the adoption of more political approaches in actual practice.¹¹ One detailed report from the Overseas Development Institute says that the European development community remains focused on fostering accountability and transparency as a means of producing better reform outcomes and explicitly as an alternative to focusing on the principles of democracy per se. Many donor initiatives take this approach as well, such as the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, the International Aid Transparency Initiative, and the International Budget Partnership. This focus is justified as a practical route to democratic governance, but the two do not always go hand in hand: transparency and accountability in service delivery have improved in some nondemocratic states like China and Rwanda, while they remain poor in more democratic states like Malawi.¹²

The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, the EU's dedicated budget for democracy assistance, often appears reluctant to get into

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the trenches of the internal politics that impede political reforms. It has been able to fund nonregistered civic organizations since 2006, but in practice has rarely done so. The instrument needs to be significantly reformed, but to date it has not been. In fact, its calls for proposals have become even more complex, and the number of recipient states exceeds 80, meaning that each country gets an average of €450,000 (\$608,000), with none getting more than €3 million (\$4 million)—amounts entirely incompatible with ensuring far-reaching impact. EU support for the rule of law has remained unthreateningly technocratic, focused on the outward anatomical structure of legal institutions, not the way that law mediates the power relationships between state and society.¹³

German political foundations (Stiftungen) have an admirable record and are often cited as exemplars of the so-called European approach. Yet many reformers in a variety of countries complain that they can be too ready to engage with autocracies on apolitical issues and pass this off as democracy support.

In short, many European policymakers cling to the notions of accountability and participation precisely because these are conceived as almost post-political or nonideological concepts in a way that democracy is not. And if anything, the very multidirectional complexity of political change in places like Egypt and Ukraine has encouraged European donors to take greater refuge in abstract governance principles.

Yet, ensuring real democratic reform requires precisely the opposite: a willingness to delve into the messy and conflicting politics of change, and address the concerns over power that divert reform momentum. The EU lags behind the United States in this area. It is notable that debates in the United States about democracy support tend to approach the issue through the lens of dealing with the big intractable cases like Russia, China, Iran, and Egypt. In Europe, democracy debates lack a high-politics tenor and are couched more in terms of generic identity and standards. The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has advanced a high-profile initiative to make the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and other democracy promoters coordinate their various activities in the realm of democracy support. The EU talks the talk of coherence, but the same political weight has not been dedicated to making sure this actually happens and that institutional jealousies and rivalries are overcome to present cohesive and effective policies.

The recent creation of the European Endowment for Democracy, another new actor that stands alongside member-state foundations and existing European-level civic consortia, marks an important initiative that could provide a vital prompt toward a more pluralist democracy profile in this sense. It defines its nascent approach as bottom-up, with a focus on decentralization, unregistered groups and individuals, and online movements that need to link into mainstream political activity. Its officials see the organization as having a catalytic function, acting as a clearinghouse, honest broker, and risk taker, rather than an entity entirely independent from member states.

Insiders say the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights has become more proactive and flexible in part to defend its ground against the endowment. Diplomats talk of strengthening the instrument's focus on core democracy issues, as opposed to the more narrowly defined human rights issues that have traditionally dominated its agenda. The EU has committed to reflecting a better understanding of traditional power structures and indigenous communities in its democracy and human rights support programs.¹⁴

However, the member states have a role to play as well. The promise offered by these two initiatives is no substitute for updated political involvement from these governments. Even those member states most interested in promoting democracy remain some distance from achieving such an upgrade. For example, Central and Eastern European member states have taken a lead role in galvanizing democracy support policies, and they certainly adhere to a more political understanding of countries in transition. However, these governments have not pumped meaningful amounts of their own money into democracy assistance. They have preferred instead to fund their own nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and offer them as implementers rather than providing civic organizations in other states with core support for their operations. In fact, they have been averse to confronting state-imposed obstacles to pro-reform activity. They tend to replicate their own transition experiences, even though they insist this is not the case. Their current cooperative effort to compile transition road maps reflects highly mechanistic understandings of political change.¹⁵ While their role is routinely (and deservedly) lauded, Central and Eastern European states' approach to democracy support demonstrates the EU-wide need for a qualitative rethink.

