



European Democracy Support Annual Review 2021

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Introduction

This study offers a first annual review of European democracy-support policies. While there are now many widely consulted indices and rankings of democracy, there is no equivalent that measures efforts to support democratic norms internationally. This review aims to correct this imbalance and is intended to begin a series of yearly overviews of European democracy-support policies. It offers information on the efforts of the European Union (EU) and European states to foster democracy internationally, and it also dissects the limitations to such efforts. Complementing the several indices of democracy, the review aims to foster more informed reflection on policies designed to support democratic norms.

The review disaggregates the different strands of policy that are relevant to international democracy. It begins by summarizing the general global context during 2021 and how this conditioned the relative priority that the EU and European governments attached to democracy support. It then details European funding for democracy projects around the world, instances in which the EU imposed sanctions or other restrictive measures in relation to concerns over democracy and human rights, and the place of democracy support within security interventions. Across the different categories, the review looks at European democracy-support efforts globally and within Europe.

The review identifies key developments in 2021. The EU and several of its member states launched new funding arrangements to support democracy projects around the world. There were modest increases in the amount of money devoted to democracy and human rights by some governments but decreases by others. The EU stepped up its use of democracy and human-rights sanctions while still refraining from exerting strongly critical pressure in relation to many notable cases of democratic regression and serious human-rights crises. It

also began to deploy a wider range of democracy-support efforts within its own borders. The wider international context was both boon and bane. In particular, the new U.S. administration gave a fillip to European democracy support while the COVID-19 pandemic was a complicating factor. The year saw some strengthened EU-level commitments to supporting and defending democracy, but also signs of democracy and human rights slipping down the order of European geopolitical priorities.

The review covers the actions of EU institutions, collective EU-level interventions, and member-state policies as well as those non-EU European states active in democracy support. There is no objectively correct definition of what does and does not count as democracy support, and this uncertainty is reflected in the analysis. The review looks at the quantitative and qualitative elements of European strategies and reflects on both of these in its concluding assessment.

Overarching Developments

The international and political context brought new constraints as well as potential opportunities for democracy support in 2021.

COVID-19

International politics were dominated by the coronavirus and resulting COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2021 in terms of efforts to contain the virus and the diplomacy of vaccine roll-outs. The pandemic pushed questions related to democracy support down the EU's agenda. Governments sought coordination on these issues above and beyond any specific attachment to a democracy agenda. Governments around the world abridged democratic rights in order to fight the pandemic and then used such restrictions to buttress their own power; autocracies became more autocratic, democracies became less democratic. Yet as the year progressed, the EU also made commitments to integrate governance issues within its external actions related to the pandemic. Council conclusions in February 2021 promised that the EU would support a “human rights-based recovery” from COVID-19 around the world.¹ Restrictions imposed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic galvanized many democracy movements throughout the year.

The New U.S. Administration

The change of U.S. president seemed to open up new opportunities for global democracy support. Joe Biden promised to resurrect the United States' commitment to democracy after the erratic positions of Donald Trump's administration on this agenda. European governments welcomed this change and committed to working with the Biden administration on global democracy. As the new president increased U.S. commitments, this also put more pressure on European governments to demonstrate their own commitments to defending democratic norms. In December, the Biden administration organized a Summit for Democracy, with the participation of over one hundred countries. All EU member states but one—Hungary—were invited and committed to doing more to support democracy domestically and internationally. While there was a new energy to the transatlantic discussion on democracy cooperation, European actors were also somewhat wary of U.S. efforts proving too heavy-handed and cutting across their approaches to democracy support.

U.S.-China Rivalry

The U.S.-China rivalry rose dramatically in significance during the year as the primary shaper of EU geopolitical positioning. To some extent, this drove European governments toward a more assertive focus on defending democracy. The strategic overtones of the

democracy agenda became much sharper in 2021, and a striking development was the reemergence of widespread talk of alliances between democratic states. This was not only related to China, but competition with the country was a major factor behind their genesis.

As this review details, the EU launched several initiatives during the year that in some measure, directly or indirectly, ostensibly linked the defense of democratic norms to strategies related to Chinese actions and power. Still, this dynamic was not absolute and something of a counterbalance persisted. Many governments in the EU sought to avoid being pulled too far into the democracies-versus-autocracies frame. The EU has sought to cooperate more with China on climate change, in particular. Moreover, the union is likely to require help from autocratic allies as well as other democracies to the extent that China's rise becomes the main strategic concern. The U.S.-China rivalry gave a boost to democracy support but also bred concern lest this be tied too tightly to U.S. strategic interests.

Strategic Autonomy

During the year, EU foreign policy debates revolved heavily around the concept of strategic autonomy. This emerged clearly as the core notion set to define and guide EU foreign and security policy under the leadership that took office in Brussels in late 2019. President Ursula von der Leyen championed strategic autonomy as integral to her “geopolitical” European Commission while High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell gave countless interviews and speeches and wrote numerous articles on it. The push for strategic autonomy strengthened in the wake of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan (see below) and as a response to the creation of a security pact between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

The relationship between the quest for strategic autonomy and democracy support was not straightforward or clear. Leaders and statements sometimes spoke in general terms about strategic autonomy helping defend “European values,” but the concept was aimed mainly at building joint military capabilities and protecting domestic production. The prominence given to strategic autonomy during the year at the very least sat uneasily with nominal commitments to democracy support and offset other aspects of EU policy crafted around a heightened focus on global democracy.

Afghanistan

Events in Afghanistan left a broad imprint on international relations and the global democracy-support agenda. The Taliban's victory and the hasty withdrawal of international troops represented a defeat for twenty years of efforts to build democratic institutions. Even if building democracy was not the main Western aim in Afghanistan, this outcome left wider doubts about the future of such interventions. Biden's decision to withdraw despite European concerns lessens the prospect of EU states following the United States into such

ventures again.² Many in Europe had already long come to terms with the limits to what external intervention could achieve for democracy—if Afghanistan put a nail in the coffin of liberal interventionism, it also cemented a direction that EU foreign policy had already taken for some years.

The events in Afghanistan also shifted the focus of international concerns to security and migration. From August, the international community was increasingly concerned with refugee flows from the country and the possible reemergence of international terrorist operations from there. This not only represented a defeat for democracy support in Afghanistan, but also meant that EU states began cooperating more with autocratic regimes in Iran, Central Asia, and elsewhere to contain the new wave of refugees. If the indulgence by the United States and European countries of corrupt and only partially democratic elites in Afghanistan following the invasion in 2001 contributed to the Taliban's regaining support among the population,³ their even tighter focus on migration and security concerns after the Taliban returned to power risked simply repeating this cycle.

New Strategies

During 2021, the EU moved forward on significant new initiatives in internal and external democracy support. In addition, several governments published strategies in this area as well.

EU External Initiatives

The year 2021 was de facto the first operational year of the EU Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights 2020–2024. The plan promises “a new geopolitical agenda on human rights and democracy” with EU responses to new challenges posed by the erosion of democracy, climate change, and the digital transition.⁴ The EU institutions and delegations agreed strategies necessary for implementing this, including Civil Society Roadmaps, thematic and country Multiannual Indicative Programs (MIPs), and Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategies. The MIPs identified the priority areas of EU cooperation with partner countries, setting the contours of funding until 2027. The MIP for human rights and democracy closely mirrors the priorities in the action plan and links policy objectives with financing.⁵ The fact that the MIPs were only adopted by late 2021, however, means that the start of disbursement of funds under the 2021–2027 EU budget was delayed. Around a third of EU delegations have prioritized democracy and human rights within their respective country funding strategies.

At the end of the year, the EU launched the Team Europe Democracy initiative—a commitment to build a strong response to defend democracy around the world. It aims to bring together fragmented EU and member-state democracy-support actions into a coherent whole, ensuring that actions are better targeted, more strategic, and more visible. The European Commission and a handful of member states were the prime movers behind this effort to replicate their joint approach to COVID-19 emergency aid. While this could be considered a rebranding of existing joint programming, the choice of democracy as a theme for this new collective approach indicates a certain prioritization of this issue, especially as funding was made available quickly outside standard budget procedures. Team Europe Democracy includes financing for research to contribute to increased knowledge and effectiveness along with assistance to EU delegations to enhance their democracy support together with member states. The development of the Team Europe Democracy initiative will be key for EU efforts in the coming years.

EU official statements and communications in 2021 included increased mentions of democracy support. Around a third of communication materials referenced EU commitments to democracy, although it was their main focus in a small number of cases. European Commission Vice President for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová and Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen mentioned democracy in over a third of their statements, while Borrell mentioned it in around a quarter of his. These represented slight increases compared to 2020 (see Table 1). However, democracy rarely formed the spine of

Table 1. Share of Statements by Commissioners that Mention Democracy

	DG JUST Commissioner	DG INTPA Commissioner	DG NEAR Commissioner	Vice President for Values and Transparency	HR/VP Statements
2020	29.2%	21.9%	28.3%	49.2%	24.6%
2021	17.1%	32.5%	25.5%	41.9%	26.0%

Source: Hand-coded assessments of 798 statements, speeches and press releases of key high-level EU officials from 2020 and 2021. This includes statements, speeches and press releases from the Commissioners for DG INTPA, NEAR, and, JUST and the Vice-President for Transparency and Values as well as press releases and statements from the HR/VP published through the Council of the EU.

Table 2. Shares of EU Commissioners' Statements With Varying Degrees of Focus on Democracy

(% weighted)	DG JUST Commissioner		DG INTPA Commissioner		DG NEAR Commissioner		Vice President for Values and Transparency		HR/VP Statements	
	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
Main focus	10.4%	2.4%	1.9%	6.5%	5.3%	5.7%	19.4%	10.5%	18.2%	16.9%
Core part	20.8%	17.1%	3.9%	7.8%	13.3%	12.3%	25.4%	18.6%	16.7%	9.1%
Addressed	20.8%	14.6%	15.5%	26.0%	33.7%	25.5%	28.4%	26.7%	22.7%	31.2%
Not addressed	47.9%	65.9%	79.1%	59.7%	47.8%	56.5%	25.4%	44.2%	42.4%	42.8%

Source: Hand-coded assessments of 798 statements, speeches and press releases of key high-level EU officials from 2020 and 2021. This includes statements, speeches and press releases from the Commissioners for DG INTPA, NEAR, and, JUST and the Vice-President for Transparency and Values as well as press releases and statements from the HR/VP published through the Council of the EU.

these communications and was frequently mentioned among other issues in introductory or concluding text (see Table 2). The exception was Borrell's official statements, which had democracy as a core focus in just under a fifth of cases in 2020 and in 2021.

