

EU support for democracy and peace in the world

SUMMARY

From the outset, the European Union (EU) has been an integration project directed at preserving peace among its Member States – a fundamental objective that it has succeeded in achieving for over 60 years. As a community of like-minded states, the EU is also based on certain fundamental values, such as democracy and the rule of law, which the Union aspires to promote, both internally and externally, and which guide all its policies.

In line with this vision, the EU has developed specific policies to support democracy and peace in the world. It also aims to integrate the pursuit of peace and democracy with all its other external actions in areas such as trade, development, enlargement and neighbourhood policies, its common foreign and security policy, and political and diplomatic relations with third countries and multilateral institutions. The EU has established a reputation as a soft power organisation guided by a normative vision and as an effective actor for peace and democracy.

Strengthening peace and democracy globally has never been an easy task, however, and today's geopolitical context poses new challenges. The proliferation and increasing gravity and duration of conflicts – some in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, the emergence of new threats, such as terrorism or nuclear proliferation, and the crisis of liberal systems have driven the EU to widen and intensify its efforts. They have also led to a new vision for action revolving around the concept of 'resilient societies' based on the mutually reinforcing pillars of peace and democracy, and a special emphasis on fragile states. Against this background, recent surveys have shown that citizens expect the EU to be even more active in promoting peace and democracy externally – something that should surely strengthen its resolve to make further progress in this crucial area.

This is an update of an earlier briefing issued in advance of the 2019 European elections.



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State of play

After the tragic experiences of war during the last century, peace has become the central foundation of the international multilateral system, as embodied primarily by the United Nations (UN). Today, it is a universally accepted value to which all nations aspire. According to a widely accepted [theory](#) among scholars, democracy is a guarantee of peace. Empirical evidence on past conflicts shows that democratic nations are much less likely to go to war against each other and against other non-democratic nations. Functioning democracies have also proved best at promoting human rights and a [decent standard of living](#) compared to their authoritarian counterparts. Even if it has not yet found universal endorsement, democracy in its liberal variant, which protects fundamental rights and is based on the rule of law and the separation of power, was the [most well-established system](#) in the world at the end of 2017.

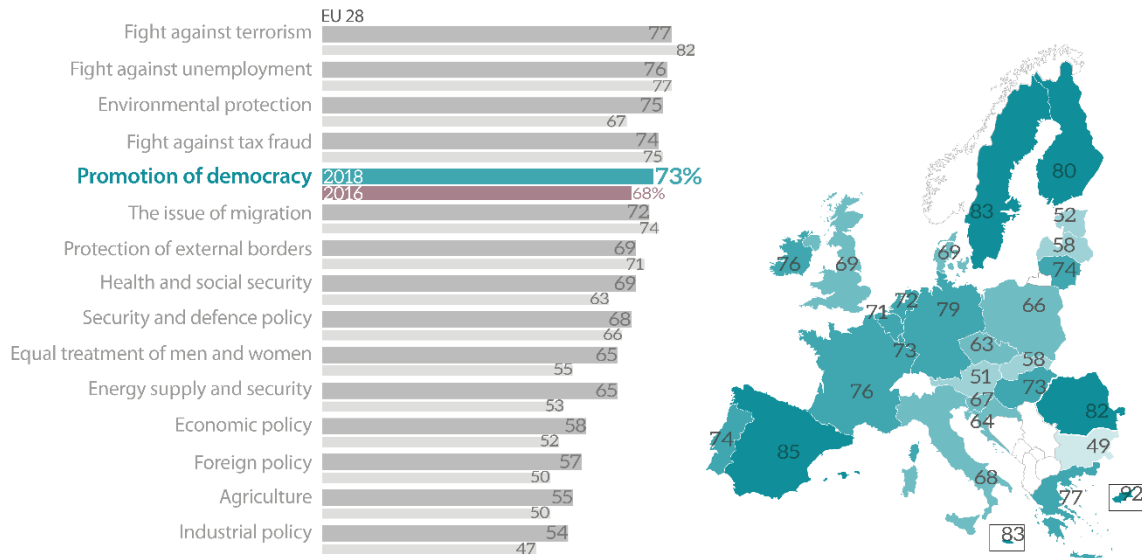
Today's geopolitical context poses certain challenges both to peace and democracy. The last years have witnessed an [increased number of conflicts](#), although more localised in nature than the large-scale wars of the previous century. Many of them are internal, in line with a longer trend: since the 1950s civil conflicts have clearly [outnumbered](#) interstate wars. Conflicts have become more protracted, and their humanitarian impact more serious, with [increasing numbers](#) of people being displaced, and atrocities being committed on a larger scale. Non-state actors involved in recent conflicts, such as ISIL/Da'esh and Boko Haram, have violated the most basic principles of international humanitarian and human rights law, committing heinous acts that require a strong response by the international community. The difficulty of de-escalating such conflicts and of eradicating radical violent groups highlights the need to prevent conflicts in the first place, by building the [resilience of societies](#), a vision embraced by the EU. A similarly [comprehensive approach](#) is required in post-conflict situations and reconstruction.

