



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

The Global Solidarity of Democrats:

Turning the Tables in the Age of Autocracy and Empire

Roland Freudenstein



Summary

August 2026

In the current era of autocracy and empire, democracy is on the back foot. Autocratic regimes have become more resilient and cooperate with one another in directly undermining democratic societies. While the 'Global South' is rather indifferent to the democracy paradigm, the US under Trump has not only abandoned its role as a leading democracy supporter but is in some cases attacking open society. Democrats should strike back. The crisis must be turned into an opportunity. The defenders of liberal democracy should forcefully counter the new geopolitical pseudo-realism as well as anti-Western narratives. Supporting other democrats is not bonhomie, but in our own strategic interest. The weaknesses of autocracies need to be better pointed out. Democratic resilience at home and supporting democrats globally go together. The particular local conditions and interests in the target countries need to be better respected. Political diasporas should play a bigger role. The new push should be led by the EU and its member states and initiated by civil society, especially political parties. We should both use more resources and explore new methods of fundraising and institutional models. Viktor Orbán's defeat in Hungary shows that the tables can indeed be turned on autocracy as well as empire.

Keywords Liberal democracy – Civil society – Authoritarianism – Political parties – Democratic resilience – Western values



Introduction

Global democracy is in bad shape. Not only has it de facto receded, but it has come to be seen as outdated among the movers and shakers of the new world disorder of 2026.

This year marks the sad anniversary of two decades of global democratic backsliding since 2006. The democratic optimism inspired by the successes of the 1990s is a distant memory. What is more, the rules-based international order is at least severely damaged, if not dead. Both from the left and the right of the political spectrum, a fashionable new 'realism' is spreading under different names: a multipolar world, a return to geopolitics or, simply, a new age of empires.

These narratives, different though they are in origin and detail, have one thing in common: they deny the validity of global democracy in securing peace, development and individual liberty. For the current US government, supporting liberal democracy globally is wrong and resilient liberal democracy in Europe is an enemy.

This policy brief aims to help tilt the balance back towards a more positive, forward-looking strategy for a new phase in global democracy support. The crisis must be turned into an opportunity. The EU and its member states will have to play a bigger role in this than any other actor. In this vein, it is important to rise to the challenge of rethinking the method while maintaining the spirit of democrats helping each other. This presupposes two things: an analysis of the depth of the crisis that draws the right lessons from past mistakes, and the laying out of a forward-looking strategy for democrats to help each other overcome democracy's weaknesses and defy autocracy on a global scale. On the basis of these actions, concrete recommendations for governments and civil society in all democratic countries worldwide can be developed.



The current crisis

The axis of autocracies

The autocrats of the 2020s have learned substantially from the fates of their predecessors in the late 1980s, the colour revolutions of the 2000s, and the Arab Spring of 2011 and its aftermath. The most important lesson is not to give in to demands for democracy. In fact, the common element from Russia to China, including Saudi Arabia, Belarus, Myanmar and so on, is that, with some temporary exceptions, repression has steadily increased in the past decade or more. The key goal of these twenty-first century dictatorships is regime security. Where possible, prosperity is used in a sort of ‘social contract’, but it is not a stand-alone goal. Even the Chinese Communist Party sacrificed growth to maintain control during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹

These regimes help one another in existential ways. They trade, sell weapons, transfer technology ranging from facial recognition software to blueprints for weapons production (Iranian Shahed drones are now made in Russia) and also deploy troops, as in the case of North Korea’s involvement in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Russia’s direct bolstering of Lukashenka’s quickly eroding regime in 2020 by special forces, police and intelligence agents is a particularly crass example. Regime security and the means to uphold it are one of the essential elements of cooperation among the world’s autocracies. However, in the new age of empire, solidarity is not without limits, as we have seen with Russia’s and China’s relative reticence in the cases of US and allied operations in Venezuela and Iran.

There is a strong pushback against civil society in most autocracies worldwide. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are made illegal; labelled as ‘foreign agents’, with the ensuing legal and operational problems; and scrutinised for their financial resources. In the name of transparency, their work is made more difficult or even impossible in a wide range of countries. Many democrats are driven into exile. Autocrats are also sharing blueprints with one another in this effort against civil society: Russia, for example, has been a model for Hungary under Viktor

¹ A. Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc. – The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (London: Doubleday, 2024).



Orbán and for Georgia in cracking down on civil society by using the ‘foreign agent’ label.²

Autocrats define liberal democracy as an existential threat: the very existence of free societies is deemed a dangerous proof that an alternative political system is thinkable. The Chinese Communist Party’s Document no. 9 (2013)³ is a good example of this type of thinking: in it, free speech, individual rights and the rule of law are labelled dangerous ideas that need to be kept out of China. Autocrats dislike liberal democracy not for what it does but for what it is: living proof that freedom is a viable principle upon which to build a society. While they may make themselves believe that liberal democracy is weak, decadent and in terminal decline, they still fear its effects on their own subjects. That is precisely why they go to such great lengths to censor Western ideas and free debate. That is also why they make such efforts to destabilise democratic systems. In that sense, oppression at home and aggression abroad become two sides of the same coin.