The EU introduced several new regional strategies that promised upgraded democracy support. The new Indo-Pacific strategy promises enhanced engagement in the region “based on promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights” and “mainstreaming” these principles in all EU action there, through sanctions, dialogues, trade preferences, and other tools—although without offering details on resources or strategies for these themes.⁶ The new Partnership Agreement between the EU and members of the Organization of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States—adopted in April following nearly three years of negotiations—has democracy, human rights, and good governance as one of its priority areas. It includes the possibility of taking “appropriate measures without consultation” in response to serious violations of democratic norms, although it appears to require lengthier consultations before aid cuts are implemented.⁷

Commitments to strengthening democracy are less prominent in the EU's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel, which has a heavy focus on security cooperation, stability and peace, fighting terrorism, and economic growth. While the Sahel strategy emphasizes the importance of political cooperation and governance issues, the latter relate mostly to matters

such as security-sector reform, anticorruption, the rule of law, and public-service provision. Reference to democracy support is limited to a commitment to election observation missions in this region.⁸ In May, EU Council conclusions promised stronger support for democracy in the Horn of Africa as a geostrategic priority to safeguard European security interests in the region.⁹

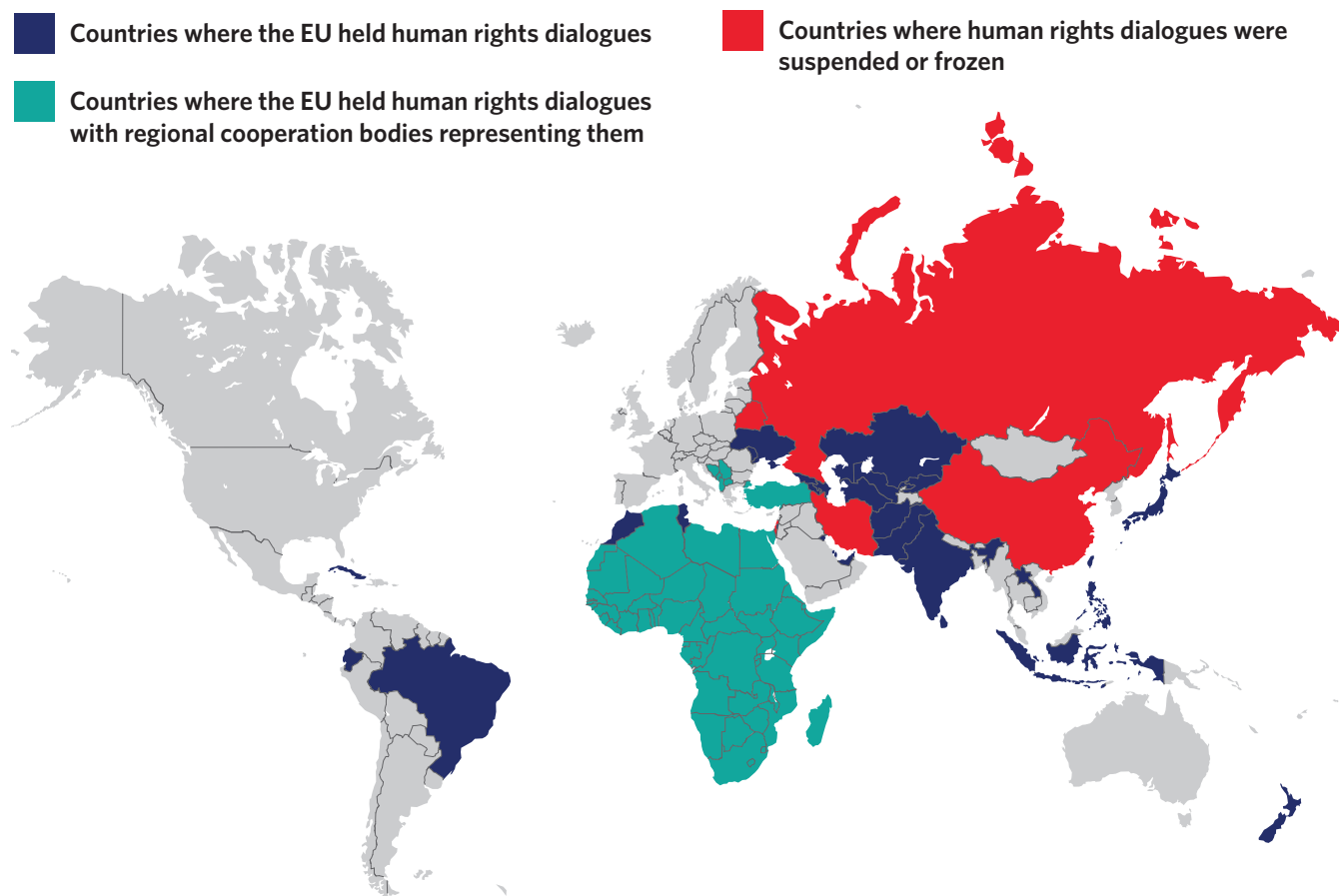
The EU agreed a Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean that includes a degree of focus on democratic governance. This states that support to governance and the rule of law in Arab partner countries will involve an upgraded focus on the independence and accountability of the judiciary, anticorruption, election observation and assistance, democratic internet governance, and privacy and data protection as well as support to civil society and gender equality.¹⁰ At the Eastern Partnership summit in December, the EU reiterated commitments to increase support for democracy for the countries concerned.¹¹

There were also important new developments at the thematic level. The third EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III) began operating in 2021 and will run to 2025. This promises an upgrade in support for women's political empowerment and participation compared to GAP II, which focused mainly on capacity building for women politicians rather than targeting the root causes of women's underrepresentation, such as legislative hurdles and patriarchal political parties.¹²

The approach to support for connectivity and regional infrastructure took a more political turn. The EU introduced its Global Gateway infrastructure program, billed as a democratic alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative that will advance "a values-based approach, offering transparency and good governance" to partners and work to support democratic norms, with a particular focus on tackling forced labor.¹³ It commits to mobilizing €300 billion in 2021–2027 for infrastructure with good democratic standards—although it is not clear where this money will come from as only €18 billion of EU aid grants is promised. It is also not entirely clear how Global Gateway investment credits and guarantees will serve democracy. The EU suggests that financing will depend on states meeting democratic standards, but the details of such conditionality have not been spelt out.

The EU continued with its regular human-rights dialogues. These were held with thirty-two partners: Afghanistan, the African Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, EU candidate countries, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Moldova, Morocco, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Palestinian Authority, the Philippines, Qatar, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The EU also started a new dialogue with Saudi Arabia, co-chaired by the EU special representative for human rights. The dialogues with Iran, Israel, and Russia remained frozen throughout 2021, while Belarus and China suspended theirs in 2021 after the last ones took place in 2019. The EU, along with several European countries individually, has supported the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, whose mission is to collect and preserve evidence of serious human-rights violations committed in the country.

Figure 1. EU Human Rights Dialogues, 2021



Source: Based on an overview table shared by the European External Action Service with the Human Rights and Democracy Network on December 10, 2021.

National Foreign-Policy Initiatives

Several European governments published new democracy strategies or wider foreign-policy reviews that gave democracy a prominent place. In the early part of the year, Germany made progress on plans for implementing the democracy strand of the German Marshall Plan for Africa. In July, then chancellor Angela Merkel and President Joe Biden signed the Washington Declaration, promising their countries will coordinate against democratic backsliding around the world.¹⁴ The new coalition government that took office in December has promised to raise the profile of democracy support and to be tougher on autocrats within and outside Europe. It has stressed that democracy support will be an “indispensable” part of German foreign policy and promised “systems-competition with authoritarian-ruled states and strategic solidarity with our democratic partners.”¹⁵ The government has also said it will develop a democracy-support policy by 2023.¹⁶ The coalition agreement also commits the

government to increasing resources and staff for human rights policy, a more feminist foreign policy, boosting support for political foundations' work on human rights and democracy, and increasing funds for the European Endowment for Democracy. Still, the government is set to be even more cautious than its predecessor on the military aspects of foreign policy, including the provision of equipment to defend democracy where it is threatened as in a case like Ukraine.

The United Kingdom published an integrated review of foreign, security, and defense policy that gave a prominent place to support for “open societies,” anticorruption commitments, and a new election observation facility—even if it was as notable for its upgrades to traditional defense capabilities as well as cybersecurity.¹⁷ On the back of this, the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office began drawing up more specific sub-strategies, including through an Open Societies and Human Rights directorate that has been charged with adding political impetus to these issues. The United Kingdom and the United States signed a new Atlantic Charter, whose eight principles commit them to defending democratic values, domestically and internationally. The United Kingdom prepared and pushed for a G7 Open Societies strand of new work, and it invited Australia, India, South Africa, and South Korea to the G7 summit to build up the kernel of a D11 grouping of democracies. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss has talked of the United Kingdom supporting a “network of liberty” and the need for democracies to push back assertively against authoritarianism.¹⁸

In its first year of post-Brexit foreign policy, the United Kingdom seemed to accentuate its commitment to global democracy as a higher-profile pillar of its strategic identity. However, many of its efforts to build new alliances brought it closer to some repressive regimes. The merger between the foreign and development ministries took some time to solidify, and by the end of the year it remained unclear what effect it would have on democracy commitments. One unresolved debate was whether the UK's “open societies” framing signaled a broader understanding of democracy than other donors or justified cooperation with economically “open” authoritarian regimes like Singapore. The Pandora Papers shone a negative light on financial governance in some overseas UK territories,¹⁹ although the government insisted it was pushing hard for transparency measures there.²⁰

France's government passed a new act on inclusive development and combating global inequalities, which reaffirmed the transversal role of democratic governance and the rule of law in its development agenda.²¹ It introduced a new Anti-Corruption Strategy in Cooperation Action for 2021–2030 promising more action from its Anti-Corruption Agency in the international arena.²² France chaired the 2021 edition of the Summit for Information and Democracy, and it sponsored the creation of an International Observatory on Information and Democracy, which aims to evaluate the information and communication space and its impact on democracy.²³ The country's commitment to supporting gender equality worldwide was shown in June, with the organization of the Generation Equality Forum in Paris.²⁴ France also launched a new Fund for Democracy in Africa and its new Indo-Pacific strategy included a formal commitment to supporting democratic values.