The benefits of peace are beyond doubt for the whole of humanity. The cost of conflicts is significant. The Institute for Economics and Peace has estimated that in 2016 [conflict and violence](#) cost US\$14.3 trillion, or 12.6 % of global GDP. In comparison, the development aid provided in 2016 by OECD countries represented only 1 % of this amount, namely [US\\$142.6 billion](#). Reducing conflicts could play a major role in reducing poverty in the world since conflict affected countries are often amongst the poorest.

Just like peace, democracy should also not be taken for granted. The ['third wave'](#) of democratisation which started in the early 1970s, with the democracy movements in southern Europe, and peaked after the end of the Cold War when the spread of liberal democracy in the world seemed unstoppable (a vision best embodied in the idea of the 'end of history'), has faded away. Now we are witnessing a [stagnation](#) or even a democratic recession, depending on the point of view. While talk of a democracy backlash or democracy recession abounds in the mass media, [scientific data on the state of democracy](#) point rather to a global stagnation in the level of democracy in the world, with a relatively slight reduction in the number of liberal democracies over the 2007-2017 period. During the same period, more countries have transformed from autocracies into electoral democracies¹ than the other way around. The most democratic regions of the world, namely Europe and the Americas, have seen their democratic standards decline more than elsewhere, such as in Sub-Saharan Africa, albeit from a different level. In the last decade, rising economic inequalities in the aftermath of the economic crisis, citizens' dissatisfaction with politicians, political parties and public institutions, the emergence of security threats such as violent extremism, terrorism and hybrid threats that take advantage of the open character of liberal democracies, as well as the difficulties of democratic regimes to deal with [irregular migration](#), have all served to increase [citizens' unhappiness](#) with democratic systems. On the other hand, authoritarian regimes have adapted to the new realities, putting on a facade of democracy, behind which they crack down on opposition parties, human rights defenders and freedoms fundamental to democracy, such as freedoms of expression, assembly and association. As they restrict the space in which human rights defenders and civil society operate, it becomes increasingly difficult to provide support to these central drivers of democratisation.

Public expectations for EU involvement²

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who would like the EU to intervene more than at present



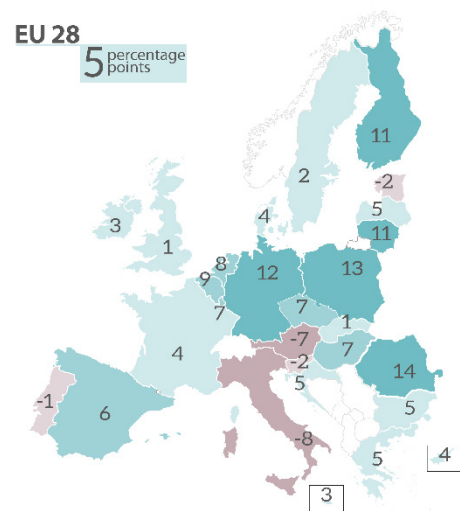
Source: EPRS based on Eurobarometer [85.1 - 2016](#); [89.2 - 2018](#).

External support for democracy responds to popular expectations both inside and outside the Union. Many people in the world still **favour** democracy over other systems of governance, despite a certain dissatisfaction with the way their democratic governments function. Moreover, people in certain regions of the world, for example in Africa, want **more democracy**.

According to a series of Eurobarometer surveys done for the European Parliament on 'perceptions and expectations', the support of EU citizens for even stronger EU involvement in support for democracy and peace in the world grew from 68 % in 2016 to 73 % in 2018 (See Figure 2). The variation in opinions across Member States is significant. The strongest support for increased EU action in promotion of democracy and peace in the world is registered in Cyprus (92 %) and France (85 %). The weakest support for increased EU action in this field is seen in Bulgaria (49 %) and Austria (51 %).