Innovative Approaches to Civil Society Restrictions

Another challenge that heightens the need for a more political rethink is that it has become more difficult to promote democracy on the ground because of the actions of some governments attempting to hold on to power. Regimes now target international support as one weapon in their broad arsenal of self-preservation techniques. Governments facing transitional moments have become more astute and clever in neutralizing democratic dynamics, and they purposefully seek to disrupt the whole range of factors that are traditionally seen as key building blocks of democratic transitions. International donors, meanwhile, are constricted in their operations.

In recent years, over 50 regimes have introduced legal restrictions on support to civil society organizations. More subtly, they have also closed civil society organizations on technical grounds, like failing health inspections; created shadow civil society bodies, youth movements, and political parties; and used new technology to compile lists of opposition supporters who then lose their jobs, health benefits, or places at universities, among other softer forms of

reprisal. Authoritarian regimes are also making agreements to turn over opposition exiles to each other on a more systematic basis.¹⁶

European democracy promoters have to deal with direct threats to their own operations in addition to regimes' tactics that render the whole in-country context less auspicious. Many of these new resistance tactics may not be exclusively or directly aimed at international democracy support projects and may not explicitly outlaw democracy support. But they serve to complicate such assistance even further. They make it harder for external actors to meet technical requirements, find willing recipients who are not worried about the effect on their credibility of partnering with Western organizations, take risks, gain legitimacy, lure would-be reformers away from regimes, and craft inclusive coalitions between domestic actors.

This all raises some profound and searching questions about the wisdom and propriety of democracy support. The danger appears greater today of outside support being counterproductive: democracy promotion efforts indubitably cause regimes to clamp down far more than in the past. However, it may be possible to counter the backlash sufficiently to ensure that democracy support is still worthwhile.

So far, European responses to these trends have been tentative, even though many aid actors now take the issue seriously. The United States has become far more ambitious, proactive, and political in this area; it has begun funding projects to help NGOs remain secret from authorities, gain ground over regimes in the battle to employ technology as a weapon, and participate in virtual training without working through regimes. The EU and member states have mainly sought to work through the United Nations in an effort to develop rules at the multilateral level that ensure NGOs' rights to receive external funding.

A small number of European democracy assistance projects have begun to focus more specifically on efforts to combat the backlash. One example is the European Commission's No Disconnect strategy, which was conceived as part of the response to the Arab Spring to provide technical advice to help NGOs circumvent regimes' use of technology to neutralize their use of the Internet and other forms of communication. This initiative has spawned a European Capability for Situational Awareness platform. Several European governments form part of a Community of Democracies working group aimed at preempting problems for civil society activists. The EU has put liaison officers into many delegations to help activists under threat. And the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights has increased the number of small and flexible grants available for NGO personnel threatened by more restrictive measures to help pay for security, medical bills, relocation, and legal help.¹⁷ Some of these efforts have convinced governments to retract draconian NGO laws.

But in general the problem has not been tackled in a systematic or assertive way. European governments have half-heartedly tried a variety of tactics—moving recipients offshore, channeling funds through arms-length organizations,

outsourcing to non-Western donors, installing protective technology—without great success.¹⁸

To respond to the narrowing of external actors' space to operate, European democracy support needs to be refashioned as a more subtle and sensitive endeavor, but it must also not become overly defensive. Regimes' innovative tactics have caused heightened problems for democracy promoters. Yet, autocrats themselves worry that they constantly need to reinvent such tactics to keep ahead of social demands for more open government, and the spread of democracy to new countries suggests that the crackdown on democracy promoters has not been entirely successful.

Of course, getting more political might aggravate the backlash against civil society. The challenge is to respond in a principled way without engendering a counterproductive spiral of repression. Donors need both to react after the fact and to get ahead of the curve by adopting strategies that preempt problems. The determining factor of whether democracy support can progress productively is European governments' ability to nest that support in a set of relations propitious enough to render dramatic crackdowns less likely.

Because the most high-profile cases of backlash against democracy supporters have involved attacks on U.S. rather than European organizations, a certain view has emerged that EU donors can escape the worst of these measures by disassociating themselves from U.S. policies. While there may be some legitimate grounds for stepping away from more assertive U.S. organizations, European democracy supporters also need to change because they are not immune from regime actions. Recently, European organizations were targeted in Egypt and Russia, for instance.