Spain's government produced a Foreign Action Strategy for 2021–2024 whose opening chapter is dedicated to human rights, democracy, security, feminism, and diversity.²⁵ It backed the strategy with moves on specific themes, including a Strategy on Technology and Global Order, a Feminist Foreign Policy Strategy, and the creation of a Task Force for Democracy in Latin America. By announcing an explicit commitment to implementing a feminist foreign policy, Spain joined countries that have placed gender equality and empowerment of women and girls at the center of their foreign policy. The strategy includes five priority lines of action: women, peace, and security; violence against women and girls; human rights; the participation of women at the decisionmaking level; and economic justice and empowerment.

Italy's government, formed in February, appeared to push the country in a direction more supportive of democracy, and it leaned away from relationships with China and Russia.²⁶ In July, Prime Minister Mario Draghi criticized China and all other authoritarian countries for their violations of human rights with striking boldness.²⁷ The parliament passed a resolution condemning China for its human rights violations in Xinjiang.²⁸ Democracy and human rights were stated priorities in Italy's new Partnership with Africa and programs on gender rights and peace-building were launched under this.²⁹ Still, the coalition government has struggled to cohere the radically different views on democracy support among its diverse groups.

In the Netherlands, a new interim government took office after the March elections and Foreign Minister Ben Knapen issued a statement in September on new foreign policy priorities, which include democracy support.³⁰ In Ireland, a Statement of Strategy 2021–2023 mentioned democracy as a key value, while the Global Ireland: Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025 document promised an ambitious renewal and expansion of the country's international presence including around democracy support.³¹ The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council adopted an Irish-led Resolution on Civil Society Space.³² In the Czech Republic, the coalition agreement reached in November to form a new government stressed democracy support and stronger partnerships with democratic countries around the world.

Slovakia approved its first Concept for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in the World in May and appointed its first ambassador for human rights in July.³³ This focuses thematically on supporting civil society and the establishment of rule-of-law institutions, protecting freedom of media and religion, and promoting gender equality, and regionally on the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership states. In October, the country organized its first international high-level conference on the promotion of human rights and democracy in the world.³⁴

Lithuania continued its efforts in 2021 to support the Belarusian opposition and provided a safe haven for opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who left Belarus in August 2020. It was also notable for its China policy—being outspoken against human rights abuses in the country, dropping out of China's 17+1 initiative with Central and Eastern European countries, and announcing it was considering opening a representative office in Taiwan. China responded with punitive restrictions against Lithuanian trade.³⁵ The Foreign Ministry

organized a high-level Future of Democracy forum in Vilnius in November.³⁶ In May, Latvia adopted a Development Cooperation Policy Plan for 2021–2023 that includes democracy as a priority area.³⁷ The document points to developments in Belarus as a trigger for an upgraded commitment to democracy.³⁸

Estonia set up a Centre for International Development and adopted a Programme of Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Aid 2021–2024.³⁹ Support for democracy was listed among the latter’s priorities.⁴⁰ Estonia also increased its commitments to supporting digital and e-government capabilities globally,⁴¹ and it became a member of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.⁴² The Ministry of Foreign Affairs updated development co-operation strategies for Moldova and Ukraine for 2021–2024 with supporting democratic development and strengthening good governance top priorities.⁴³

Poland’s government adopted in January a Multiannual Programme for Development Cooperation for 2021–2030: Solidarity for Development that includes a formal commitment to democracy and human rights.⁴⁴ Bulgaria adopted in January its new Mid-term Programme for Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid 2020–2024.⁴⁵ Promoting democratic processes based on the values of democracy, the rule of law, transparency, and the efficiency of institutions are central to it but they are not at the top of development aid priorities, ranking lower than education and healthcare.⁴⁶ Good governance and building inclusive societies have emerged as priorities under Romania’s Annual Plan for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid.⁴⁷ In May, the country’s two-year Presidency of the Community of Democracies was extended until September 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁸

EU Internal Initiatives

The EU institutions moved forward with a wide range of new internal policies that form part of the European Commission’s “new push for European democracy.” The main strategic document underpinning this push is the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) adopted in December 2020, which is particularly focused on the digital challenges to democracy. The EDAP reinforces commitments to linking democracy support within the EU with its foreign-policy toolbox, particularly regarding online interference in elections and tackling disinformation.

In 2021, the European Commission moved forward with several actions outlined in the EDAP and a new Media and Audiovisual Action Plan that deal with media freedom and the safety of journalists. In September, it adopted nonbinding recommendations on the protection, safety, and empowerment of journalists.⁴⁹ These mirror those of the Council of Europe, which are considered best practice by many journalists’ associations.⁵⁰ They set out actions for member states to ensure that journalists enjoy safer working conditions and that state authorities do more to counter intimidation online and offline. The European Commission drew up a European Media Freedom Act to be proposed in 2022. This will have a specific focus on the independence and pluralism of media, and it will relate mainly to the situation inside the EU but is likely to have an external component.

Under the EDAP, the EU institutions have promised a legislative initiative on strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs): legal actions often used to silence journalists and human-rights defenders. The process of agreeing this began in 2021, with a public consultation run by the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. A coalition of over one hundred civil society organizations (CSOs) pushed the EU institutions to adopt an ambitious directive, which gained traction with a European Parliament own-initiative report adopted in October.⁵¹ Taken together, these initiatives dealing with the sustainability of the media sector, media independence, and the work of journalists represent a concerted effort to address challenges to the role played by media in European democracies.

The year 2021 also saw progress on EU initiatives for safeguarding democratic norms online. These will have an impact on the digital policies of other countries around the world as they seek to tackle the problems social media and artificial intelligence pose to democratic governance. Several of these policies regulate large online platforms such as Facebook and Google with the aim of mitigating their harmful impacts on democracy. In October, the whistleblower Frances Haugan provided evidence of Facebook's damaging effects on fundamental freedoms, electoral integrity, and democracy, leading to more calls for regulation.⁵² In addition, the EU and the United States created a joint Trade and Technology Council to defend democracy against digital threats domestically and globally among other things.

Proposed by the European Commission in December 2020, the Digital Services Act (DSA) will regulate content moderation—the removal of illegal content such as terrorist content or hate speech—and also impose transparency requirements on advertising and recommender systems. In addition, the DSA puts in place a framework for risk assessment as a means of identifying and countering violations of fundamental rights and threats to democracy produced by online platforms. France in particular pushed for these and other tougher EU regulatory measures against big tech companies. Many in the EU saw these measures as key to tackling the harmful impact of social media companies on democracy in recent years. In December, the European Parliament insisted on strengthening the proposals for the transparency obligations placed on tech companies. The DSA will need to be adopted by the European Parliament and Council of the EU in 2022 in order to enter into force.

Following consultations conducted over the year, the European Commission issued in November a proposal for a Regulation of Online Political Advertisement. This seeks to impose additional obligations on online service providers to provide transparency and to set clear rules for the use of personal data in online political advertising. The basis of the regulation is an EU-wide definition of political advertising. What such a definition might be is clear in relation to political parties and candidates, but it is less clear when it comes to other actors like CSOs and private companies. The transparency requirements proposed include information on the identity of the sponsor of an advert, the amount spent per advert, the relevant election or legislative process, the data source, and the criteria for ad targeting. The regulation would limit political advertising but falls short of civil society demands for a full or partial ban on political microtargeting.⁵³

Figure 2. Key EU Policy and Funding Initiatives



* The European Democracy Action Plan also falls under the External Policies category.

Source: Authors' elaboration, drawn from research undertaken in the context of this review.

In April, the European Commission unveiled a proposal for a new Artificial Intelligence Act, which is currently under discussion in the Council of the EU and the European Parliament. The proposal uses risk-based criteria to determine what kind of artificial intelligence can be developed in the EU and exported for purposes such as surveillance and policing outside it. The act is likely to influence global standards around a risk-based approach to artificial intelligence, with democratic norms ostensibly being central in this regard.

In May, Vice President for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová issued guidance to strengthen the EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation, a self-regulation tool that sets out rules for large social-media platforms to curb disinformation and foreign or malign interference in elections.⁵⁴ The revised Code of Practice will focus on demonetizing disinformation, ensuring the integrity of services, empowering users to understand and flag disinformation, increasing the coverage of fact-checking, providing access to data to researchers, and monitoring platforms' performance. The European Commission started revising the Code of

Practice in September, attracting sixteen new signatories by late November, and it is expected to publish the updated version in the first half of 2022.⁵⁵

The second annual EU Rule of Law Report contained a stronger focus on civic-space restrictions than the 2020 report and included a section on the impact of COVID-19 on the rule of law in member states. However, on other fronts the report could be considered weaker, with many negative trends in member states entirely omitted due to the overly narrow definition of the rule of law used by the European Commission. The report does not include country-specific recommendations. In her State of the Union Speech in September, von der Leyen committed to having country-specific recommendations in the 2022 report, which would have much more practical impact.⁵⁶ Public consultations opened in December for the third reporting cycle.⁵⁷

In May, the Conference on the Future of Europe began after a delay of one year, with an online consultation platform for citizens and civil society. The conference is working to a compressed timetable, with the goal of finishing its task by mid-2022. Citizen panels and three large plenaries were organized over the course of the year. Many hundreds of decentralized deliberative exercises have also been organized by civil society and member states and registered on the multilingual platform for policy input. The conference is widely seen as the most participative exercise the EU has held. The question for 2022 will be whether these various inputs find their way into meaningful conclusions and follow-up actions.⁵⁸

In December, all member states except Hungary, along with non-EU European democracies, participated in the U.S.-led Summit for Democracy. They have all promised commitments to strengthen and support democracy at home and abroad, with details of these plans due to be submitted in early 2022. While the Biden administration announced a \$424 million Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, by the end of 2021 European states had not firmly committed extra funds specifically for the summit's follow-up (although Belgium announced just under €4 million of general democracy aid at the summit).⁵⁹ After not receiving an invitation, Hungary vetoed the EU's formal participation in the summit. Most European governments engaged positively with Biden's initiative, although with some doubts over what practical impact it was likely to have.