The overall rise in support for increased EU involvement in promotion of democracy and peace is 5 percentage points (see Figure 3). At Member State level, the most significant increase is in Romania (increase of 14 percentage points) and Poland (increase of 13 percentage points). Five Member States show a fall in the desire for intensified EU involvement in promotion of democracy and peace, but in only two of them is this trend more than marginal – Italy (decrease of 8 percentage points) and Austria (decrease of 7 percentage points).

Figure 2: Expectations for more EU action than at present: percentage points difference between 2016 and 2018



Source: EPRS based on Eurobarometer [85.1 - 2016](#); [89.2 - 2018](#).

Unlike 2016, when the proportion of Europeans who considered the EU action on promotion of democracy to be insufficient was considerably higher than those who considered it adequate (51 % to 37 %), in 2018, the groups are almost equal – 45 % evaluate it as insufficient and 42 % as adequate. Part of this change is down to the five percentage-point increase in the share of Europeans who evaluate current EU involvement in the field as adequate.

This positive change in evaluation of the EU's involvement in the field is most prominent in Greece (increase of 18 percentage points) and in Hungary (increase of 16 percentage points). The opposite trend is registered in only three Member States – most significantly in Malta, where the share of citizens with positive evaluation of the EU action on promotion of democracy and peace in the world has dropped by eight percentage points. Differences in the evaluation of the EU action amongst Member States remain significant, ranging from as low as a 25 % evaluation of adequate in France to 62 % in the Czech Republic.

Promotion of democracy and peace in the world is a policy area where there is an expectation gap between current and desired EU involvement. Its magnitude has remained the same, since the improvement in evaluation of EU action is balanced by the increased expectations for even more EU action on promotion of democracy and peace in the world.

EU framework

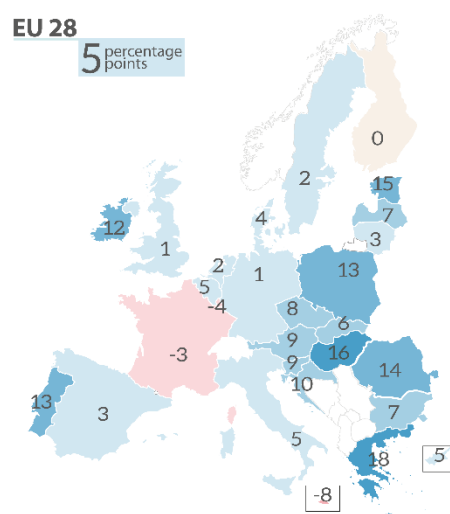
Legal framework

As an organisation that has been able to secure peace among its Member States since its creation, and as a successful supporter of democratisation processes in Europe, the EU continues to play an important role, both in its region and in the wider world, by setting an example and inspiring and helping others to share its fundamental values, including peace, democracy and human rights. This role is enshrined in the Treaties.

Historically, Article J(1) of the [Maastricht Treaty](#) (which entered into force in 1993 and granted the Union important competences, including to develop coherent external policies) introduced the advancement of democracy and the preservation of peace as a fundamental principle of EU common foreign and security policy and of EU development cooperation. The [Treaty on European Union](#) (TEU), as modified by Lisbon, recognises democracy as a fundamental value of the Union, and a general objective and a guiding principle of EU external action. The EU is also to contribute to peace, security and prevention of conflict through its external action. Under its common security and defence policy (CSDP), the Union may make use of civilian and military assets provided by the Member States on missions outside its borders for peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter.

Under the TEU, the EU is also committed to respecting the principles of multilateralism, as well as international law and the UN Charter. [Goal 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), to which the EU is equally committed, contains targets that are directly relevant to democracy and peace, namely (16.1) 'Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere',

Figure 3: Perception of EU action as adequate at present: percentage points difference between 2016 and 2018



Source: EPRS based on Eurobarometer [85.1 - 2016](#); [89.2 - 2018](#).

and (16.7) 'Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels'.

