

Current geopolitical challenges of Europe: How can democracies work together in a world with rising authoritarian states?



In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, announced the triumph of liberal democracy and market economy as the ultimate form of governance. Today, more than 30 years later democracy faces remarkable challenges across the globe. The Covid-19 Pandemic has had a tremendous impact on democratic institutions. This was felt not just during the peak of the pandemic itself - when human rights were curtailed around the world, elections postponed and executive powers enlarged - but afterwards as well. The pandemic has left a mark on the functioning of democracy, in places where governments procrastinated on the restoration of democratic institutions, or where the perception of citizens on the robustness of their democratic institutions in the face of crisis was dented.

Similarly, geopolitical turmoil, chief amongst it the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its global repercussions, is both the cause and the consequences of an environment in which democracies are openly challenged and in which authoritarian actors do not refrain from hybrid war, sponsoring of terrorism or weaponizing illegal migration to Europe. Furthermore, the latest escalation of violence in the Middle East, the heinous attack of Hamas against Israel, is proof again of how fragile our democracies are. Authoritarian tendencies can be seen in a vast number of countries while the quality of democracies is declining worldwide. The past years the EU and Europe as a whole have witnessed several war fronts within or close to its neighbourhood: Georgia, Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and now Middle East. In addition, we shall not overlook the permanent security threat of terrorism that keeps spreading fear and insecurity amongst our societies. According to the most recent Global Democracy Index, only 6.1 per cent of the world's population lives in a functioning democracy (International IDEA 2022)¹. More than a third of the global population lives under authoritarian rule.

The manifold attempted coups in Africa since 2020 are yet another example of the difficulties encountered by democracies around the world. They fuel global instability and create space for private militias and human traffickers that are the main responsible for illegal migration flows towards the European Union.

As traditional power structures evolve, new geopolitical dynamics are emerging, shaping the international landscape, including the Global South. The world is witnessing a more and more evident rivalry between democracies and autocracies, a phenomenon that begs several questions: Are the trends of increasing autocratic influence temporary or are they indicative of a long-term tendency? How can the European Union's democracies respond to these challenges?

In the face of the exportability of autocratic models of government, the European People's Party (EPP) strongly believes that the European Union, as the largest promoter and supporter of democracy globally and itself one of the most successful democratic and peace projects in the world, must offer a more attractive alternative. Challenges of Covid-19 and the response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine showed that democracy is not a value in itself but an integral part of the solutions to address the challenges of the 21 century. The EU is a project of democracies and its enlargements have proven highly successful in promoting democracy in Europe also through inspiring our neighbours, especially the peoples in the neighbouring countries to follow the suit. The EPP is convinced that over the long term, the sustainability of the EU's security, stability and prosperity objectives are intertwined with its democracy agenda. We therefore need to effectively promote democracy as it is; the political system that best serves people with respect to human rights and the best equipped one to deliver on political and socio-economic expectations. The aforementioned goal will be achieved best through an information and education process about democracy and its values and by always taking into account the global cultural and historical differentiations.

1 <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker>

Global Alliances for Democracy.

The EPP is committed to strengthen democratic institutions and to build democratic resilience through cooperation. In the last year, we have witnessed concerted efforts of the free world to assist Ukraine in defending itself against the Russian war of aggression. Measures have been taken to increase democracies' interdependence and cooperation through collective sanction regimes against Russia, Belarus, Iran and their proxies. In parallel, efforts have been made to reduce economic and energy dependence on autocratic regimes that limit our political freedom of choice or make us vulnerable to coerced action. The time of relatively peaceful and prosperous globalisation appears to be over. The time has gone when globalisation was perceived as a way to build interdependence, which would naturally lead to the peaceful coexistence of more and more democratic states. The idea that cooperation would automatically lead to Russian rapprochement with the West has turned out to be an illusion. The European Union and its allies are now rather looking into building or reinforcing their strategic sovereignty. Here, there is remarkable cooperation between EU member states and our closest NATO allies, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom as well as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. In sum, we are witnessing a reinvigorated level of unity among the democratic world. However, in the same way, "undemocratic fronts" are trying to reinforce their own partnerships (ex. Russia-N.Korea, Russia-China etc). For EPP, a common European policy vis-a-vis China is imperative.

The EPP seeks to build even stronger domestic, regional, and global partnerships that are more assertive towards and resilient against the attempts of autocratic actors, who, working alone or through concerted action, undermine multilateral organisations, cause destabilisation and threaten global security. We urge our European heads of state and government to put the strength of our democracies into action to revitalise, to consolidate and to strengthen the international rules-based system that was constructed by leading democratic allies at the end of World War II. It is a system that is predicated on a set of norms and principles encouraging peaceful, predictable, and cooperative behaviour amongst states as well as formal institutional bodies, such as the United Nations (UN) and NATO that serve to legitimise and uphold these rules. These in turn provide an environment, in which democracies flourish.