Part of the EU's new strategy has to be about transparency. European democracy promoters need to delineate their guidelines more robustly and more transparently to make it more difficult to accuse them of partisanship or direct political meddling. Most European organizations insist they are unbiased and already do this. However, given that mistrust extends beyond regime hardliners in many countries, they will need to work harder to show this is genuinely true.

European democracy supporters must then work to convert that transparency into trust and credibility through a long-term approach that is fully inclusive. Dealing with the backlash must be part of a broader strategy. Policy cannot simply back existing opposition parties if it is to gain traction because often those parties are discredited, giving autocrats a chance to gain or reestablish a foothold. Many cases show that just changing who holds the power does not suffice for sustainable democratization. Because authoritarian rulers too easily take advantage of contradictions in democracies' foreign policies,

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democracy promoters should not directly target regimes per se but rather take a step back and aim at building a new form of politics.

A key dilemma is whether democracy support can be effectively wrapped up in, and to some extent hidden within, broader packages of development support. Many development specialists advocate including democracy support in development efforts, even though regimes now sometimes even block development aid that has nothing to do with sensitive political issues. While this approach holds potential, when it has been adopted it has invariably emasculated the political elements of aid programs. For this route to succeed, operational guidelines would

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be required to prevent such depoliticization. This would require more actors in the development policy community to buy into the democracy agenda, as there has long been some discrepancy in perspective between the development- and democracy-policy communities. Bundling democracy promotion and development into indivisible packages could be achieved through some form of regular democracy audit capable of assessing the political impacts of overarching development support.

Another option would be for donors to pool resources into a general pot of funds that are then allocated in accordance with local demands. But a crucial policy question is how far individual democracy assistance projects can be separated from European or more broadly Western foreign policies. Such an approach might present insurmountable practical challenges. But the spirit would be to clarify that individual projects are not being run specifically at European governments' behest for devious political ends but because domestic actors seek such a form of funding. The United Nations Democracy Fund has registered some success in doing this and merits closer study by European donors.

More transparency will also help neutralize suspicion. Regimes often perceive external democracy support to be far more purposeful, efficient, and manipulative than it really is. Some observers argue the opposite, namely that more covert forms of support are needed to beat the backlash, evoking the kind of contacts that were built up with dissidents in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. But on balance, it would not be helpful to seek to replicate this kind of approach in today's very different geostrategic context. The covert option would not sit easily with the values of openness and rule-based politics that the EU nominally promotes.

In addition, funding rules, which have become overly onerous and rigid, need to be revisited to free up the kinds of imaginative aid capable of circumventing regimes' clever techniques. European democracy support needs lateral thinking and must back innovative measures that democrats adopt in many countries to circumvent new restrictions on their activities.

New Actors, New Models

Even more fundamentally, European democracy support needs to keep pace with the emergence of new types of pro-democracy actors and the emerging models of democratic accountability. To have impact at a structural level, democracy support policies need to reconsider how they impact society and how they seek to shift patterns of accountability in an emerging democracy.

Debates have opened up about different forms of civic organization and political representation, helping to spur a revival in the last three to five years of debates about different varieties of democracy. This is due in part to post-Arab Spring reflections, in part to a certain malaise in Western liberal democracy, and in part to the apparently superior economic performance of Asian and other rising powers. The understanding of what constitutes good “democracy” is more fluid than in the past, and strategies for supporting political transitions need to take these shifts into account.

Democracy promoters have for a long time claimed to be open to alternative political models and to reject what they see as simplistic charges that Western policies impose one-size-fits-all, context-blind liberal democracy uniformly around the world. Some evidence suggests they are not entirely wrong in this. Yet, relatively little democracy support has incorporated systematic joint deliberation about the necessary updating of the concept of “democracy” that is being promoted, with democracy supporters generally engaging in limited soul-searching. Understandably, their focus has been more on tactics and less on abstract reconceptualization of the object of their work.

Democracy support should be more receptive to a pluralism of ideas about the best means to ensure effective political competition, representation, and accountability. This does not imply any diluted commitment to counteracting the ills of autocracy. The pluralism that is needed in democracy support is not that of an open door to illiberalism. And the shift in thinking does not entail uncritically buying into notions of regionally specific Arab, Asian, or African democracy, many of whose assumptions rest on spurious grounds. It does, however, require a consideration of different ways to build on core liberal political values. Western democracy supporters need to cast a wider net in terms of the types of civic organizations and movements with whom they partner.

EU support for liberal values is becoming more sophisticated in this sense.