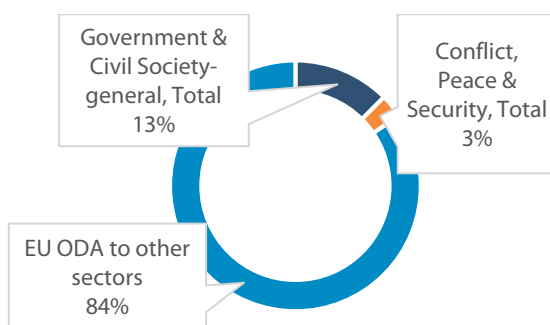
Financial framework

Main policy documents

The November 2009 Council [conclusions](#) on democracy support in the EU's external relations, and the annexed EU agenda, define the major guidelines for EU action. Most importantly, EU policy must be tailored to local specificities. It should be based on dialogue and partnership with third countries, bearing in mind that these, through their institutions, political actors, civil society organisations and other stakeholders, have ownership of domestic democratisation processes, while the EU plays only an assisting role. The 2015-2019 [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy](#) outlines several priorities that are relevant to democracy, namely supporting the integrity of electoral processes and strengthening election management bodies; maximising the impact of electoral observation; supporting the capacity of parliamentary institutions; supporting public institutions in strengthening good governance and the rule of law; invigorating civil society and addressing threats to it; supporting human rights defenders and freedom of expression online and offline. The [EU's Global Strategy](#), adopted in June 2016, outlines a vision of 'resilient society' based on the assumption that the connection between democracy and peace is a bi-directional one, with each pre-supposing and reinforcing the other. It advocates an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, using all policies and instruments for conflict prevention and resolution.

The EU has set aside part of its external financial resources to fund programmes dedicated specifically to democracy and peace. 13 % of total EU development aid (see Figure 4) is granted to actions supporting government and civil society, while a smaller percentage supports securing peace.

Figure 4: Share of EU official development aid (ODA) for peace and governance sectors (2014-2016)



Source: [OECD, Development Assistance Committee \(DAC\)](#), Creditor Reporting System Aid Activity database on Official Development Aid

EU support for government and civil society covers a wide variety of actions (see Figure 5). Some of these aim at reinforcing governments' capacity to deliver (administrative and public finance management, decentralisation, legal and judicial reform, etc.) while others support democratic actors (e.g. legislatures and political parties) and actions (elections, democratic participation, etc.). Support directed at improving good governance in general, such as through better management of public finances or anti-corruption measures, is expected to strengthen democratic institutions and to create democratic openings where these are absent, but its efficacy in promoting democratisation, particularly in authoritarian regimes, remains [controversial](#).

In the EU budget, the main programme aimed at promoting democracy is the **European**

Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). In financial terms, it remains the smallest EU external financing instrument, with **€1.33 billion** over the 2014-2020 period. Around a quarter of its funds are reserved for election assistance, especially for funding EU election observation missions; the rest are dedicated mainly to financing civil society organisations and helping human rights defenders at risk. The **European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI)** focuses on promoting human rights and the rule of law, establishing deep and sustainable democracy and developing a thriving civil society. Its total in the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) amounts to **€15.43 billion**. The **Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI)**, endowed with a financial envelope of **€19.66 billion** over the current MFF, is the main financial instrument in the EU budget

for funding aid to developing countries. Its geographical programmes, to which almost two thirds of its budget are dedicated, must spend at least 15 % of their allocated funds on human rights, democracy and good governance.

Figure 5: EU development aid for government and civil society by sectors (2014-2016)

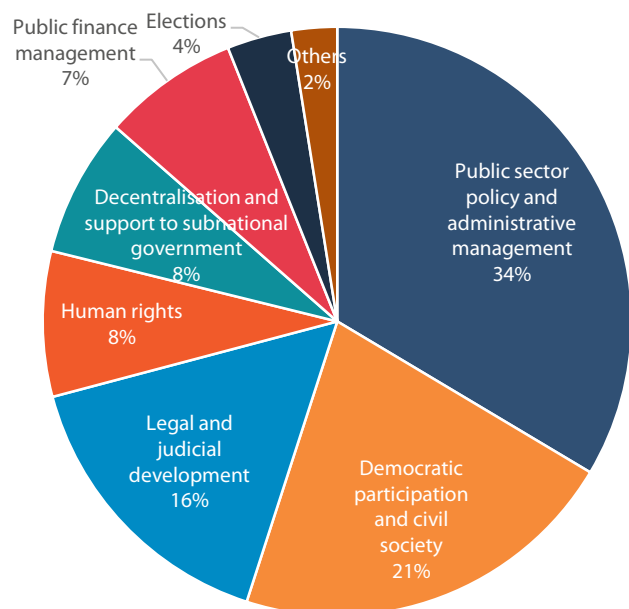
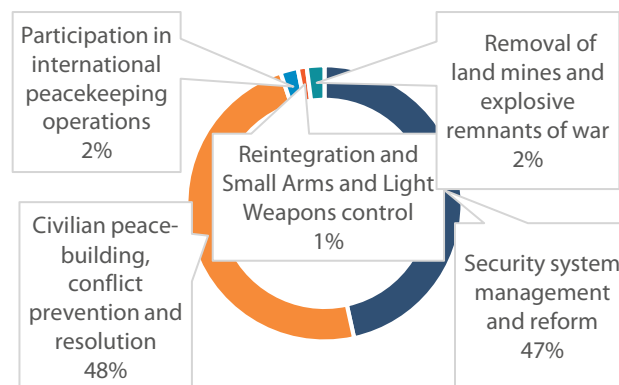