Yet, we in the EPP acknowledge that global governance must become more representative and less hierarchical both in terms of representations (e.g. in the UN Security Council and e.g. inequality in tackling debt issues treatment). If the EU is to be seen as a credible democracy actor, it should also push for democratic reforms at the multilateral level, starting with the need for reforming the UN Security Council. The UN Summit of the Future scheduled for September 2024 should be a valuable opportunity to undertake reforms in this direction. At the same time it should also not hesitate to address democratic shortcomings, challenges and misdoings within the Union or with traditional allies and other third-party partners.

We need to demonstrate that the international rules-based system can meet contemporary challenges because otherwise we will see the emergence of an increasingly diverse set of alternative, more exclusive fora of cooperation, e.g. the BRICS. This would put the EU in a delicate position, balancing between the need of appealing to a broad and inclusive conception of multilateralism while prioritising cooperation with selected like-minded partners at the same time.

Reciprocal Bilateral Dialogue for Democracy.

While global alliances for democracy are key, the EU should not forget about country-level action. In fact, we in the EPP believe that the European Union's democratic discourse should be turned into a reciprocal

bilateral dialogue with partner countries, acknowledging that democracies as a political system can vary in their exact form and shape, while always encapsulate certain key characteristics: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks and Balances, Impartial Administration, and Participatory Engagement and such key values as freedom, equality, human dignity, rule of law. Supporting democracy worldwide does not have to be prescriptive but can be sensitive to different contexts and focus on essential prerequisites. In order to remain a trustworthy partner in a global democratic dialogue, the EU must continuously increase its efforts to defend fundamental democratic principles and the rule of law within the Union.

This is particularly noteworthy in the context of forward-looking enlargement strategies for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the consequent challenge to the European security architecture has rightfully intensified calls for a redefinition of the EU's Enlargement and placed more emphasis on its Neighbourhood Policy. Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia have made an inspirational choice for democracy in the Eastern neighbourhood region. We see the hopes of people of Georgia to embark on the path of EU integration and we hear the voices of the people of Belarus and, even in Russia, who want to live in a normal, democratic country and share the European way of life. Europe and the EU have a geopolitical moment of responding to these challenges and hopes by actively promoting and enlarging democracy in our neighbourhood. Democracy in Ukraine, as a future member of the EU, would be the best inspiration for the people to have democracy in Belarus and in Russia, while the NATO membership for Ukraine would be the best cure against the imperial soviet nostalgia and mentality, the treatment of which would open the doors to democratic transformation in Russia itself.

For instance, our credibility in the Western Balkans has been severely diminished due to our failure to deliver upon political promises. Wherever a vacuum is left by the EU, it has been eagerly exploited by autocratic actors, including Russia and China. The EU struggles to strategically communicate its immense technical and financial assistance compared to Beijing and Moscow's narratives of unconditional support. Large-scale disinformation and propaganda campaigns have destabilised democratic institutions and efforts at reconciliation in the region.

For us in the EPP enlargement is the European Union's most successful strategy. We support targeted democracy action plans to be embedded into ongoing or impending accession negotiations. As the EU is revisiting its enlargement policy, we need to place the democracy agenda more squarely and centrally into our policies. To do so, the EU can build on a positive track record. We are already perceived as a major driver of democratic transformation in our Eastern Neighbourhood. However, there is room for improvement and alignment of our sectoral policies with our democracy agenda. A reinforced policy towards the region, based on clear benchmarks and support for democratic reforms are key to developing democratic resilience and popular support for reforms. We must not leave our partners there in a geopolitical grey zone and allow for enlargement fatigue to set in which would hinder the process of democratic reforms implemented within the EU accession process.

The EU shall push for change but should let the domestic actors own the process and bring about results. A good example for such a two-way street is the EU's support to connect digitalisation with democracy in our Eastern Neighbourhood. As a global rule-setter, the EU has a lot to share but has also a lot to gain from the digital expertise and capacities developed in the region to defend democracy.

Safeguarding our Democratic Narrative in the face of disinformation.

Information manipulations and the purposeful spread of disinformation, both from state and non-state actors, has become an integral instrument used by autocratic actors to exert pressure on democratic values

and norms. The pandemic had exposed an increased number of people to fake news and disinformation, including conspiracy theories beyond the pandemic itself, opening up new avenues for extremists' agendas.

The EPP is concerned by the negative impacts and commit to take appropriate steps to address threats from and build resilience against, misinformation and disinformation. We know that we are not immune and commit to strengthen the resilience of our societies against these threats, including by expanding digital inclusion, media literacy education, and fact checking, as well as fostering intercultural understanding and continuing to counter, by all possible means, the propaganda disseminated by autocratic regimes. It is important to fully implement the European Democracy Action Plan², to adapt it to the new geopolitical context and foresee an increased budget for all tools necessary to tackle disinformation campaigns, especially with a view to the upcoming European elections.