Democracy Aid

There was broad continuity in European aid for democracy and human rights in 2021. Funding for external democracy projects continued on a relatively constant course, with some donors making modest increases, while the EU opened a new program for spending on democracy projects in member states. Still, the funds allocated for democracy aid remain relatively low compared to those for other policy areas such as climate action or security. A striking deficiency is that donors still generally struggle to identify how much they actually spend on democracy and human rights. Figures are not easily available, democracy aid is mixed in confusing ways with other funding (such as for public administration reform or peace-building), and aid categories are not directly comparable across countries. Even those policymakers responsible for democracy aid are almost always unable to say how much their country was spending on this objective. This compares unfavorably with other areas of external funding.

By the end of 2021, the most recent official spending figures available were for 2019: in this year, of EU member states, only Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden gave more than €100 million for democracy aid, alongside the European Commission, Norway, and the UK—all these donors were individually a long way behind the U.S. allocation for democracy.

External EU Funding

As 2021 was the first year under the EU's 2021–2027 budget (or Multiannual Financial Framework), several changes to its democracy funding came into operation. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which for many years was the dedicated budget line for such funding, ceased to exist as a separate instrument. Rather, funding for human rights and democracy is now available as one of four thematic programs under a new catchall Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). This thematic program was allocated €1.5 billion for 2021–2027, compared to €1.3 billion to the EIDHR for 2014–2020, and retained the flexible modalities of the EIDHR, such as not requiring funding approval from the local government and being able to support unregistered entities.

In addition to the human rights and democracy program, a new CSO thematic program was allocated €1.5 billion for 2021–2027, compared to €1.4 billion to the CSO-Local Authorities instrument for 2014–2020. Only part of the CSO program will address projects related to human rights and democracy. The EIDHR provision on not requiring government approval has been extended to all CSO support under the new thematic programs.

These thematic allocations are dwarfed by the geographical allocations that make up nearly 80 percent of the NDICI total. Around 15 percent of these, or €9 billion, are slated for

democracy-relevant programs. The budget also includes a fund for emerging challenges, €200 million of which will go to democracy and human rights, while additional democracy support may also be possible from a reserve for rapid-response actions. Diplomats report that having a single instrument enables them to ensure that democracy is now integrated into the mainstream geographic aid programs.

In September, the EU announced a package of €119.5 million dedicated to supporting democracy and defending human rights worldwide from the funds allocated to the 2021 fiscal year. Of this, €100.8 million would go from the NDICI to local-level support for CSOs, democracy activists, and human-rights defenders across 116 countries; €5 million to the Team Europe Democracy initiative to support data collection, analysis, and enhancing coordination between member states on human rights and democracy; €4.8 million to the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; €4 million to the Human Rights Crises Facility to support CSOs in conflict zones and more unpredictable, difficult political situations around the globe; and €4.9 million to the Global Campus of Human Rights for the 2021–2022 academic year.⁶⁰

A new European Peace Facility (EPF) was agreed at the end of 2020 and became operational in 2021, with a €5 billion allocation from member states rather from the EU budget. Its main rationale is to encourage stabilization and peace mediation, and its most notable innovation is a remit to fund military cooperation and equip security forces in third countries—a potentially significant change to the extent that the EU had previously been fastidious in not funding security actors but only training them. High Representative Josep Borrell clarified that the EPF's focus is to provide military capacities to African allies for security and stability.⁶¹ The EU insisted this new remit represents a boost to democracy-building as it now funds security projects helping to establish more stable foundations for democracy. Still, the EPF has taken a large slice of EU funds for very direct security support, much of which sits uneasily with democracy-support commitments—security forces that receive EU advice and training are often used by regimes to curtail pro-democracy protests. So far, the EPF has provided funding to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Mali, Moldova, Mozambique, and Ukraine as well as to the African Union to support operations in Somalia.⁶²

As the European Commission moved forward with programming for all these funds, priorities and trends took shape in 2021. It aimed to increase the mainstreaming of democracy support into geographic and sectoral programs. It devised a new global initiative on the enabling environment for civil society. More funds were allocated to local actors and away from large CSOs, with 80 percent of EU civil society funds now managed by delegations so as to match local priorities. The European Commission increased direct funding to grassroots groups and significantly increased sub-granting to reach smaller community-based groups. The EU cannot directly support protest movements but it has increased its efforts to encourage established CSOs to engage with these. In recent years, the European Commission has offered more Framework Partnership Agreements that act like operating grants in order to provide more predictable long-term funds beyond project support.

The European Commission also devised more flexible ways to support CSOs in very repressive environments, through small local and sometimes digital actors. The European External Action Service created a new unit on digital technology to boost support for digital activists. The European Commission now aims to get funds to individuals more than before, in a form of support less tied to CSOs pressing for harmonization with EU laws and standards. Another development was that the updated Civil Society Roadmaps allowed for more extensive local CSO involvement and influence over priorities—although this did not meet CSOs’ expectations in many countries. The European Commission also moved beyond traditional consultations with CSOs to undertake more forums at the local level to give space for grassroots groups. A declared priority was to reach out even more to informal civic movements.⁶³

In response to COVID-19, the EU cut the number of Election Observation Missions (EOMs). The EU only sent one full mission, to Ghana, in the first half of the year and then one to Zambia in August. It canceled a planned mission to Ethiopia for political reasons in addition to the pandemic. The number of missions increased toward the end of the year with EOMs to Gambia, Honduras, Iraq, Kosovo, and Venezuela. Different levels of expert teams were dispatched to local or national elections in several countries including the Central African Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Liberia. The EOM to Venezuela was especially significant and led to the EU releasing a report that was critical of the electoral process while acknowledging that opposition candidates had been allowed to run.⁶⁴

The EU released democracy aid to respond to emerging opportunity or crises in some cases. It dedicated around €30 million to Belarusian civil society and promised €3 billion of general aid support if the regime agreed to reforms. In December, the European Commission announced a further €30 million for Belarusian youth, independent media, small and medium-sized enterprises in exile, and cultural actors.⁶⁵ The EU launched a new aid initiative to help Sudan’s fledgling and shaky democratic transition. New EU projects worth €155 million were approved for Cuba, with four of seventy-eight projects with the Cuban authorities and the rest to CSOs in and outside the country. After a reformist and EU-oriented government took office in Moldova in August, the EU released a package of reform-related assistance in October. After the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict reignited, a new EU for Dialogue initiative was set up, offering €15 million to projects on conflicts, with a democracy component, in the Eastern Partnership states. Also in October, the EU released €600 million of macro-financial assistance to Ukraine following progress on the rule of law under the country’s International Monetary Fund program.⁶⁶

Offsetting these increases and improvements to democracy aid were some clear limitations to EU funding. In some notable instances of possible opportunity or popular mobilization, donors did not release significant democracy funding. The EU and many of its member states equivocated about backing pro-democracy activists in Algeria and Hong Kong. In the Sahel, most new funds went to regimes to build up states’ institutional and security capacities, trying to create jobs and local health and education facilities to prevent people sympathizing with radical groups, while democracy assistance was a small and dwindling

part of these aid programs.⁶⁷ In Libya, the EU supported a new unity government but did not release significant funding to help build a democratic political system around it; notwithstanding a contribution to strengthening election infrastructure in the country, the main focus of funding remained on stemming migration as tensions within the new government triggered a new wave of migrants. In Syria, the last remaining aid efforts to underpin opposition-held governance structures wound down.

National Government Funding

Several EU member states increased their democracy aid in 2021. Sweden began its Drive for Democracy in 2019 and advanced this further in 2021. Its development agency, Sida, announced that its regional development cooperation strategy with sub-Saharan Africa would include an additional €48 million for strengthening democratic movements that have faced increased risk as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁸ Sweden launched a new Middle East and North Africa regional strategy that increases democracy support, especially in the Palestinian territories. Under the country's declared feminist foreign policy, funding to women's rights groups was one of the major sectors of support. In April, Sida began work on a new party-support program.⁶⁹

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy stepped up its work to promote collaboration between Swedish and Russian municipalities, including through initiatives that help to increase the participation of civil society in municipal decisionmaking processes.⁷⁰ In Syria, Sida supported independent media, the dissemination of knowledge about nonviolence, and training for lawyers and journalists on women's rights, among other initiatives.⁷¹ Sweden introduced new development cooperation strategies for Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, and Guatemala, alongside a strategy for Latin America that increased resources for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.⁷² It also added €96 million to its Asia development cooperation strategy for democracy and human rights.⁷³

No other state offered an as well-structured or highly prioritized set of democracy-support initiatives as Sweden, although in many cases governments increased their funding levels. Germany remained the largest European government donor in democracy support. Its aid increased modestly and the number of countries where it operated political aid programs increased, although it is unclear precisely how much funding went to democracy. The development ministry published a new strategy to guide its work over the next decade. This launched a new approach that reduced the number of core recipients from eighty-five to sixty countries, with thirty-three of these set to have governance and democracy as a “key” component of their aid programs, including through new “reform” and “transformation” partnerships more tailored toward political reform.⁷⁴ The new government's coalition agreement promises that more development aid will be oriented toward democracy and human rights.⁷⁵

Poland's development aid slightly increased from €0.7 billion in 2020 to €0.8 billion in 2021.⁷⁶ Democracy support is mainly provided through Solidarity Fund PL, which has

offices in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.⁷⁷ Its budget increased from €3.2 million in 2020 to €5.9 million in 2021, and it gained new competencies in overseeing election-monitoring missions.⁷⁸ Poland increased its Solidarity With Belarus aid package from €11.2 million in 2020 to €13.6 million in 2021.⁷⁹ Estonia increased its development aid, including its democracy support, although with relatively limited amounts of funding.⁸⁰