Support for reform is now led more by demand rather than simply exporting cookie-cutter models. Sensitivity to local contexts is at least firmly registered as a desirable guide to assistance. Even if the EU’s reform assistance is often more cautious as a result, this approach is widely felt to have given democracy support a more genuinely liberal turn. In September 2012, the European Commission and the EU’s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, forwarded proposals on improving the EU’s support to countries in

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transition, promising that reform efforts will be “swift, tailor-made, comprehensive and driven by the reform countries themselves.”¹⁹ Countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia have been given the lead role in designing their development programs with the European Commission—albeit with mixed results in terms of democratic reform. The Instrument for Stability, which supports projects in crisis situations, now gives more funding to projects designed by civil society actors rather than focusing only on traditional conflict stabilization.²⁰

The EU touts a raft of new projects on trade unions and labor standards as reflecting its concept of deep or social democracy.²¹ It is evident that the breadth of democracy assistance programs now extends far beyond minimalist, Schumpeterian conceptions of democracy. A number of new initiatives have begun to increase funding to social insurance schemes in many recipient countries and to deepen civic input through ideas such as “social cohesion laboratories.” Within rule-of-law initiatives, there has been an increase in the focus on legal aid and mobile legal clinics to improve access to justice for poor, rural communities.²² European governments spend many times more on state building and social development than on elections or “Western-style” party building. Much European support is concerned with establishing strong rule of law to restrain individual freedoms and ensure greater equality in the furtherance of collective interests: a more utilitarian than liberal approach. One ministry reports that European initiatives have tilted strongly toward “vernacular” understandings of democracy stemming from informal and patronage-based distributions of power.²³

Still, critics charge the EU approach with being too rigidly limited to a liberal model of democracy. Many articles and experts today argue that democracy support can only gain renewed legitimacy if it prioritizes less liberal and more direct or populist forms of democracy. This critical view undoubtedly has much merit, especially in taking Western governments and institutions to task for failing to attempt to change the power structures and inequalities that sap democracy of its practical value for many citizens. But not all elements of the criticisms are entirely convincing. The evidence does not overwhelmingly substantiate the claim that European democracy promoters only support a rigid, low-intensity form of pernicious liberal democracy that nobody outside the West really desires. This now-common claim unhelpfully caricatures what are far more complex debates about democratic variety and more varied international policies.

Much European democracy support is not so much guilty of foisting a narrowly defined and undesired liberal democracy on other peoples as it is of being what might be termed preliberal. At a time when much mainstream academic opinion advocates the postliberal, the EU still hesitates to support many core liberal norms in the name of elite-managed or guided political change.

The somewhat clichéd critique is that the West must stop “preaching and lecturing.” But this standard critique has become a distracting canard. Most governments, most of the time, make strenuous efforts to avoid issuing strictures

that grate in recipient states. They have insisted on little that is tightly prescriptive or conditional in terms of competing models of democracy. This is not to say that some of the discourse and language used does not still need massaging, but most initiatives have softened and become about bridge building and dialogue. Many European programs have become more indirect, supporting networks of local civic activities with other countries of comparable experience rather than transposing wholesale democratic frameworks. European actors are not alone in pursuing this approach; most of the U.S. organizations that are still viewed by many Europeans as too directly political and imposing have in fact moved in the same direction.

The EU's problem is in determining how to implement the much-repeated maxim of "country-specific approaches." The EU must develop a way to ensure that—in practice rather than just in theory—its policies flow from local contexts rather than simply projecting outward from any singular European conception of power or identity. European policy instruments should be tailored more closely to local specificities and strategic variance.

The challenge of adequately building in new actors and models to existing practices is a nuanced one. European policymakers exhibit a clear willingness to move in this direction but, unsurprisingly, tend to fall back into more familiar patterns of support in the face of any uncertainty. More needs to be done, for instance, genuinely to shape such an inclination toward reform in the Middle East and North Africa. In this region, the EU has deepened its engagement with new social and youth movements, and religious actors are no longer shunned. In the region's several processes of constitutional revision, European organizations have generally offered mediation and shared experiences, eschewing the direct promotion of particularly liberal, European templates of democracy. The relationship between economic and political liberalization is approached in a more nuanced way. However, steps beyond this in the region have been relatively limited. Local reformers perceive that the EU is reluctant fully to take on board alternative understandings of democratic representation and is blind to the fact that what regimes sell as slow, gradual progress in fact masks an atrophy of reform in a stasis of pernicious hybridity.

