The European Union's Global Strategy:

Making Support for Democracy and Human Rights a Key Priority

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The challenge

The EU Global Strategy is a unique opportunity to (re)commit to making support for democracy and human rights a key priority of European Union (EU) external action and to reflect on how the EU's instruments to promote these priorities could be further strengthened. However, political interest in support of democracy and human rights currently appears to be at low ebb across the EU. The ongoing consultation process on the Global Strategy shows how difficult it will be to get a clear commitment from EU institutions and EU member states to make democracy and human rights a key priority of EU external action.

Four challenges stand out that make it difficult for EU actors to give prominence to support for democracy and human rights:

1. **Domestic developments in Europe question the EU's credibility and legitimacy to support political reforms elsewhere.** With the economic crisis in Europe, illiberal turns and shrinking spaces in some member states (Poland, Hungary) and the EU's response to the refugee crisis (deal with Turkey), the EU's normative power and legitimacy to support democracy and human rights has come under further pressure.

> **Several challenges make it difficult for EU actors to give prominence to support for democracy and human rights.**

2. **Unfavourable international context and the rise of the autocratic model.** The international context for supporting democracy and human rights has become more difficult. The EU is faced with shrinking spaces for civil society, the media and opposition parties in many countries around the world. Freedom House, for instance, finds that political rights and civil liberties have been gradually eroding over the past nine years. At the same time, authoritarian powers such as China and Russia are attempting to legitimise the autocratic model internationally and are competing with the EU for political influence in world affairs.

3. **Trade-offs in EU policy priorities.** There is growing uncertainty among European policy-makers whether supporting democracy and human rights is a good thing to do. The Arab Spring has led to political and humanitarian crises, instability and extremism. Some policy-makers and observers therefore argue that political opening goes hand in hand with further destabilisation, and that the outcome of regime change may be too risky to aim at supporting political openings. Support for democracy and human rights is thus subordinated to more narrowly defined security and stability objectives. Moreover, some

authoritarian regimes such as Ethiopia and Rwanda (as well as China) have experienced strong economic growth and good track records in poverty reduction. In these contexts, support for poverty reduction seems to ostensibly conflict with support for political reforms.

4. **Commonly negative perceptions of the impact of support for democracy and human rights.** Finally, the effectiveness of EU support for democracy and human rights is questioned. Sanctions, other forms of negative conditionality and democracy aid are often perceived as being ineffective. With the exception of the EU's enlargement policy, no "carrot" appears big enough to support long-term political reforms. Security and economic interests often trump support for democracy and human rights, and the EU has often been inconsistent in using its democracy and human rights instrument. Some policy-makers and observers then tend to conclude that conditionality and democracy aid are not working, instead of arguing for using it more consistently.

The combination of these four challenges puts support for democracy and human rights on the backburner of EU external action and questions the importance it could have in the EU's global strategy.

The solution

Support for democracy and human rights is not merely a question of the EU's values and whether the EU is a normative power. More liberal, peaceful and prosperous states outside of Europe serve the EU's own economic, security and geo-strategic interests. We argue that support for democracy and human rights is not just part of the problem but part of the solution for supporting global sustainable development and promoting the EU's longer-term economic and security interests. The EU should therefore make support for democracy and human rights a key priority in the Global Strategy.

Democratic regimes outside of Europe serve the EU's strategic interests. Research shows that democratic regimes are more stable

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and peaceful and produce fewer security externalities; they invest more in public goods provision, prosperity and welfare for their citizens. Democracies trade more and it is easier for the EU to cooperate with these regimes in international organisations, as cooperation with autocracies may produce reputational costs and joint interests may be more difficult to find. By contrast, authoritarian regimes such as Ethiopia, Rwanda and Vietnam that engage in poverty reduction and public goods provision are rare and emerge only under very specific structural conditions.

Democracy and human rights support can contribute to political reforms. Research finds that sanctions, conditionality and democracy aid can work, if they are not overly ambitious, are well-targeted to local contexts and consistently applied. The political uprisings in the Arab Spring should be viewed as an example that authoritarian regimes may be stable in the medium- but not the long term. Once political opposition to the autocratic regime grows, severe instability is likely. EU support for civil society, the media, the opposition and the broader institutional framework can contribute in the short- to medium term towards authoritarian regimes opening political spaces incrementally (or at least not closing them further). In the longer term, the EU could thereby make a small contribution whereby these regimes transition to democracy and not another form of authoritarian rule. Moreover, it is important to note that, in total numbers, there are more hybrid regimes than closed authoritarian ones. In hybrid regimes, political opening and democratisation are less likely to cause civil war. Support for human rights and democracy in these countries is important for deepening democracy where it has already begun to take root.

The EU is uniquely placed to move this agenda forward if EU institutions and member states act collectively. Given its own experiences of democratisation; its long history of engagement in this area; its commitment to support a broad range of rights, including in the most challenging contexts; and, of course, its potential weight in promoting political reforms through its aid, trade and other relationships,

Europe has a comparative advantage and specific role in supporting democracy and human rights. Individual EU member states alone can do very little to promote this agenda. However, the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the strengthened mandate of the EU delegations and the recent attempts to better link foreign policy, trade, development and other policy fields in supporting democracy and human rights create the potential for the EU to work together better and thereby become a politically effective player.