Most commonly, European donors increased their aid in 2021, which they insisted increased the resources made available for democracy projects, although without specific or identifiable amounts being allocated to democracy assistance it was impossible to quantify the measure of their commitments. France increased its ODA by 49 percent between 2020 and 2021, and it stated it would increase its democracy aid, especially to media support, democratic participation and civil society, human rights, and gender equality. It also allocated €50 million to its new Democracy Fund for Africa to be spent over five years.⁸¹ Spain increased its ODA, mainly for spending related to the COVID-19 pandemic and without clear allocations for democracy. Italy increased the annual budget of its Agency for Development by €600 million from 2020 to €6.4 billion. Democracy was listed as a priority but without any preset allocation to it; most proximately, €125 million was allocated for peace and stabilization.⁸²

Several countries did not specify an overall increase in democracy aid but launched new initiatives in this field. Denmark launched the Amplify Change fund for civic movements and the Tech4Democracy Program. Austria contributed to UNDP programs on strengthening electoral processes and democratic participation in Ethiopia and Uganda, along with new programs on elections in Mozambique, local democracy in Georgia, investigative journalism in the Balkans, and women's rights in Kosovo. Finland's government published its "Report on Development Policy," which identified democracy support as a top priority of development policy; a budget line of €3 million supported Demo Finland and a newly created Rule of Law Centre.⁸³

Other European donors decreased their democracy funding. Within the United Kingdom's overall aid cut from 0.7 percent to 0.5 percent of GDP, funding for democracy and the rule of law has been cut back (by an amount that was still unknown at the end of the year). Some long-funded programs wound up in the context of already deep, ongoing funding cuts to nonstate bodies involved in democracy assistance.⁸⁴ The United Kingdom led the creation of the Global Media Defense Fund, which had an active role in the Media Freedom Coalition, and prioritized support for independent media in its aid.⁸⁵ Other thematic areas suffered cuts, although the country remained one of the largest European democracy aid funders.

The Czech Republic cut its democracy aid as its Transformation Cooperation Program shrank, although it increased its support to civil society and independent media in Belarus.⁸⁶ Slovakia's democracy support remained at roughly the same level as in previous years even as its overall aid increased slightly, though the Sharing Slovak Expertise initiative shifted some of its aid to COVID-19 priorities and away from democracy.⁸⁷ Latvia's Development Cooperation Policy Plan for 2021–2023 included a decrease in aid from 2021 into 2022 and 2023.⁸⁸

This was the eighth calendar year of support by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) to democracy actors in Europe’s neighborhood and beyond. The EED spent just over €30 million on democracy support. Over 40 percent of this went to independent media, with many grants providing core funding that enables outlets to continue to operate in challenging environments. The EED enhanced coordination efforts relating to Belarus, acting as a basket fund to support the International Accountability Platform for Belarus. Beyond grant-making, the endowment contributed to knowledge-sharing and policy debates through many events during the year, including partnership events such as Democracy Day and Difference Day, and a series of closed-door events that brought together activists with stakeholders from EU institutions and member states. During the second half of the year, in the run-up to the Summit for Democracy, the EED together with fourteen other democracy-support organizations on both sides of the Atlantic developed and published the Five Messages for the Summit for Democracy document.

Funding Within the EU

In 2021, the first calls for proposals were published and awarded under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values program (CERV). This new program was adopted under the 2021–2027 EU budget, with a total budget of €1.55 billion. It merged the former Rights, Equality and Citizenship program and the Europe for Citizens program that disbursed €435.3 million and €195.5 million respectively under the 2014–2020 EU budget—meaning the new program represents a significant increase. CERV has an expanded scope with democracy and the rule of law added as focus areas, making it the first clear funding mechanism for protecting and promoting democracy and the rule of law inside the EU.

In April, the European Commission published a call for proposals for four-year Framework Partnership Agreements to support European networks, CSOs active at the EU level, and European think tanks on a variety of themes including “promoting and protecting Union values” and “promoting citizen engagement.” These agreements existed under the previous EU budget, but now they address the areas covered by the EDAP, including democratic elections, disinformation, and the rule of law. Over the course of the year, further calls on, among other things, promoting equality, combating gender violence, supporting strategic litigation, and upholding democratic values were published. In the summer, the European Commission contracted a consultancy to conduct a mapping of civil society in each EU member state to inform its programming, with a view to funding larger organizations that can regrant funds to smaller civic initiatives—however, CSOs complained about what they judged to be limited consultation with civil society.

The European Commission also launched a new set of projects through the Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology focused on the broad area of media support in the EU. This included calls for projects on media councils, support for media freedom and investigative journalism, media plurality, and a media-monitoring system. At the same time, the Directorate General for Research and Innovation launched

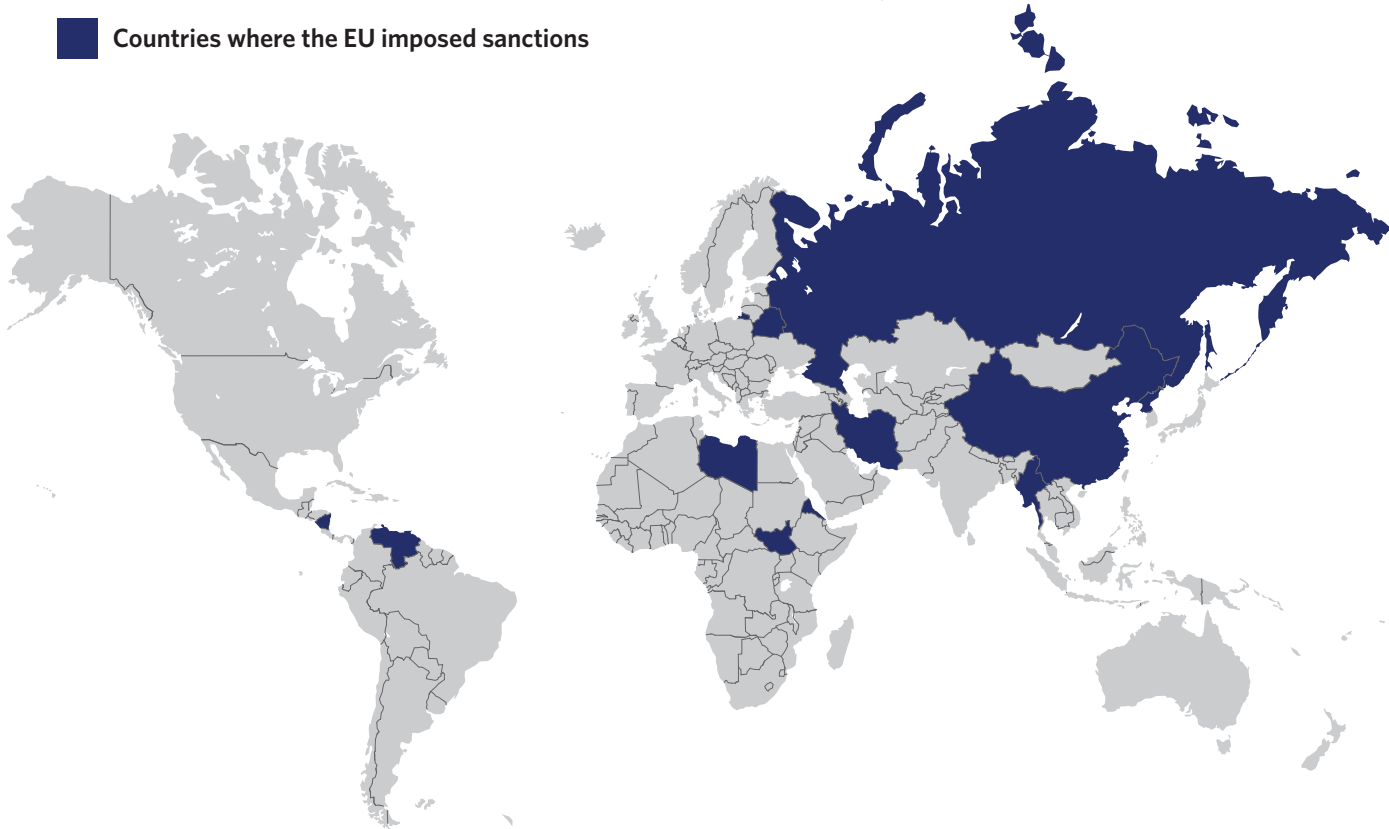
a new cluster of research opportunities linked to democracy under the Horizon Europe program. Horizon Europe includes more funding for democracy than in previous years. Calls focused on the future of liberal democracy, democracy in the EU's neighborhood, the economic models of modern democracies, post-pandemic politics and governance, and the intersection of feminism and democracy.

Norway continues to provide support to CSOs in fifteen EU countries through the Norway Grants program, with most of its funding for civil society, good governance, and human rights flowing through the EEA Grants fund run in partnership with Iceland and Liechtenstein. In the last year of the 2014–2021 cycle of programming, the EEA donors failed to reach an agreement with Hungary on selecting an operator to manage funding for civil society in the country, as they insisted this be a fully independent body.

Sanctions and Democratic Conditionality

The EU has generally preferred to avoid strongly punitive approaches to democracy support, and it has applied democratic conditionality mainly under its enlargement policies. While this long-existing feature continued in 2021, the year also saw the EU adopt sanctions and reduce aid in connection to human rights and democracy. Possible sanctions were debated in all EU leaders’ meetings, although the need for unanimity acted as a brake on their use and legal doubts rumbled on about whether listings (those individuals subject to restrictive measures) were human-rights compatible. During the year, there was continuous work to sharpen the operational details of sanctions in areas like preventing evasion and clarifying criteria to remove sanctions. There was also some debate on the sanction regime’s next phase and possible extension.

Figure 3. EU Sanctions on Grounds Related to Democracy and Human Rights, 2021



Source: EU Sanctions Map, last updated January 12, 2022, www.sanctionsmap.eu.