The EPP believes that European democracies would do well to draw on the experiences and the expertise of countries in our Eastern Neighbourhood, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia, which are subject to frequent disinformation campaigns launched by the Russian Federation and its proxies. Equally, the United States, Japan and Taiwan all have rich experiences in tackling disinformation. In this context, progress on a Global Conduct for Information Integrity, which aims to outline what constitutes legitimate state behaviour in the information environment, is crucial.

The EPP is convinced that we must do more than spotlight the autocrats' shortcomings. If democracies are to prevail, we need to make a stronger, positive case for democratic rule. That means doing a better job of meeting national and global challenges—of ensuring that democracy delivers on its promised dividends.

We can speak from a position of self-confidence. Not least the pandemic has shown: Democracy can deliver. In the same vein, the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine has demonstrated that democracies have the power to forge alliances and partnerships at eye level, but it has also sounded the alarm preparedness. With political legitimacy, public discourses the ability to self-correct and our innovative strength, democracies have a decisive competitive advantage. We operate in a system that by necessity includes the largest number of stakeholders in decision-making process and in doing so are ideally positioned to shape responses that are legitimate and inclusive.

China.

As EPP, we believe that liberal democracies have to learn the right lessons from the experience with Russia with regard to China. The dependence on Russian fossil energy imports was not only revealed by the war against Ukraine, but had been known for many years. In the case of China, Europe's dependency is incomparably greater. In 2022, the EU's trade deficit in favour of China amounted to 396 billion euros. We observe that reciprocity and equal opportunities have become a distant prospect for EU companies in China while the leadership of President Xi Jinping has formulated the goal of being the dominant world power by 2049 on numerous occasions. China is the only country that has the intention and at the same time the economic, technological and military means to reshape the global rules-based order.

Beijing's response to Russia's war on Ukraine – a balancing act frequently referred to as 'pro-Russia neutrality' – has so far been much closer to Russia than it was in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. Simultaneously, developments since February 2022 have increased Russia's dependency on China, which some now qualify as a rising 'vassalisation' of Russia.

2 [European Democracy Action Plan \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-operations/infographic-122022-1000x600.pdf)

The Chinese Communist Party has, on its own initiative, shifted the balance and clearly pushed the core of EU bilateral relations towards systemic rivalry. At the same time, the EU cannot belittle the partnership: relations with China have grown over decades and cover all political, economic, scientific, social and cultural areas. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has summed up the main features of the EU policy towards China: A complete decoupling is neither in its interest nor realistic. China is too intertwined with the EU economies for that as one example, China's Belt and Road initiative. We therefore support, that 'de-risking' and not 'de-coupling' is the order of the day.

Putin's Russia and the democratic transformation of Russia after the Ukrainian victory.

The Russian war of aggression is the largest military conflict on the European continent since the end of the World War II and reflects the growing attempts by authoritarianism to bring down democracy. It has also shown that the era of traditional conflict is not over. It is a revelation of Russia's colonial attitude towards its neighbours. As long as the Russian Federation remains a dictatorship obsessed by an imperial nostalgia, it will continue its efforts to maintain the ever-looming threat of aggression on the European continent. As of today, the Kremlin has sent no credible signals expressing interest in dialogue or diplomacy with Ukraine, the EU, or the political West. Nevertheless, the EU will intensify diplomatic outreach efforts and continue to cooperate with Ukraine and other countries to ensure the widest possible international support for the key principles and objectives of Ukraine's Peace Formula.

Any security agreement with the Kremlin's regime would be a culpable illusion. Numerous international actors have recognised the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism and a state, which uses means of terrorism that furthermore should be followed by concrete measures. The EU is expressly committed to the permanence of the sanctions packages already adopted.

As EPP, we believe that merely sanctioning the Russian Federation will not be sufficient in the long term to effectively defend our European way of life, our model of values and society of freedom and democracy. The EU has also to work much harder in order to bring a democracy perspective for the people of Russia. It has to engage with the Russian democratic forces in a regular and more structured manner before the transformational changes in Russia. It has to have a strategy of supporting the actual transformational changes, which may be led by a transitional government. And, finally, the EU has to have a strategy to sustain these changes to democracy in a much longer-term perspective by proposing to democratic Russia a new generation agreement of political and economic association and good neighbourly relations. The EU has instruments and can use them more actively to take a global leadership and inspire the transformational change of Russia to democracy, which would restore freedom and dignity to the oppressed citizens of Russia.

Additionally, today's Putin's autocratic Russia shall be isolated internationally. Those who violate human rights must be held accountable as a matter of urgency. Furthermore, and because of the new geopolitical situation on our continent, the EU must support its neighbours, including the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries, in dealing with foreign interferences, disinformation and the consequences of the Putin's of aggression against Ukraine. In doing so, the EU should not neglect its own society and critical infrastructure. It is essential to make these more resilient to external influence. The EU must furthermore deepen its close cooperation with NATO and its partners around the world. Only in this way can European democracies defend the rules-based international order.



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