Making it happen

Making EU support for democracy and human rights a core priority in the Global Strategy and EU external action requires substantial political will by EU institutions and member states. The EEAS and the European Commission have placed more emphasis on supporting democracy and human rights in the past few years. The European Parliament is generally very vocal on making support for (democracy) and human rights a priority in EU external action. However, the Parliament's draft report on the Global Strategy is silent on these issues, focusing instead on the EU's defence and security policy. EU member states have so far lent little political support to EU democracy and human rights commitments – and not in a coherent or consistent way. Many member states are sceptical about external democracy support or prefer to focus their engagement on the most uncontroversial elements of rights and governance. Given the serious challenge of today's deteriorating democracy and human rights context, European leaders must recognise that they cannot afford to look the other way.

If the EU Global Strategy takes up support for democracy and human rights as a core priority, EU institutions and member states should use this commitment to introduce further reforms and strengthen the EU's existing policies and instruments. In particular, the EU should:

- **lead by example and restore the credibility of the EU as an actor in this field.** In EU member states where political freedoms are at risk (Poland, Hungary), the EU should apply convincing

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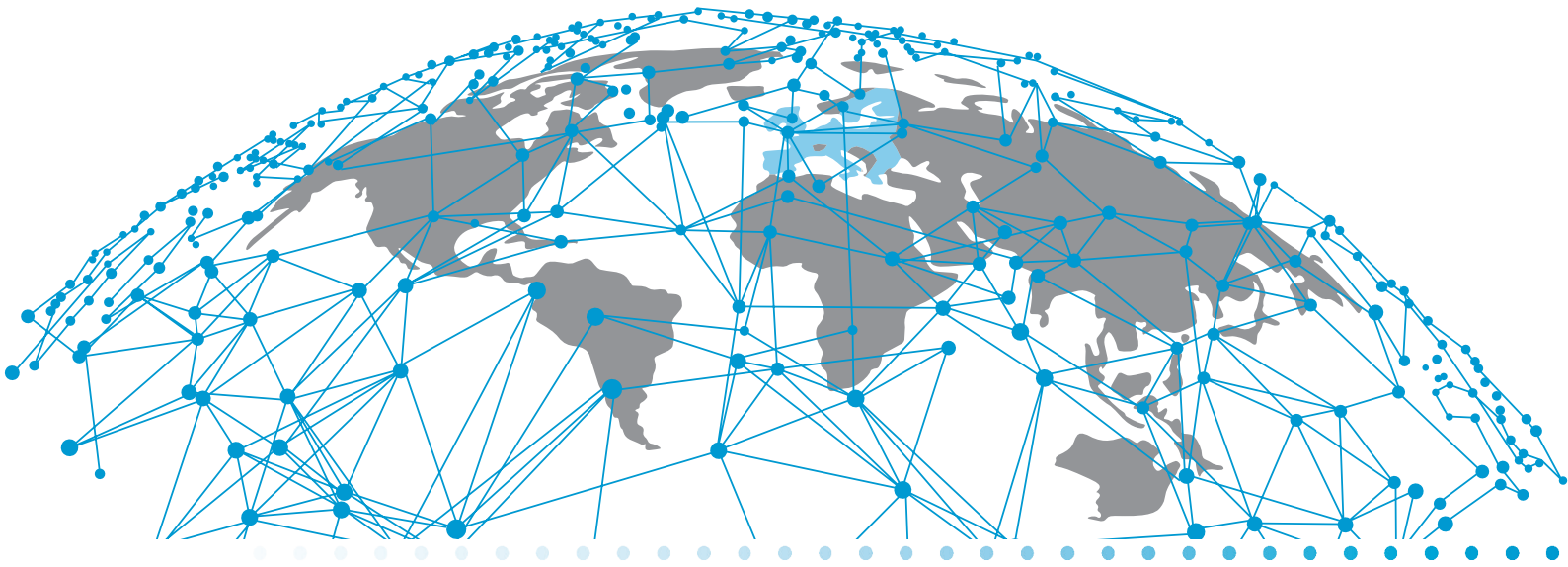
measures to reverse this trend. Moreover, the EU should ensure that the basic human rights of migrants and refugees coming to Europe are not violated. The credibility and legitimacy of EU measures hinge on the success of its own model!

- **learn from past mistakes that one size does not fit all.** The EU should go beyond the export of rules and technical blueprints; engage with a wider range of actors beyond state actors and elites; offer stronger and more strategic support to civil society, parliaments and the media; and provide more flexible mechanisms to support local reformers in addressing local problems. Most importantly, EU institutions and EU member states should make their policies more consistent and coherent.

- **integrate democracy and human rights coherently and strategically across all external policy domains** – from trade, to migration, or climate – in order to leverage the cumulative impact of EU external action to promote political reforms. In this regard, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2015–2019) has made a first step in the right direction.

- **use the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5 and Goal 16, to increase support for inclusive and accountable institutions and women's rights.** Goals 5 and 16 are important benchmarks against which EU actions can be measured. This benchmark can serve as a common basis for strengthening dialogue and partnership on human rights and democracy, not only with aid-recipient countries, but also with emerging economies and strategic partners, with whom the EU has often failed to engage effectively on these issues.

- **resist pressure to focus on promoting short-term stability, that is, through support for the security sector without trying to promote broader democratic reforms.** Deteriorating stability and security in a range of countries also beyond the neighbourhood (e.g. Kenya and Cameroon) are real concerns for the EU. However, particularly in these contexts, support for inclusive political institutions, the media, civil society and the opposition is also needed in order to not further bolster authoritarian structures.

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