Sanctions

In December 2020, the EU agreed on the new Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. As 2021 unfolded, it invoked this to apply several rounds of sanctions on individuals and entities deemed guilty of major human-rights abuses. Notably, the regime enabled the EU to impose sanctions on Chinese officials for the first time since the Tiananmen Square killings in 1989, on Russian officials implicated in the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and on officials responsible for especially egregious abuses in Eritrea, Iran, and North Korea; and to respond to political stalemate in Lebanon.

Introduced in 2020, the United Kingdom's human-rights sanctions regime became a regular part of its foreign policy in 2021.⁸⁹ The country also established its global anticorruption sanctions regime in April and began to apply it, taking it beyond the scope of EU sanctions.⁹⁰ Norway adjusted its sanction provisions to align itself with the EU's shift toward targeting particular individuals or entities.

Some countries were the subject of especially intense debates about restrictive measures that led to the EU imposing sanctions. But in several of these cases, it kept sanctions to a modest scale and offset them with efforts at political engagement.

Belarus

After initial measures in late 2020, the EU incrementally ratcheted up its response to the situation in Belarus with five rounds of sanctions over the course of 2021 to cover 183 individuals and twenty-six entities. In the fourth round in June, it went beyond individuals and entities to impose sanctions covering the financial services and oil and potash sectors, along with restrictions on exports of digital surveillance equipment—the first time the EU imposed sectoral sanctions on Belarus. (In December, Lithuania was discovered to have broken the sanctions by importing potash from the country.)⁹¹ EU and UK sanctions went beyond U.S. measures related to financial products and sovereign debt; the United States caught up at the end of the year. Measures in response to the hijacking of a Ryanair flight with journalist Roman Protasevich on board included a ban on the access of Belarusian airlines to airports and airspace within the EU.

The fifth round of measures came in response to President Alexander Lukashenko's strategy of helping refugees across Belarus's border into the EU, mainly Lithuania and Poland.⁹² More measures in November targeted the state airline Belavia for its role in carrying refugees from the Middle East to Minsk. As this crisis worsened, Germany's then chancellor Angela Merkel reopened contact with Lukashenko to negotiate humanitarian relief for the refugees.⁹³ The European Commission made €700 million available for this. Some member states wanted to hold back on the new sanctions as Belavia then stopped the refugee flights. Eastern European and Baltic states as well as Belarusian opposition figures criticized this pause and Merkel's dialogue with Lukashenko. Belarus's government ceased ferrying refugees to the border, suggesting that sanctions had some impact—although not on democracy in the country.

Russia

In June, the EU extended its sanctions against Russia related to the annexation of Crimea for another six months, and in October it added to its listings eight Russians deemed to be undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity.⁹⁴ After targeting four individuals involved in the Navalny poisoning case, the EU took no further action in relation to this issue. Russia expelled three EU officials for attending protests against Navalny's imprisonment; Sweden, Poland, and Germany retaliated by expelling a Russian diplomat each.⁹⁵ Germany suspended its Petersburg Dialogue with Russia after the latter designated several German CSOs as "undesirable foreign organizations." Still, after the sanctions on a small number of officials, in June France and Germany pushed to offer Russia a new process of leaders' summits. While other member states blocked this, EU policy moved back to selective engagement with Russia. Although the Crimea-related sanctions remained in place, no comparable general measures were considered in relation to the Russian regime's infringement of democratic rights. At the end of the year, the EU debated adding to its sanctions after Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders. It also imposed sanctions on operatives of the Russian mercenary group, Wagner, in relation to their actions in Africa.

Venezuela

When the EU placed sanctions on nineteen Venezuelan officials in February, the country's government expelled the union's ambassador. The EU then signaled that it would be willing to lift sanctions in return for incremental steps from the regime toward a de-escalation of the fraught situation in the country. It also stopped holding Juan Guaidó to be the country's legitimate president, putting itself at odds with the Lima Group of countries from the region. The EU's focus was increasingly on trying to mediate between the regime and the opposition to break the stalemate,⁹⁶ which kept the scope of sanctions within limited bounds. Norway led a third attempt at dialogue that began in August, with the Netherlands as one of the monitoring states, together with Russia, but this made little progress.

Myanmar

The EU imposed three rounds of sanctions on Myanmar. These were designed to avoid punishing the population and instead targeted ministers, deputy ministers, and the attorney general as well as economic entities in the timber and gems sectors. The EU also withheld financial aid from the government, although it continued humanitarian assistance, providing €20.5 million of emergency relief.⁹⁷ At the end of October, the European Parliament called for wider sectoral sanctions as Myanmar's junta continued to intensify repression against the population, but member states declined to take this step.⁹⁸

Lebanon

In July, the EU adopted a framework that would enable it to apply sanctions against Lebanon's elite for blocking the formation of a new unity government.⁹⁹ However, France then co-hosted a donors conference that raised €314.5 million more in aid for Lebanon.¹⁰⁰ The EU and its member states pumped money into the country to prevent a complete collapse of the economy while also trying to hold back tranches of support pending reforms, mainly economic ones rather than deep political ones. After a government was formed, France pushed to retain engagement and economic support, while the EU restarted support for ministries with technical assistance, making available €291 million in grant financing with some conditionality.¹⁰¹

Limited or No EU Measures

While the EU imposed an increasing number of sanctions in 2021, there were notable cases of democratic crisis and repression where it took no or extremely limited action. It did not impose sanctions in relation to China's increasingly harsh clampdown on pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong. In contrast, the United Kingdom imposed restrictive measures and offered citizenship to many democracy activists in the territory. It also followed the United States in announcing a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in China over various human rights concerns, while the EU did not do so. The EU did not impose sanctions in response to the Cuban regime's brutal repression of protesters who took to the streets over the summer, with France and Spain in particular opposing the European Parliament's call for the EU to use its human-rights sanctions regime.

The EU condemned the move by Tunisia's president in July to close the parliament, but it did not impose sanctions. The EU, France, and other member states mainly called for dialogue between all parties to find ways to respect the country's democratic constitution.¹⁰² The EU maintained sanctions from 2020 on Turkey relating to drilling for gas in the waters around Cyprus, but it did not take measures related to the country's ever-more pronounced authoritarian turn.¹⁰³ EU relations with Algeria continued in a relatively positive vein, without measures being taken as the regime put down democratic protests with virulence. France's President Emmanuel Macron made critical remarks about the country's authoritarian politics, leading Algeria to recall its ambassador. Debate sharpened in the EU late in the year over possible measures as Serb leaders threatened to pull out of Bosnia and Herzegovina's multi-ethnic state institutions, but ultimately no moves were taken. Germany pushed for EU measures while Borrell was against this. The United Kingdom did impose sanctions, together with the United States, related to corruption in the country.

In Africa, there were several instances where the EU declined to act in critical fashion. Most conspicuously, it did not impose sanctions on Ethiopia's government in response to its military actions and rights abuses in the Tigray region.¹⁰⁴ The EU began negotiations with Burundi's government to lift sanctions in place since 2016. While it renewed measures on

four individuals in October, it declined to move forward with restrictive measures under Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement. After a coup in Guinea in September, the United States suspended aid and the Economic Community of West African States imposed sanctions on the country's military leaders, while the EU continued providing aid and only imposed an arms embargo. France's government was cautious, having been close to the ousted authoritarian president Alpha Condé.¹⁰⁵ Following the coup in Sudan in October, Borrell suggested that the EU could impose measures if the situation was not immediately reversed, yet this did not happen—in contrast to the World Bank, which halted its funding, and the African Union, which suspended Sudan from participation in union activities.¹⁰⁶ Following the coup in Mali in May, the EU adopted in December a framework for sanctions, but it did not list any individuals for restrictive measures and security cooperation continued (see below).¹⁰⁷

While the EU did not impose sanctions specifically related to many internet shutdowns across the world, its sanctions regimes in Belarus, Iran, Myanmar, and North Korea did cover some issues relating to digital restrictions. An upgraded EU export-control regulation entered into force in September, with new criteria relating to digital surveillance equipment, suggesting that firmer action might be taken in the future. At the Summit for Democracy in December, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Norway—along with Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom—signed on to a broader multilateral code of conduct that will attach human-rights criteria to export licenses for sensitive technologies.¹⁰⁸ At the end of the year the commission stepped back from proposing a ban on products made with forced labor, rather suggesting that companies take responsibility for carrying out due diligence on the use of forced labor in their supply chains.¹⁰⁹

Aid Reductions and Conditionality

In addition to sanctions, the EU moved in several cases to suspend or reduce aid on grounds related to democracy and human rights. If for some years much attention was on internal debates over the new sanctions regime, policymakers focused increasingly on aid conditionality in 2021. This change occurred because of events in countries like Ethiopia and Myanmar that made it difficult to continue large aid flows, and also because of the new, restructured Multiannual Financial Framework and its new processes for external funding. In addition, COVID-19's economic impact put pressure on aid budgets and made governments more sensitive to the need to justify aid flows.

In early 2021, the EU suspended €88 million of budget support to Ethiopia's government due to its military actions against opponents in the Tigray region and the limitation of access for humanitarian relief workers. It cut pre-accession aid to Turkey on democracy and human-rights grounds, which it has done each year since 2018. The EU held back training assistance for Libya's coast guard and other security forces after criticism that these funds were fueling human-rights abuses, and it called for detention centers in the country to be closed after the UN criticized it for being complicit in rights abuses carried out in them.