Postcolonialism and the ‘Global South’

The end of the Cold War saw a steady rise in the political and economic power of countries of the former Third World. In the 1990s, many of them became democracies, or at least adopted some elements of pluralism, in the wake of a global trend towards multiparty elections and the rule of law. But while economic growth first sped up after 2000 in parallel with the colour revolutions, democratic backsliding began in the late 2000s—and has not yet stopped. At the same time, prosperity in and the increasing political clout of countries including Turkey, Brazil, India, South Africa, Indonesia and many others led to a geopolitical power shift to the countries of the ‘Global South’. While there is little common ideology in this wide mix of democracies, hybrid regimes and autocracies, scepticism of the ‘Global West’ is a common denominator. The pragmatic pursuit of national interest, with little regard for questions concerning political systems or even globally valid human rights, is another element. This aspect has, of course, been recognised and utilised by more aggressive autocratic powers such as China, Russia and Iran, which presented themselves as the avant-garde of this grouping.

2 R. Youngs and E. Panchulidze (eds.), *New Approaches to Defending Global Civil Society*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (25 February 2026).

3 *China File*, ‘Document 9: A China File Translation’, 8 November 2013.



In parallel, on the left of the West's political spectrum, post-structural and postcolonial theory gained ground first in academia and later in public discourse. Largely criticising European colonialism and imperialism and discrediting empirical and rational analysis, denounced as 'white privilege', the theory served as an excellent basis not only from which to attack Western 'hypocrisy', but also with which to deny legitimacy to any universal claim about human rights. In effect, in postcolonial discourse, support for democrats across the world is nothing but a modern extension of colonialism. In effect, Western postcolonial theory converged with the Global South's aversion to values-based policy, creating a new hostility to global democracy support.⁴

The Western reaction to the Israeli response after the 7 October 2023 massacre by Hamas was a decisive moment in this development. In the eyes of many in the Global South, as well as those on the 'woke' left, this was a prime example of Western hypocrisy:⁵ why would bombing civilians and committing war crimes, or even outright genocide, be excusable if committed by Israel but condemnable if committed by Russia in Ukraine, or the US and Israel in Iran? But here, the West has insufficiently argued the obvious: that is, that Ukraine has never attacked civilians, in Russia or elsewhere, in the way that Hamas (and Hezbollah and Iran) did on 7 October, nor in the way that it, along with Israel's other enemies, has done ever since 1948.

The Western reaction to accusations of hypocrisy and neo-imperialism has too often been weak and has not sufficiently pointed out the inconsistencies in the claims of the Global South and postcolonial theorists that democracy support is imperialism by other means. Above all, the argument has not been made sufficiently that support for democracy is directed at people who already believe in the benefits of free and fair elections, freedom of expression and the rule of law—and who actually, and rightfully so, expect other democrats to help them. There is a different Global South from that of governments and regimes: southern civil society, which is often far less critical of the Global West than the forces in power.

4 A. Jacobs, 'Nach dem Postkolonialismus', Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Auslandsinformationen, 22 July 2025.

5 *Al-Jazeera*, 'Western Leaders Accused of Hypocrisy Over Response to Palestine, Ukraine', 9 October 2023.



National populism and the crisis of liberal democracy

The rise of autocracy worldwide goes hand in hand with the rise of national populist forces⁶ in Western democracies. In fact, autocrats greatly profit from the hollowing out of liberal democracy from the inside—which is why they make such efforts to strengthen national populists. Paradoxically, the existence of illiberal and anti-democratic forces, even governments, in the West, is taken as another proof of Western hypocrisy⁷ by the Global South and its advocates.

But it is important to emphasise that autocrats have not created national populism; they only support and reinforce it through foreign information manipulation and interference and direct financial and political assistance. Russia's direct support for extremist parties, mostly on the right, in Western Europe and North America, is a case in point.

In any case, fighting national populism in the Global West⁸ is also part of fighting autocracy on a global scale. But as the causes of its rise are homemade, no amount of counter-disinformation will remove it. For that to happen, and incidentally for liberal democracy as a system to make a global comeback, governance will have to palpably improve. This is only possible if such governance provides long-term stability and economic growth while preserving freedom, therefore delivering improvements to the lives of the majority of people faster than to date. Better performance is necessary not only to fight national populism but also to generate resources for stronger security, including support for democracy. Above all, higher economic growth helps to increase Europe's weight on the world stage. Finally, liberal conservative Peter Magyar's decisive victory against the national populist Viktor Orbán in Hungary in April 2026, in circumstances greatly favouring the government, shows that semi-autocratic regimes can be successfully fought by people power.

6 National populism, for the purposes of this paper, is assumed to fundamentally differ from political conservatism mainly through its tendency to exacerbate societal divisions and to disregard or even destroy checks and balances. C. Mudde, 'Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism', The Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy.

