

G20 before the International Day of Democracy **No Sellout of Democracy**

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Bonn, 13 September 2023. The G20 summit showcased that democracies and autocracies need to cooperate with each other. "Standing up for democracy and cooperating with autocrats - is that possible?" asks Julia Leininger in the current column.

The word "democracy" does not even appear in the G20 summit declaration issued over the weekend. In the current situation, that's a good thing. Strategic alliances are necessary to overcome global challenges. But political leaders must still stand up for democracy. This is especially necessary in the current world situation. When the United Nations established September 15th as the International Democracy Day 16 years ago, democracy was in better shape. There were early signs of what is now called the "third global wave of autocratisation" but half the world's people still lived in democracies. By 2022, 72% of the world's population lived in regimes with autocratic characteristics. For example, India, the current G20 chair and once the world's largest democracy, curtails basic freedoms of individual groups. The recent military coups in Niger and



Gabon also represent the new strengthening of autocratic rule.

It is not only the state of individual democracies that is in a bad way. Democracy has once again become an unhelpful battle term in global politics. The EU, Germany and the USA speak of “systemic rivalry” between autocracies and democracies. The German government’s National Security Strategy is committed to a values-based policy. A search for the term “democracy” in the document yields 76 hits, more than in any other security strategy of Western powers, setting a very high bar. But what does it really mean to stand up for democracy in a multipolar world full of challenges?

“Germany cannot avoid pursuing its interests through cooperation with autocracies.”

Common good cooperation with autocrats without selling out democracy

It is in Germany’s interest to have a strong policy on democracy both externally and internally. For an economy whose prosperity is primarily financed by exports, stable relations with other states are central. Democracies not only offer better results for sustainable development but also greater certainty of expectations and more stable cooperation in the long term. Nevertheless, Germany cannot avoid pursuing its interests through cooperation with autocracies. This can be done without selling out democracy by forging alliances oriented toward global and regional common goods. For example: A joint effort of democracies and autocracies is needed to curb climate change; reforming the world trading system will not work if only democracies join forces; and advocacy against coup plotters in West Africa would certainly be more effective together with strategically relevant autocracies like China.

But won't this betray value-based foreign and development policy? Values and interests are compatible. They are compatible as long as the purpose of the cooperation is clearly focused on the global and regional common good. The inevitable trade-offs between democracy promotion and other goals must also be openly addressed by policy-makers. Last but not least, it is essential that the concept of democracy be left out of strategic cooperation with autocracies. If autocracies partner with democracies and use these partnerships to

demonstrate a false commitment to democracy, democracy would be harmed. This would create more democratic facades. Democratic principles would be further eroded. For example, autocratic regimes would gain further legitimacy if democracy appeared in joint statements such as the G20 declaration.

German contributions to the slow death of democracy?: “Do no harm to democracy”

It is not only with strategic alliances that dangers to democracy arise. Most democracies die slowly. Elected officeholders like Orban in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey or Talon in Benin have eroded democratic institutions by a strategy of “thousand small steps” over a decade or so. Development cooperation runs the risk indirectly helping to stabilise autocracies and reinforce autocratisation. For example, ill-considered support for administrative reforms or investments in the public sector can widen the political scope for autocrats. As the second largest donor of international development funding, Germany has a special responsibility to at least not reinforce such autocratisation processes even if no state can reverse another country's internal dynamics from the outside. Counteracting autocratisation from the outside is only successful if one can strengthen pro-democratic forces on the ground. While Germany proactively promotes democracy through projects and political foundations, it is unlikely that these relatively small resources can outweigh the unintended effects of development policy in autocratic contexts. First steps to protect democracy worldwide – including in the implementation of the National Security Strategy – would be to develop a “do no harm to democracy” principle. This means examining cooperations to see what potential effects they have on the political makeup of a state, but also whether it would not be better to stop disbursing development funds in strategically less relevant countries (e.g., Rwanda). Overall, this is no easy equation. Balancing national interests and standing up for values requires careful and coordinated actions. After all, that democracy thrives is also a strategic national interest.