The EU also intimated that it would hold back macro-financial assistance to Georgia on rule-of-law grounds and in response to the government's apparent complicity in attacks on a gay pride march. The government preempted this by announcing it would not request these funds and would take funds instead from the Asian Development Bank that did not come with democratic conditions.¹¹⁰

Policy on Afghanistan reflected a complex mix of dynamics. The country was among the top ten recipients of EU aid each year during the 2010s, but the EU and its member states held back aid after the Taliban seized power. However, the EU quadrupled its humanitarian aid with five benchmarks attached: that the Taliban cooperate on terrorism, allow people to leave, let humanitarian aid in freely, respect human rights, and form an inclusive government. The EU defined these benchmarks as aims rather than preconditions for cooperation with the Taliban.¹¹¹ It engaged with the Taliban to cooperate on security and refugee issues although it did not formally recognize the new government. The EU pursued “humanitarian plus” aid beyond strictly emergency support despite the clearly autocratic nature of the new regime.¹¹² After cutting its aid in 2020 from \$70 million to \$18 million, the United Kingdom increased it again. The EU mooted a new €1 billion for Iran and Pakistan to manage refugee flows from Afghanistan, despite these countries' marked democratic backsliding. At the end of October, it decided to reopen its diplomatic representation in Afghanistan.¹¹³

Overall, the EU was relatively sparing in its use of aid cuts as a mean of leverage on democracy issues. Member states and EU institutions sought to retain the flexibility to vary such responses with strategic aims in mind rather than be obliged to reduce funding in accordance with democracy criteria. Despite a hardline new government with a more authoritarian style taking office in Iran, the EU stepped up its efforts at rapprochement and renewal of the nuclear accord. Germany used harder rhetoric on Chinese and Russian authoritarianism but tended to say this justified more engagement through trade.¹¹⁴ Tranches of EU aid were held back for Ukraine but not the likes of Egypt, Iran, or Uganda with more limited aid and far worse human-rights records. As with sanctions, EU decisions on aid cuts lacked precision or any detailed attempt to match proportionality of measures with expected outcomes.

The EU and its member states also increased aid to many nondemocratic states. The EU offered new aid under recently signed cooperation agreements to Central Asian states, Cuba, and Vietnam. After regime-controlled elections in Uganda, it did not suspend aid; rather, it was President Yoweri Museveni who halted funding from the Democratic Governance Facility—a fund dating from 2011 and financed by Austria, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the European Commission.¹¹⁵ The EU increased aid as repression intensified in DR Congo, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe. It also increased funding for Egypt, Rwanda, and other countries with authoritarian regimes for cooperation on COVID-19 vaccines.¹¹⁶ Within weeks of a military coup in Chad, the European Investment Bank announced a €340 million investment in green projects in the country, alongside Guinea and Mali. Negotiations with Azerbaijan for a new contractual agreement for political and economic cooperation did not conclude successfully, in part due

to the regime's repression of civil society, yet the EU released new aid to the country for a range of sectoral issues.¹¹⁷

The EU continued to fund the Palestinian Authority after President Mahmoud Abbas canceled elections in May. Many in the EU shared his fear that Hamas would win the elections. Hamas's anger at being deprived the chance to compete in elections was one reason why the group then launched a wave of missile strikes on Israel, which in turn caused Israel to respond with far greater firepower against the Gaza Strip. The EU was not able to agree on a common position on this conflagration, with Hungary in particular blocking criticism of Israel. The EU did push for the Palestinian Authority to set a new date for elections but it did not reduce aid or trade cooperation when this failed to materialize.

The EU did not attach significant democratic conditionality to trade agreements. The European Parliament acted largely against member states' preferences when it effectively froze ratification of the EU's Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China signed at the end of 2020, acting after China imposed restrictive measures against some its members in retaliation for the EU sanctions on Chinese officials. This was an important case of the new sanctions regime spilling over into economic relations. Mostly, however, the EU continued or even increased trade with authoritarian regimes. European governments declined to take any measures against China that would interrupt trade and investment in response to the Chinese actions against Lithuania outlined above, with the EU saying only that it may consider raising the issue in the World Trade Organization. The EU pushed ahead with trade talks with Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand—all backsliding countries. Talks with India on a free-trade agreement resumed in May as the country was downgraded to nondemocracy in several international rankings.¹¹⁸ The United Kingdom's foreign minister stated that it would sign trade agreements with countries suffering poor human-rights records.¹¹⁹ It did so with Turkey, pushed similar talks forward with Singapore, and finalized a new investment agreement with the United Arab Emirates.

The democracy clause included in EU trade agreements was not used, nor did the EU use conditionality provisions in its Generalized System of Preference (GSP) trade regime. GSP democracy and human-rights conditionality has been used only four times over nearly twenty years, most recently with regard to Cambodia in 2020. The EU did not consider any new cases for the removal of trade preferences in 2021, though a new complaints mechanism came into force, which may lead to increased pressure for such action in the future.¹²⁰ The European Parliament called for the EU to remove GSP+ from Sri Lanka as its government failed to abide by human-rights obligations, but member-state leaders declined to take this step.¹²¹

At end of the year, the European Commission was finalizing long-discussed proposals for an “anti-coercion” trade-defense sanctions regime to be used when countries adopt restrictions against EU trade and investment or attempt economic coercion. China's actions against Lithuania were an added prompt to these proposals, even if member states eschewed any concrete measures against China for these actions in 2021. These new sanctions are not strictly related to democracy and may take some focus away from, or even cut across, human-rights sanctions, although their eventual targets may well be mainly nondemocratic powers.

There was an overall increase in European arms sales to nondemocratic regimes. Twenty-six European companies were among the world's one hundred largest arms suppliers, and European suppliers accounted for 21 percent of total arms sales in 2021, with the United Kingdom the third-largest supplier behind the United States and China.¹²² While the United States cut arms sales to Saudi Arabia, European supplies to the country increased. The United Kingdom restarted arms sales to the Saudi regime despite a court decision that ruled against these on the grounds that the use of these arms in the Yemen conflict flouted basic humanitarian norms.¹²³ France and Greece deepened security cooperation with Saudi Arabia in an effort to push back against Turkey's regional assertiveness. In December, Macron toured the Gulf states, where he signed new arms deals, and he became the first Western leader to meet with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. When Italy restricted arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over their involvement in Yemen, the United Arab Emirates ordered Italian troops and aircraft to leave the Al Minhad Air Base, causing Italy to remove some of its restrictions.¹²⁴ New French weapon sales to Egypt in May raised particular concerns since it was later proved that they had been used in civil society repression.¹²⁵

In 2021, EU humanitarian aid increased by 60 percent to €1.4 billion from €900 million in 2020.¹²⁶ These funds went mainly to addressing crises in countries with authoritarian regimes. Humanitarian assistance increased in particular to Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, as noted above. In countries where it imposed sanctions or conditionality, such as Syria and Venezuela, the EU also usually increased its humanitarian relief. It allocated €130 million of humanitarian aid to Syria and to support Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. While the EU retained a strictly nonpolitical approach to such emergency relief, so significant an increase in humanitarian aid has clearly had political implications: the EU channeled most of this aid to UN bodies that set priorities in cooperation with the autocratic governments hosting them.

Internal Measures

The relationship between the EU institutions and many member states on the one hand and Hungary and Poland on the other steadily deteriorated in 2021. Article 7 proceedings against both countries remain stuck in the EU Council but there was a perceptible hardening of member-state positions with regard to these two governments' persistent breaches of democratic values. While the ultimate sanction of suspending voting rights for Hungary and Poland remains off the table, the issue of conditionality moved up the agenda through a new rule-of-law mechanism in the 2021–2027 EU budget.

In November, the European Commission sent letters listing instances where the two governments' rule-of-law infringements undermined EU financial interests.¹²⁷ The letters are widely seen as the first step in the use of the conditionality mechanism on the rule of law. Still, during discussions in the EU Council in October, the European Commission made clear that it would not activate the mechanism until the European Court of Justice rules on

its legality in early 2022, despite significant pressure from the European Parliament. The Netherlands has taken the strongest stance on the need to enforce the conditionality mechanism while Germany has argued for some kind of compromise with Hungary and Poland. The European Commission did not send funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility to either country in 2021, possibly preparing to enforce rule-of-law conditionality in relation to the EU budget.

After Hungary's government passed an anti-LGBTQ law, fourteen member-state leaders denounced this move at a summit in June 2021. The Netherlands' Prime Minister Mark Rutte went as far as to say that Hungary "has no place in the EU anymore."¹²⁸ Hungary's governing party Fidesz was finally removed from the European People's Party (EPP) family in March. Over the years, the EPP had shielded Hungary's government from punitive EU measures. While Fidesz was suspended from the party family in the spring of 2019, its MEPs had continued to enjoy the rights and privileges of EPP membership within the European Parliament. That Fidesz was finally pushed to leave the EPP was a significant step in allowing for a pan-European and cross-party alliance in favor of stronger measures against Hungary's government.

Poland's government lost a series of cases at the European Court of Justice regarding its continuous breaches of the rule of law through controversial judicial reforms in recent years. In October, the court ruled that Poland's government should pay €1 million per day for failing to abolish a disciplinary chamber for judges—the highest daily fine in EU history. The commission also launched legal action against the Polish government after the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, the legality of which is questioned by Brussels, ruled in October that the Polish Constitution has primacy over EU law, challenging the European legal order. Following the European Council in October, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that Poland would need to abolish the disciplinary chamber, end or reform the disciplinary regime for judges, and start reinstating judges who had been sacked in order to receive EU pandemic recovery funds—a clear invocation of democratic conditionality. This pressure prompted Poland's government to agree to revamp the disciplinary chamber, although it is not yet clear whether this would allow for the chamber to function with genuine independence.

While the legal developments in the European Court of Justice are important in the ongoing standoff between Hungary and Poland on one side and the EU institutions on the other, political developments also weigh heavily on the decision to invoke democratic conditionality. Many member states balked at the prospect of these two governments taking significant shares of the recovery fund when they were so directly flouting core EU values. The coalition treaty of Germany's new government indicates a hardening of the country's position and increases the likelihood that rule-of-law conditionality for EU funds will be formally invoked in 2022. If the EU and its member states declined to take critical action against Hungary and Poland for many years, in 2021 they took tentative steps toward a firmer stance.

Security and Peace-Building Interventions

While the use of military deployments has always been highly sensitive within the democracy-support community, European governments have sometimes seen hard power as beneficial to democracy. In 2021, however, there were no deployments of European troops specifically to defend democracy. European governments moved further away from seeing military assets as having any relevance to democracy support. Events in Afghanistan exacerbated this trend that was already evident from the mid-2010s. In countries where the EU or its member states had security missions, the relationship between these and support for democratic norms was uneasy.