7 See Shada Islam's comment in J. Dempsey, 'Judy Asks: Is the EU Too Soft on Hungary?', *Carnegie Europe*, 15 September 2022.

8 This term encompasses the Euro-Atlantic area (with the obvious temporary exception of Hungary and the US) and like-minded democracies in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan etc.



America switching sides

Let us start with a simple truth: the United States of America is not only a country, but also a project. From John Winthrop's 'City Upon A Hill' to presidents such as Barack Obama and Joe Biden, the US has understood its role in the world as a force for good, always looking beyond its own borders.⁹ For most of the 250 years of the Union's existence, America's interests were intertwined with, and best safeguarded by, an open society at home and free trade and a rules-based order internationally. Support for freedom in other parts of the world was part and parcel of this approach.

That does not mean the US has exclusively supported liberal democracy throughout its history: both at home and globally, there have been substantial interruptions and exceptions to what is nevertheless the rule in American political tradition. Full equality for all citizens is only two generations old, some autocracies were actively supported by the US, and isolationism has—on occasions and temporarily—replaced the internationalism that most of the Founding Fathers embodied.

It is very possible that the specific worldview behind 'America First' is one of those exceptions, and not a permanent turn away from America's idealistic foundations. But the fact remains that with all the declarations and actions of the first year of the Trump 2.0 administration, democracy at home in the US is threatened, and democracy support internationally is no longer America's mission. The dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the severe threats to the continued existence of the National Endowment for Democracy, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America are proof of the latter. This has opened up massive gaps for Chinese and other autocratic governments to push into. China's Belt and Road Initiative and its four global initiatives now find it much easier to transmit Chinese propaganda and, with it, vilification of liberal democracy.¹⁰

Moreover, in 2025, it became clear that the Trump administration is now spreading its own, often anti-democratic ideology globally, especially in Europe, through support for so-called patriotic movements and parties. A close look

9 R. Zoellick, *America in the World – A History of U.S. Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* (New York: Twelve, 2020).

10 S. Zarris, 'Development Without Democracy: The Authoritarian Consequences of Dismantling USAID', *Northeastern University Political Review*, 24 January 2026.



at their agendas and actions makes it clear that these parties and movements not only weaken European integration but also the democracies in which they operate.¹¹ The Hungarian example shows, though, that Make America Great Again (MAGA) interference (in this case, supporting Viktor Orbán with messaging from Trump, Vance and Rubio) does not always produce the desired result.

All this does not, however, mean that the US should be considered a 'lost cause' in global democracy support. Quite the contrary: the Trump 2.0 administration seems to be sailing ever deeper into trouble at home, and a Democratic victory in the mid-terms and even in the 2028 presidential election looks possible. While this does not mean that, in terms of US democracy support, everything will return to pre-2025 conditions, it is possible that at least the sharp divergence between the EU and the US may disappear. Furthermore, the interaction between US philanthropy and civil society is already creating new opportunities beyond public funding.¹²

The age of cynicism and empire

Ever since Hans Morgenthau penned his *Politics Among Nations* in 1949, so-called realpolitik has masqueraded not only as realistic but also as moral, as it is allegedly not based on illusions and therefore saves people the disruption that occurs when idealism encounters reality.¹³

Today, one of the common denominators of autocrats and national populists is the belief in the principle of 'might makes right'. As White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller famously put it: 'We live in . . . the real world, . . . that is governed by strength, . . . force, . . . power!'¹⁴ Furthermore, the US National Security Strategy of late November 2025 clearly distances itself from previous administrations' provision and, later on, spreading of liberal ideology.¹⁵

11 Hungary under Viktor Orbán's Fidesz is a case in point. The German Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) offers another example: see M. Fratzscher, 'Die AfD ist eine Gefahr für Demokratie und Wirtschaft', *Die Zeit*, 13 February 2026. Both parties are actively and openly supported by the US government, in addition to having extensive ties to the Republican Party.

12 P. Hefele, P. Papadongonas and M. Lampert, *Common Ground and Complementary Strengths for Re-calibrating EU-US Relations*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (2026).

13 A. Lieven, 'The Ethics of Realism', *Dissent*, Summer 2022.

14 S. Collinson, 'Trump's New Mission Statement: Strength, Force, Power', *CNN*, 6 January 2026.

15 E. Harding, 'The National Security Strategy: The Good, the Not So Good, and the Alarm Bells', *CSIS*, 5 December 2025.



One has to understand that in the eyes of MAGA propaganda, USAID and other democracy support actors are not just corrupt or a waste of resources, but actually criminal organisations, meddling in elections and imposing gender ideology on developing countries. Worst of all in the eyes of MAGA, by promoting counter-disinformation and uncovering autocratic foreign information manipulation and interference, institutions such as the State Department's Global Engagement Center allegedly helped to muzzle free speech in the US itself.¹⁶ Far beyond the US, this has directly served to reinforce autocrats' arguments for making Western pro-democracy and development organisations illegal. The jubilation in Moscow, Beijing, Belgrade and other places at the closure of USAID should be read as a warning.