The embrace of "new actors" today hinges to a considerable extent on information communications technology (ICT). A pressing challenge is to get the burgeoning support for new ICT-based civic activism right. The question is whether the funds now being allocated to support new actors and ICT-related projects are being spent in the best way possible. Many local ICT-based actors raise criticisms on this score. They tend to complain that European support is still too oriented toward training individuals and not sufficiently focused on creating environments that enable ICT to have a political impact. More infrastructure is needed in places where online coverage remains confined to a small share of the population, and building that infrastructure is held back by broader Western policies on trade and investment as well as imbalanced

globalization. Many projects have left activists more vulnerable to surveillance by regimes. Ironically, many initiatives are highly dependent on multinationals, leading to issues of credibility, especially over export from the West of surveillance technology—the limiting of which has not yet been unequivocally prioritized by the EU.

While many European-backed projects and initiatives do admirably try to link new mobilization and traditional representative institutions, most are in fact concerned with using ICT to make governance more effective, not necessarily more democratic. Many seem to circumvent the legislature. Most focus on very local concerns that involve the way services are provided at a neighborhood level. While this is often a strong aspect of European approaches, projects also need to foster better linkages between the local level and more systemic issues.

Recipients also insist that outside support does not offer enough help to “new actors” attempting to move from protesting against regimes to articulating trade-offs between groups and issues of the type that are requisite to elaborating positive manifestos and governing platforms. Initiatives based on crowdsourcing party platforms or providing input into bill drafting take some steps in this direction, but much more is needed. Moreover, many projects seem to help already vocal partners of the international community adopt ICT rather than broadening participatory dynamics to genuinely new groups.

Global Partners

Lastly, new global partners must also be factored into the EU’s democracy support strategies. Much debate and policy focuses on the rising democratic powers, and it is clear that these actors must play a central part in future European diplomacy. But a delicate balance will be required in engaging with these forces. The potential exists for the EU to cooperate with them on democracy—if such cooperation is developed in sensitive and mutually conditioning ways.

With a post-Western global order forming, the transatlantic community cannot achieve nearly as much as it has in the past without the support of other democracies. Most rising powers are democracies—Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Nigeria, Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, and India. But their foreign policies remain largely realist, and they are reluctant to undermine the principles of sovereignty in the name of democracy.

That does not necessarily sound the death knell for democracy support. Rising democracies have begun to address issues of democracy support—albeit couched in different language and with notable caveats compared to Western governments. India supports the UN Democracy Fund and the Community of Democracies, and it has proposed democracy-related actions through the Commonwealth; Brazil has supported the mobilization of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) for some rights-based questions, as rival to the often-paralyzed Organization of American States.²⁴ Brazil, Turkey, India, and Indonesia are seen as swing states by virtue of their weight within their

respective regions and fluid positions on the liberal world order—their role will have special significance for the shape of future global norms.²⁵ And there are emerging differences between the rising democracies themselves, with South Korea, Indonesia, and Turkey stressing more ambition in and enthusiasm for democracy support than India, South Africa, or Brazil.

The EU acknowledges the need to close the gap between democracy policy and multilateral policy, and some EU efforts have taken shape to coordinate with non-European powers on support for Arab countries in transition. The European Commission and Brazil's Supreme Electoral Tribunal have signed an agreement to cooperate on election observation and training. There are some initial signs that transition lessons are being transmitted from South to North: many European NGOs have opened offices in rising powers to facilitate the democracy-promotion agenda. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance has put forward the idea of a new paradigm of North-South cooperation on democracy. Diplomats insist they have moved into a second phase of developing the EU's flagship strategic partnerships, in which the focus is on shifting from a largely transactional to a more values-based concept of new alliances. And the EU is seeking partnerships on the democratic management of counterterrorism efforts with India, for example.

But the general view among local reformers is that these efforts remain woefully inadequate and need to be intensified. EU institutions and member states should work to stimulate a broader pattern of coordination between Western and non-Western democracies. This should not take the form of rising democracies simply being expected to dock with EU or U.S. templates of democracy support. Moreover, if EU institutions and member states seek help from rising democracies in particular countries, such as Syria, Egypt, Burma, or Venezuela, they must be ready to link this to the reconfiguration of power within global institutions. Conversely, they should not romanticize the appeal, legitimacy, or commitment of non-Western democracies. But they can tease out useful and subtle efforts to multilateralize democracy support and encourage mutual learning between the West and other actors with an interest in democracy's fortunes.