Although several violent conflicts worsened in 2021, EU states eschewed major military engagements. The EU did not employ any of its battle groups during the year. Yet there was much internal discussion about the need to strengthen military capacities and to engage more directly in conflict situations. Borrell was especially keen to give EU foreign policy this more action-oriented focus.¹²⁹ The EU prepared a Strategic Compass during the year with the aim of cohering and sharpening security and defense strategies. This is due to become operational in 2022 and is set to include democracy support as one of its formal aims.¹³⁰ The first draft of the Strategic Compass in November proposed the creation of 5,000-strong Rapid Hybrid Response Teams.

In 2021, there were seventeen ongoing Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, of which eleven were civilian and six military. The civilian missions were in the Central African Republic, Georgia, Iraq, Kosovo, Libya, Mali, Niger, the Palestinian territories (specifically in the cities of Ramallah and Rafah), Somalia, and Ukraine. They involved around 2,000 staff and an annual cost of €281 million. The EU began a new counterterrorism training mission in Mozambique following terrorist attacks there. It also moved to create a new mission in Libya focusing on security-sector support, with human-rights training attached to this.¹³¹ Formally, under the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability mechanism, civilian CSDP missions promote stability and build resilience through strengthening the rule of law in fragile environments.¹³² In practice, however, the most recent missions have focused on tightly defined security aims and had little direct relevance to democracy support—indeed, they often seemed to undermine it. The French-led European Intervention Initiative, which is separate from the EU, remained inactive.

In the Sahel, France reduced its military presence and focused on a narrower set of counterterrorism efforts. The EU's CSDP missions in the region focused on security and counterterrorism training and capacity-building; they did not provide a vehicle for any meaningful amount of democracy support. This presence involved some difficult accommodations with authoritarian dynamics. When military hardliners took control of Mali's supposedly transitional post-coup government in May, the EU prepared the ground for possible sanctions (see above), diverted some aid from the security sector to other uses, suspended its

counterterrorism training mission (EUTM), and pushed the transitional government toward new elections. However, it soon restarted EUTM activities, and some French and European counterterrorism cooperation continued with local security forces as jihadist attacks increased.¹³³

France's decision to reduce its military presence in Mali in the final months of 2021 reflected its frustration with the regime's threat to renege on an agreed electoral timetable. Still, counterterrorism operations continued. As France wound down its *Opération Barkhane* in the region, its focus switched to the more narrowly focused Takuba Task Force, the European operation to advise and assist Mali's armed forces.¹³⁴ Operational since April, by the end of the year the task force had around 600 troops, half of them French with eight other EU states contributing the rest.¹³⁵ The decision to run the task force outside the CSDP in part reflected France's desire to keep the focus tightly on counterterrorism cooperation with state authorities in the region while drawing down its own troops.

When Chad's long-time autocratic ruler Idriss Deby was assassinated in April, France helped his son take power in an archetypal undemocratic putsch so as to be able to continue security cooperation.¹³⁶ As most of Germany's troops deployed abroad are in the Sahel region, it raised concerns over the counterinsurgency approach that seemed increasingly to sideline governance factors. However, while some EU states pressed for more mediation and efforts to broker deals between local armed groups and authorities, France and others insisted on keeping the focus on defeating armed groups militarily. The downgrading of political reform rebounded against European interests: at the end of the year, the EU was forced to review its training missions across the region, and even suspend training in the Central African Republic, after it was revealed that these had been helping the same authoritarian government forces who were now working with Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group.¹³⁷

In Syria, the EU showed no interest in replacing the last 900 U.S. troops working with the Syrian Defense Forces on post-Islamic State stabilization in the northeast of the country after those troops left. As the regime put a heavy squeeze on the remaining semiautonomous rebel areas, European states were left with little room to operate and moved toward modest engagement with it and a focus almost exclusively on retaining access for humanitarian aid, channeled mainly via UN agencies that work through and at the behest of the regime.

In Afghanistan, European troops had not been in direct combat roles for some years prior to the Taliban takeover, and they were engaged mainly in counterinsurgency training, with only a tangential relationship to democracy-building. As the political crisis deepened and the government weakened, European governments did not offer military support to protect what remained of democracy against Taliban advances. They did not replace the departing U.S. troops even though they were united in strongly opposing the United States' withdrawal;¹³⁸ instead they withdrew their own remaining forces. European troops deployed only to get European citizens out of the country and not for any broader remit. In 2021, the European security presence moved from a modest capacity-building function to humiliating retreat.

Rather than undertaking military deployments, the EU intensified its focus on mediation. The new mediation strategy it launched at the end of 2020 became operational.¹³⁹ The European External Action Service upgraded its Mediation Support team.¹⁴⁰ The place of democracy support in EU mediation efforts remained uncertain and differed across countries. In some cases they sat uneasily together: the EU moved to foreground mediation efforts in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan as its democracy support lost traction in these countries. In Georgia, in contrast, the EU mediated in April an accord during the country's political crisis that promised to unblock political reforms; however, the government later withdrew from this agreement and its democracy commitments. The EU did not engage in the standoff between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh that began in late 2020 and restarted in May 2021, although European Council President Charles Michel hosted a meeting with the countries' leaders in December.

Conclusion:

Themes in 2021 Democracy Support

On several levels, the EU's political commitment to defending and fostering democracy internationally strengthened in 2021. Counterbalancing this, its external actions pulled in contrary directions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and various regional security concerns. Yet the upgraded democracy commitments were not negligible. What is more, the strategic or COVID-19 dynamics that undercut democracy support in some instances also provided a fillip to new democracy funds and diplomacy elsewhere. While COVID-19 was the year's top policy priority, it did not drown out democracy considerations, as some had initially predicted.

Democracy Aid

A familiar, even ubiquitous, refrain over the last several years has been that past models of democracy support need to be ditched and no longer hold any prospect of success, that the EU has failed to move with the geopolitics of the times, and in particular that it needs to move beyond an reflexive effort to export its own templates and notions of democracy to a world that simply does not want these. Policy developments in 2021 show that EU democracy support has already moved into a new phase. European democracy aid has become more focused on protecting core rights under attack, and the EU has moved to mold its aid policy around local demands for support. It adheres to a lowered and more realistic ambition of keeping some space and capacity for democratic agency alive, as opposed to replicating wholesale institutional models or sequencing all-embracing patterns of democratization focused overwhelmingly on elections. The EU has not gone far enough in this direction, but significant changes are apparent in the way that it supports democracy. EU funds mostly tried to keep a faint democratic-civic pulse alive in several countries despite inauspicious times. In the future, the EU will need to build on efforts to better pair its support for civil society and citizen demands with the institutional support for democratic governance it provides to governments.

Sanctions and Conditionality

This was the year when the EU rolled out a new human-rights sanctions regime and talked tougher on aid conditionality. The EU faced key challenges in reacting to promising reforms of recent years unravelling—in Armenia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Tunisia—and discerning what critical leverage could be exerted in such cases. Its increased use of sanctions was striking but it was also rather ad hoc and scattershot, and not apparently linked to detailed assessments of where this might have impact. While the impact of sanctions depends on very specific contextual factors and structural features of regimes to which they are applied, the EU's decisions on sanctions did not seem to take into consideration such complexities.

Alongside sanctions, the EU also used forms of democratic conditionality, in particular reducing aid in response to democratic backsliding and increasing funds in the wake of positive democratic progress. Aid cuts were more frequent but also narrower in their aims. In many cases, the EU sought forms of aid variation short of cuts, such as changing end recipients or providing less unconditional budget support. Trends during 2021 suggest that the EU is becoming more targeted and specific in its rationale for aid cuts—for example, pressing for very specific institutional changes relating to anticorruption, cessation of violence, and observer access. These conditions seemed to be designed to unblock aid while cuts signaled a more punitive disengagement.

Democracy as Geopolitics?

The year saw attempts to inject more geopolitical overview into funding on the ground, although progress in this was still modest. There was also debate about whether the EU should be more global in its democracy policy or focus on its neighborhood as the United States tilts more to the Pacific. While the Afghanistan debacle re-awoke familiar calls for a new EU intervention force, the political will to contemplate ambitious interventions in the name of difficult democracy-building aims, as opposed to security or migration containment, diminished during 2021. The familiar “democracy cannot be imposed by military means” critique looks increasingly hollow given the absence of any such intent in EU actions.

In relation to such strategic linkages, a recurring concern for effective European democracy support around the world remains lack of policy coherence. Efforts to support democracy frequently push up against other key priorities like trade, energy security, migration, and stability, with democracy and human rights usually ending up playing second fiddle. This can be seen, among other things, with the export of military technology to dictatorships, the significant amount of aid to authoritarian regimes, trade deals with regimes with poor human-rights records, and the uneven application of sanctions. European actors made only limited progress in 2021 in reducing these key inconsistencies. This is something they can ill-afford in an era of heightened international and geopolitical competition.

Internal Momentum

The momentum of new EU policy commitments appeared more dynamic in relation to the internal than external sphere. Some of the lessons from international democracy support began to find resonance in EU internal funding and conditionality measures, although this remained tentative. The European Democracy Action Plan is a notable upgrade in efforts to defend European democracy and the closest the EU has come to having a democracy strategy as such. Still, it relates mainly to a range of digital issues, the area where the EU was most ambitious in 2021. A tension clearly emerged between those prioritizing freedom of speech against those wishing to use the EDAP for more far-reaching regulatory limits against online debate. The breadth of its proposed digital policies is significant and puts the

EU in a strong position to help shape digital issues at the international level. Still, the impact of these policies will depend heavily on U.S. efforts to rein in tech giants, the aggressiveness of China's government abroad, and the ability of the EU to successfully use those policies to help people around the world gain more digital access and build digital infrastructure alternatives to Chinese offers.

Launchpad?

It is possible that a foundation was laid in 2021. The EU created or signed up to several new commitments like the Team Europe Democracy framework, and member states made commitments at the Summit for Democracy, while the EU also set in place the funding to support its new Democracy and Human Rights Action Plan. These could prove to be the foundations of stronger and more effective democracy support in future years. It might also be the case that these foundational moves fail to lead to tangible policy upgrades in the years ahead, or that only a small number of member states see value in contributing to the next-phase democracy agenda. If this happens, European commitments to improve democratic support made in 2021 might turn out to represent a false dawn.

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