Of course, autocracy and empire are not identical. In fact, as we see in the cases of Venezuelan, Iranian and possible future Cuban democrats in exile and their approval of Trump's interventionism at the beginning of 2026, the disruptiveness of this particular brand of imperial action can also provide opportunities for democrats.

Democracy support 2.0

Democratic peace

Democracy is good for peace. Democratically governed countries tend not to go to war with each other, and autocracies are more belligerent than democracies. An entire school of thought in international relations, 'democratic peace', is built on this idea and provides plenty of empirical evidence.¹⁷ The triangle of individual liberty, stability and prosperity is better balanced by democracy than by any other system.

From that follows a simple truth: the global solidarity of democrats is no festival of love and understanding. It is the hard-nosed pursuit of our interests as free and peaceful societies. This truth is still undervalued in the current fashion of

16 For a particularly striking example of MAGA conspiracy thinking about USAID and other pro-democracy efforts, see J. Rogan, 'The Deep Dark Secrets of USAID With Mike Benz', *YouTube*, 12 February 2025.

17 M. Doyle, 'Why They Don't Fight. The Surprising Endurance of Democratic Peace', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2024.



appreciating geopolitics and great-power rivalry. It is, therefore, in the context of the debate on the future of global democracy support, insufficient to invoke the ‘fundamental values’ of the EU or liberal democracy in general. The purported distinction between values such as freedom and democracy (nice to have) and interests (essential) needs to be fully confronted as impractical. In the light of the concept of ‘democratic peace’, values are long-term interests. The art of politics is to draw the line between the short and the long term: for example, in order to prevent uncontrolled mass migration, tactical deals with autocracies may be unavoidable. But the underlying reasons for the exodus from warring autocracies of the Global South are bad governance, chaos, and a lack of freedom and positive prospects. This will only change if more countries become more democratic—which will take time and effort.

The primary source of strength: civil society

If the organising principle of autocracies is top down—from the dictator’s desk via the intelligence services and transmission belts to the social media hackers and petty saboteurs—then open societies’ response to autocratic threats must be the reverse: bottom up. This means that civil society is the backbone of a democratic defence. Civil society here means not only classical non-governmental organisations, but begins with political parties and extends into foundations, think tanks, academia, media, and all kinds of networks and associations of individuals. Its activities in the context of the global solidarity of democrats encompass a wider range of activities than just fostering non-governmental organisations in other parts of the world; with the aim of creating a global civil society based on universal principles. This is where the push for the renewed solidarity of democrats needs to start. Only civil society, in this broader sense, can generate the political will that leads to new structures, methods and initiatives for global democracy support at the national and European levels.

Ideally, governments and international organisations should not hire people; they should fund projects. Having said that, governments and their agencies have roles to play in supporting democracy at home and abroad. Think only of the indispensable role of intelligence services in countering hybrid warfare. But governments should mainly support, enable and contribute to civil society’s efforts, not coordinate them, let alone carry them out themselves. This may create some friction losses due to duplication of work and activities which contradict each



other in detail, but that is the price to be paid for maintaining an essentially bottom-up, grass-roots-oriented approach.

Internationally, too, civil society must be given a stronger role. Especially in a world where Global South governments hold more economic and political power (or migratory pressure potential), classical diplomacy, economic incentives and human rights conditionality will be less effective. They will have to be accompanied by direct support for civil society in place, provided by civil society in democracies. Social media, using exiles as bridges, joint activities in third countries and other innovative approaches can help to overcome autocratic obstacles to citizen-to-citizen cooperation.

In most countries of the Global West, civil society and, therefore, a good portion of global democracy support efforts, have been dominated by the left. The only exceptions to this are the Eastern flank member states of the EU and NATO, where civil society encompasses more conservative elements: a legacy of the anti-Communist struggle during the Cold War.¹⁸ In the future, it will be necessary for CSOs in the Global West to be more open to socially and politically conservative ideas, and for conservatives to become more active in this area. It is a two-way street.

Challenging autocratic narratives

Narratives are still an underrated element of autocratic rule. Especially in the age of social media, the power of the stories that autocrats tell themselves, their own people, and their conscious or unconscious audiences in democracies is not appreciated enough.¹⁹ Abstract indices, such as relative income levels or comparative freedoms, are overestimated in their effects and ability to strengthen democratic resilience.

There are three elements to autocratic metanarratives—and this is, by and large, true of both those peddled by autocratic regimes and those spread by national populists in existing democracies:

1. *Self-defined victimhood at the hands of a liberalism run wild.* Internationally, this expresses itself as anti-Western, anti-imperial ‘getting up from one’s

18 Based on the personal experience of the author as the Director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation’s Poland office from 1995–2001.

19 Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc.*



knees'; inside Western democracies, it is the alleged revolt against an erstwhile all-powerful globalist liberal elite. In this vein, it is not autocracy and national populism which run amok and dismantle the rule of law, but cancel culture and Western liberalism.