The EU should not associate with ideas for high-profile, geopolitically conceived groupings of democracies. Proposals for such leagues, concerts, and forums of democracies still circulate in the United States, invariably as suggested circumventions of the United Nations.²⁶ The more productive way forward would be to work systematically on low-profile, practical cooperation in the more operational areas of democracy assistance. New EU development policy dialogues with South Korea, Japan, and Brazil offer a promising entry point to explore democracy issues in a concrete and cooperative way. This cooperation needs to constitute more than European donors simply “laundering” funds through new donors in the hope that the latter are more accepted in many developing states. Rather, EU institutions and member states must be

open to genuinely different ways of approaching democratic reform if they seek to build trust with the rising democracies.

The European Endowment for Democracy could be well placed to develop regular dialogues with agencies in the rising democracies engaged in thinking about international democracy, including both development agencies and civil society actors. The latter are a particularly important and an increasingly dynamic source of influence in rising democracies. European governments now often bring up democracy issues in their meetings with other governments. But cooperation could be even more promising if civic networks were built up between

Europe and other areas of the world. Such dialogues would help share experiences and reduce duplication. Focusing on more concrete questions of strategy would help convince rising democracies that supporting democracy is not synonymous with sovereignty-infringing interventionism.

Initiatives to incorporate political reform questions into conflict resolution strategies could be productive as well. Rising democracies are more comfortable talking about conflict prevention than democracy support, and they have

begun to learn in places like Haiti, Sri Lanka, and Mali that reducing conflict entails dealing with political power structures. The rising democracies also have valuable lessons to share on reform of the military during democratic transitions.

These states should be encouraged to move beyond the tendency simply to think in terms of telling others about their own transitions; local reformers appreciate lectures from other countries' experts on their transition experiences, but often complain this is not of the most practical relevance to their own concerns. Dialogue on different models of democracy would also nourish Europe's own deliberation of this question.

The EU or the European Endowment for Democracy specifically could even invite actors from the rising democracies to offer their input into monitoring the union's democracy and human rights action plan. This would convey a willingness to take advice from other democracies while helping to engage them on practical questions of democracy support tactics. And European donors and NGOs should cooperate with their rising-democracy counterparts on the closing space issue: both are threatened by tighter authoritarian restrictions, and solidarity would be mutually beneficial.

EU institutions and member states must be open to genuinely different ways of approaching democratic reform if they seek to build trust with the rising democracies.

Conclusions

Democracy support is at a crucial juncture. It could either be reinvented or begin to lose both credibility and traction. Organizations that promote and support democracy face multiple challenges in this environment. But there are also new opportunities for organizations to seize a leadership role in rethinking crucial aspects of democracy support.

The democracy support community has known for a number of years that democracy policies cannot merely continue as before. Yet organizations tend to continue with their short-term, day-to-day business of running projects instead of seeking to coordinate a higher-level and deeper reassessment of how democracy support strategy needs to adapt to stay relevant and useful in a reshaped world order.

Greater pluralism is needed. Democracy support must embrace a wider variety of tactics, models, actors, and strategies. To tackle its unique challenges, the EU should rethink its concentric-circles notion of its neighborhood; link together the management of internal with external democracy challenges; and more concretely embrace the multiplicity of European actors working on democracy issues.

In relation to more general challenges, European strategies should move beyond a technocratic, rules-export, governance focus and toward a more political approach to democratization. EU approaches must embody more variance across countries on the receiving end of policies, support more diverse institutional pathways and models, and work with a broader range of partners beyond Europe.

European policies have moved in recent years to incorporate some of the implications of the new democracy landscape. But much more is needed. Some abiding and embedded myths must be debunked about which elements of European democracy support are the strongest. The panorama today is one of abundant eclecticism. The call for more pluralist democracy support resonates with the long-standing concept of “consequentialist liberalism” that is open-ended in terms of what is required to best advance liberal norms globally.²⁷

Pluralism should not mean feckless realpolitik. Rather, the EU’s democracy support strategy needs a healthy variation that chimes with the very spirit of the political pluralism being promoted.

Notes

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