2. *A reversal of liberal narratives about the past and future.* Putin, Trump and Orbán, with their obsession with territory and their disdain for a global order, may look to us like figures from the nineteenth century. However, to them it is the Western liberals who are from the late twentieth-century past, whereas they represent the future.
3. *'The politics of eternity', as it is termed by US historian Timothy Snyder.* This concept embodies the idea that nothing ever really changes, as opposed to liberals' belief that history, by and large, moves invariably towards progress—'the politics of inevitability'. To authoritarians, 'boys will be boys' and superpowers will be superpowers, with their respective spheres of influence. This is, of course, cynicism masquerading as political realism, but it spreads easily in an age of socio-economic trouble and societal tension. Democrats, on the other hand, should never underestimate human agency, good or bad, and never assume that anything is inevitable or irreversible.²⁰

The following points should form the elements of a democratic counter-narrative:

- There is no such thing as nationalist internationalism. True, national populists and autocrats coordinate and cooperate in important ways, and can agree on fighting 'globalist elites', condemn mass migration, and wage culture wars against wokeness and cancel culture. They have even achieved significant synergies, as in the case of US MAGA conservatives taking Viktor Orbán's Fidesz rule as a blueprint. But the more national populists come to power, the more difficult it becomes to push an overarching agenda. Especially in neighbouring countries with a difficult past, nationalists can only cooperate in exceptional cases. Robert Fico from Slovakia and Viktor Orbán in Hungary come to mind. But when one looks at nationalists from Poland and Germany, Germany and France, or Hungary and Romania, not to mention Russia and Ukraine, it quickly becomes obvious that nationalists often have great difficulties cooperating. The same is true for populists from northern and southern EU member states and when it comes to the question of austerity versus profligacy: they

20 T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).



will never agree on a common strategy for the EU's financial solidarity.

- The Achilles heel of autocratic leaders is succession. Autocracies are often stable until the leader is incapacitated, killed or deposed in a coup. And this is the moment at which autocracies become notoriously unstable, precisely because they lack an agreed-upon process for choosing a successor.
- Long-term output legitimacy remains a strength of liberal democracies. They manage the triangle of individual freedom, prosperity and security better than autocratic systems do.
- Systemic corruption is a central element in the autocratic rulebook. It is also one of its easiest characteristics to point out in debates and election campaigns, as Peter Magyar very successfully demonstrated in Hungary in April 2026.
- To admit that liberalism has become illiberal in some cases (as in cancel culture) is no weakness—it would actually strengthen the democratic narrative. But even at its most illiberal, wokeness has never matched the degree of oppression which characterises modern autocracies.
- The obsession of autocracy and populism with force, strength and power needs to be countered by references to history. The rules-based global order of the last 80 years was actually a reaction to the two devastating world wars which happened when nineteenth-century sovereignty met with the technologies and the ideologies of the twentieth century. This should be treated as a warning by anybody who believes 'might makes right' is best for all.
- To win hearts and minds in autocracies, the question should not be, Are you in favour of liberal democracy? That term is already tainted by regime propaganda and national populist social media activities. Instead, the question must be, Do you want to have a say over the people who govern you? Do you like accountability? Do you want corruption to be prosecuted? If phrased like this, liberal democracy has a chance in the battle of the narratives, even in the age of empire and autocracy.

Values-based realism: a narrative for a new Global West

After his remarkable speech at the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney became a celebrity in the struggle for a new rationale for the remaining Western democracies, that is, the Global West'. Carney used a term that had in fact been coined by Finland's president,



Alexander Stubb, in June 2024: ‘values-based realism’.²¹ In a nutshell, this means that regardless of the extent to which the US may still be committed to liberal democracy and the global solidarity of democrats, the remaining democracies will have to cooperate in shifting coalitions of the willing, protecting their own freedom and supporting it elsewhere wherever possible. All this while also acknowledging that the twentieth-century form of the rules-based international order is gone and that the survival of democracies hinges upon at least partial and temporary cooperation with autocracies such as the Gulf monarchies or South-East Asian countries—as long as they do not pose existential threats to the Global West.²²

Part of this values-based realism in a world more dangerous and volatile than it has been in seven decades, and in view of the democratic peace theory, must be a new effort to reinforce and conceptually broaden the defence of democracy at home and the support for democrats elsewhere in the world.

That is why the EU and its member states should, in their own interest, step up and take on the role of *primus inter pares* when trying to save democracy support. This should be part and parcel of Europe’s efforts to increase democratic resilience and assume strategic responsibility in a world of autocracy and empire. Especially at a time when countries’ systems of governance are liable to change, the Biden-era model of institutions such as the Summit of Democracies is too cumbersome, and too much energy will be spent just on deciding who can participate. Instead, flexible coalitions and a strong emphasis on civil society are the way forward.

Let us harbour no illusions: democrats in Europe itself are in need of solidarity—today in countries such as Hungary, but in the future maybe elsewhere. This may well come from democracies outside Europe, ideally including democracies in the Global South. But so far, structured efforts in this respect from countries such as Brazil, Mexico and India have been extremely limited.²³

21 A. Stubb, speech at the Annual Meeting of Heads of Mission, Helsinki, 27 August 2024.

22 R. Freudenstein and P. Hefe, ‘Values-Based Realism and Its Enemies: How to Tackle the Geopolitical Realism From Left and Right’, *Martens Centre Blog*, 24 February 2026.

23 T. Carothers, R. Kleinfeld and R. Youngs, *What Future for International Democracy Support?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (7 July 2025).



Democracy shield inside, global democracy support outside

At the moment, however, a different development is underway: member states have, since Russia's initial aggression against Ukraine in 2014, reinforced their capabilities in countering Russian and other autocratic hybrid warfare. These efforts have intensified since the full-scale invasion of 2022. But since the beginning of the second Trump administration and its near total withdrawal of the US from democracy support, there has not only been no visible increase in global efforts but there has been, at least rhetorically, a new scepticism in Europe about such efforts, for example, in the debates about the next multiannual financial framework.²⁴

There is a massive contradiction at play: if one of the major threats to our democratic societies comes from autocratic systems, and those systems collude in undermining us, then it is foolish to reduce our efforts to help democratic allies in those systems and in the world at large. It is exactly this kind of mistaken realpolitik, defining a values-based foreign policy as 'nice to have' rather than necessary and betting predominantly on hard power, that will backfire upon our interests.

Go local in policies and methods but remain universal in values

'There is no one-size-fits-all'—this is almost a cliché, and its pre-eminence in the debate about global democracy support has grown recently. This is partly due to the call for pragmatic ways out of the crisis, but is also a response to accusations of Western-centrism from the Global South. The two most important recent studies of democracy support and civil society in crisis make this point very strongly.²⁵

It makes perfect sense to pay more attention to the kind of regime in which one operates, and to respect the local cultural specificities and even the particular

24 Youngs and Panchulidze, *New Approaches to Defending Global Civil Society*.

25 See Carothers, Kleinfeld and Youngs, *What Future for International Democracy Support*, as well as Youngs and Panchulidze, *New Approaches to Defending Global Civil Society*.



interests of local actors. In that respect, too, the need to rethink global democracy support should be turned into an opportunity.

Equally, however, the universality of central values (such as those enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was deliberately developed with input from non-Western actors) should be re-emphasised. These are not European values, not even Western ones, but are valid across the world. To label them European or Western actually plays into the hands of cultural relativisers such as the Chinese Communist Party, which rambles on about 'Asian values' and claims that liberal democracy is not for the Chinese.

Focus on the exiles

One underrated factor in global democracy support is the growing diaspora(s) of civil society and political activists from autocracies. As democratic backsliding advances and autocratic crackdowns on civil society intensify, there are more and more political émigrés in the remaining democracies. These groups can not only play an important role after regime change in their home countries, but can also be extremely helpful in the present.

First of all, exiles can deliver insight into the black boxes that, in many cases, their home countries have become due to travel restrictions, limits on journalism and so on. These insights can range from providing socio-economic analysis to explaining cultural specificities, facilitating communication, and helping with deciphering and debunking propaganda narratives. Exiles can also be extremely helpful in advising on sanctions policies and other containment measures.

Second, exiles can play very positive roles in 'messaging back' to audiences in their home countries, actively countering state propaganda and representing a lifeline of alternative information for populations whose regimes want them to be kept in the dark, almost literally. This presupposes active use of social media, but it is precisely the field in which political émigrés, at least the younger ones, often excel. In this respect, just small amounts of funding can achieve great results.

Third, once the old regime falls (through whatever means), exiles can assume important functions in the transition to democracy and a free economy. Of course, this is an extremely sensitive process due to the high potential for animosity between the returnees and those who stayed during difficult times. Nevertheless,



if that process is managed well, returning émigrés can make important contributions to democratic transition processes.

All this presupposes proactive policies in the temporary host countries: the provision of humanitarian visas, travel and work permits, bank accounts and so on is necessary for active political diasporas. Of course, the advantages of such policies have to be weighed against the risk of misuse for purely economic emigration or, worse, for clandestine activities in the framework of hybrid warfare by the respective home regime. Navigating these risks and opportunities will be a formidable challenge—but worth the effort.

New structures, new financial resources

The civil society and political party-inspired push for a new start in the global solidarity of democrats should make a virtue out of necessity. In the US, this has already led to new forms of private donor activism stepping in, at least partly, in instances where government activities ended. It would be worthwhile for Europe to also develop new funding models, but given philanthropy's weaker status in European societies, this will not happen to the extent that it does in America. Nevertheless, fresh thinking is welcome in Europe, as well.

Most importantly, the EU has not adequately reacted to the crisis so far. Planned expenditure for democracy support within the Global Europe budget line as part of the multiannual financial framework is still under negotiation, but the chances are that this will not exceed the roughly €250 million for human rights activities and CSO support in third countries spent in 2025. Of course, part of the €16 billion EU Neighbourhood Policy for 2025 can be considered democracy support when used for strengthening the rule of law and civil society in the southern and eastern neighbourhood of the Union.²⁶

This has to change. Compared to the hundreds of billions of euros that EU member states are now willing to spend on military hardware, we are talking about peanuts here. But Europe will have to step up if democracy is to have a fighting chance against its detractors both within Europe and outside it.

26 R. Youngs (ed.), *European Democracy Support Annual Review 2025*.



Policy recommendations

- It all begins with political will: political parties, think tanks and other CSOs must become the initiators of a new push to strengthen the global solidarity of democrats, in their own best interest. They must develop narratives in response to autocratic threats and national populist propaganda. And they should draft the concrete plans and policies to be implemented.
- Governments should cooperate with, rather than try to govern, these efforts by civil society. This will create some double work and therefore friction losses, but that is the unavoidable price that free societies must pay.
- New forms of financing through crowdfunding and public–private partnerships should go hand in hand with modern structures and an enlarged role for volunteer work. The crisis in global support for democracy must be used as an opportunity, fully exploiting the potential of information technology, social media and artificial intelligence.
- The democratic diasporas of activists exiled by their regimes should be more effectively involved to provide advice on relations with autocratic regimes and to help with messaging citizens in autocracies.
- With the US administration's withdrawal from global democracy support, the EU and its member states should at least partly step up and take a global lead, while keeping the door open for the US to return. At the EU level, the European Endowment for Democracy is a good place to start. National foundations and other CSOs should also get more, not less, funding.
- To kick off a European effort, a group of prominent European leaders should take the initiative by publishing a common op-ed simultaneously in several prestigious daily newspapers. A broad-based debate in national legislatures and the European Parliament should follow, flanked by in-depth contributions from major think tanks.



Bibliography

Al-Jazeera, 'Western Leaders Accused of Hypocrisy Over Response to Palestine, Ukraine', 9 October 2023, accessed at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/9/western-leaders-accused-of-hypocrisy-over-response-to-palestine-ukraine> on 27 March 2026.

Applebaum, A., *Autocracy Inc. – The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (London: Doubleday, 2024).

Carothers, T. and Carrier, M., 'When Do Mass Protests Topple Autocrats?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 10 March 2026, accessed at <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/03/iran-regime-change-khame-nei-protests> on 27 March 2026.

Carothers, T., Kleinfeld, R. and Youngs, R., *What Future for International Democracy Support?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (7 July 2025), accessed at <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/what-future-for-international-democracy-support> on 27 March 2026.

China File, 'Document 9: A China File Translation', 8 November 2013, accessed at <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation> on 27 March 2026.

Collinson, S., 'Trump's New Mission Statement: Strength, Force, Power', *CNN*, 6 January 2026, accessed at <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/06/politics/trump-greenland-venezuela-colombia-miller-analysis> on 27 March 2026.

Dempsey, J., 'Judy Asks: Is the EU Too Soft on Hungary?', *Carnegie Europe*, 15 September 2022, accessed at <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2022/09/judy-asks-is-the-eu-too-soft-on-hungary> on 27 March 2026.

Doyle, M., 'Why They Don't Fight. The Surprising Endurance of Democratic Peace', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2024, accessed at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/why-they-dont-fight-doyle> on 27 March 2026.

Fratzscher, M., 'Die AfD ist eine Gefahr für Demokratie und Wirtschaft', *Die*



Zeit, 13 February 2026, accessed at <https://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/2026-02/afd-wirtschaftspolitik-oekonomie-demokratie-gesellschaft> on 27 March 2026.

Freudenstein, R., 'Are the Bad Guys Winning? The Challenge of Autocracy and the Global Solidarity of Democrats', in I. Hegedűs and E. Uszkiewicz (eds.), *What Can Liberals and Democrats Fight With? Finding a Winning Narrative in the High-Stakes 2024 European Elections* (Budapest: Hungarian Europe Society 2024), 59–64, accessed at <https://europatarsasag.hu/en/blog/what-can-liberals-and-democrats-fight-finding-winning-narrative-high-stakes-2024-european> on 27 March 2026.

Freudenstein, R., 'Macht und Werte – Kann die EU ohne durchsetzbare Grundwerte zu einem Global Player werden?', *Dialog Forum*, 1 December 2020, accessed at <https://forumdialog.eu/2020/12/01/macht-und-werte/> on 27 March 2026.

Freudenstein, R., 'To Protect Europe, Promote Democracy', *The Parliament Magazine*, 8 August 2025, accessed at <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/oped-to-protect-europe-promote-democracy> on 27 March 2026.

Freudenstein, R. and Hefe, P., 'Values-Based Realism and Its Enemies: How to Tackle the Geopolitical Realism From Left and Right', *Martens Centre Blog*, 24 February 2026, accessed at <https://www.martenscentre.eu/blog/values-based-realism-and-its-enemies-how-to-tackle-the-new-geopolitical-realism-from-left-and-right/> on 27 March 2026.

Harding, E., 'The National Security Strategy: The Good, the Not So Good, and the Alarm Bells', CSIS, 5 December 2025, accessed at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/national-security-strategy-good-not-so-great-and-alarm-bells> on 27 March 2026.

Hefe, P., Papadongonas, P. and Lampert, M., *Common Ground and Complementary Strengths for Recalibrating EU–US Relations*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (2026).

Hill, F., 'Lennart Meri Lecture 2023' (2023), accessed at <https://lmc.icds.ee/lennart-meri-lecture-by-fiona-hill/> on 27 March 2026.

Jacobs, A., 'Nach dem Postkolonialismus', Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Auslandsinformationen, 22 July 2025, accessed at <https://www.kas.de/de/web/auslandsinformationen/artikel/detail/-/content/nach-dem-postkolonialismus> on 27 March 2026.

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, *Angriff auf den Westen. Postkoloniale Theorie*



in *Wissenschaft, Politik und Gesellschaft* (Berlin, 2025), accessed at <https://www.kas.de/de/web/geschichtsbewusst/einzeltitel/-/content/angriff-auf-den-westen-postkoloniale-theorie-in-wissenschaft-politik-und-gesellschaft> on 27 March 2026.

Lieven, A., 'The Ethics of Realism', *Dissent*, Summer 2022, accessed at <https://dissentmagazine.org/article/the-ethics-of-realism> on 27 March 2026.

McFaul, M., *Autocrats vs. Democrats – China, Russia, America and the New Global Disorder* (New York: Mariner Books, 2025).

Morgenthau, H., *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1949).

Mudde, C., 'Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism', The Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy, accessed at <https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century> on 27 March 2026.

Pousadela, I., *Cutting Civil Society's Lifeline – The Global Spread of Foreign Agent Laws*, Civicus (October 2025), accessed at <https://publications.civicus.org/publications/foreign-agents-laws-report/> on 27 March 2026.

Randig, R., *Global Europe, Global Democracy and Uncertain Futures for Supporting Civil Society*, Heinrich Böll Foundation (December 2025), accessed at <https://eu.boell.org/en/2025/12/16/global-europe-global-democracy-and-uncertain-futures-supporting-civil-society> on 27 March 2026.

Rogan, J., 'The Deep Dark Secrets of USAID With Mike Benz', *YouTube*, 12 February 2025, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wNJQQWMqgE> on 27 March 2026.

Snyder, T., *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

Stubb, A., speech at the Annual Meeting of Heads of Mission, Helsinki, 27 August 2024, accessed at <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-alexander-stubb-at-the-annual-meeting-of-heads-of-mission-in-helsinki-on-27-august-2024/> on 26 March 2026.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (New York, 1949), accessed at <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> on 27 March 2026.

Von Ow-Freytag, B., *Filling the Void. Why the EU Must Step up Support for Russian Civil Society*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (2018), accessed at <https://www.martenscentre.eu/publication/filling-the-void-why-the-eu-must-step-up-support-for-russian-civil-society/> on



27 March 2026.

Youngs, R. (ed.), *European Democracy Support Annual Review 2025*, accessed at <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/research/2026/02/european-democracy-support-annual-review-2025> on 27 March 2026.

Youngs, R. and Panchulidze, E. (eds.), *New Approaches to Defending Global Civil Society*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (25 February 2026), accessed at <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2026/02/new-approaches-to-defending-global-civil-society> on 27 March 2026.

Zarris, S., 'Development Without Democracy: The Authoritarian Consequences of Dismantling USAID', *Northeastern University Political Review*, 24 January 2026, accessed at <https://nupoliticalreview.org/2026/01/24/development-without-democracy-the-authoritarian-consequences-of-dismantling-usaid/> on 27 March 2026.

Zoellick, R., *America in the World – A History of U.S. Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* (New York: Twelve, 2020).

About the author

Roland Freudenstein was born in Bonn, Germany. After two years of voluntary military service, he studied political science, economics, Japan studies and international relations in Bonn and Los Angeles. Having worked as a research fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations, he became a member of the foreign and security planning staff of the European Commission in Brussels in the 1990s. Subsequently, he became director of the Warsaw office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and later held a leading role at the Foundation's central office in Berlin. After coming back to Brussels in 2004, he represented the German city state of Hamburg in the EU. In 2008 he served as head of research and deputy director of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and,



from October 2015, was its policy director. In October 2021 he became vice-president of GLOBSEC and head of its Brussels office.

Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
Rue du Commerce 20
Brussels, BE 1000

For more information, please visit www.martenscentre.eu

External editing: Pole Star Editing CommV
Typesetting: Victoria Agency
Printed in Belgium by ABIJ

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

© 2026 Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

The European Parliament and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use. Sole responsibility lies with the author of this publication.