Figure 6: EU development aid for conflict, peace and security by sectors (2014-2016)



Source: [OECD, Development Assistance Committee \(DAC\)](#), Creditor reporting system Aid Activity database on Official Development Aid.

Outside the EU budget, the main programme contributing to democracy promotion is the **European Development Fund (EDF)**. Launched in 1959, the EDF is aimed at providing development aid for African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. The EDF is financed by direct voluntary contributions from the EU Member States. Its financial resources for the 2014-2020 MFF total **€30.5 billion**. A significant part (according to some estimates, one third) of EDF funds are directed towards supporting various aspects of governance. Priorities are established together with partner countries' governments through national indicative programmes.

The [European Endowment for Democracy](#), an independent private law foundation supported jointly by the EU institutions and a number of EU Member State provides funding to struggling local champions of democratic change in the European Neighbourhood. Being very flexible, it can adapt to local circumstances, to avoid restrictions from authoritarian governments.

The main instrument dedicated to peace is the **Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP)**, endowed with a budget of €1 billion over 2014-2020. It focuses on crisis management and peacebuilding (i.e. crisis preparedness, crisis response, conflict prevention and peacebuilding), and on addressing global and trans-national threats (i.e. terrorism, cybersecurity and illicit trafficking). The IcSP was amended in 2017 to allow for new funding opportunities for military capacity-building in third countries, with an extra €100 million allocated for that purpose. The amendments allow the Union to help to build the capacity of military actors in partner countries through training and mentoring, provision of non-lethal equipment and infrastructure improvements. EU funding may not be used to finance recurrent military expenditure, arms and ammunition procurement, or training which is solely designed to contribute to the fighting capacity of the armed forces.

Deliveries of the 2014-2019 parliamentary term

Policy initiatives in the area of democracy

In order to realise in its external action the fundamental values of democracy and human rights, the Union has designed specific actions, some self-standing, some intertwined with other important policies such as development aid, trade and the common foreign and security policy.

- In recent years, the EU has extended its **political and diplomatic efforts** in favour of democracy. Created relatively recently, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has played an important empowering role on the ground, facilitating dialogues with national authorities and civil society. Even if it does not have a dialogue specifically dedicated to democracy assistance, the EU includes democracy issues in its political and human rights dialogues with partner countries. Democracy has been added as a central dimension of the human rights and democracy country strategies, which EU delegations draft with the aim of identifying priorities for EU action.
- **In trade policy**, the EU uses its leverage as the world biggest commercial bloc to promote respect for human rights, democracy and rule of law in partner countries. During the current parliamentary mandate, the EU has consistently included democracy and human rights provisions in the new bilateral agreements it has negotiated, including with partners where issues with respect to democracy would not normally arise, such as Japan and Canada.³ The EP has repeatedly insisted on the inclusion of such a clause in all new agreements.⁴ The EU's [unilateral trade preferences](#) contain a similar mechanism allowing their suspension in cases of systematic and serious violations of human rights, including civil and political rights. The EU Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) provides additional trade incentives to developing countries that ratify and comply with an extensive set of international conventions, including the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). The reviews regularly undertaken by the Commission (in 2016 and 2018) have confirmed that while problems persist, there has been tangible progress in countries covered by the scheme, including on democratic standards. Political and legal reforms undertaken in Sri Lanka convinced the EU to reinstitute the preferential GSP+ regime for the country in May 2017. [The 2018 GSP+ country review](#) highlighted 'a significant opening up of democratic and civil society space' there. The EU has initiated the procedure for suspending trade preferences with Cambodia because of the very poor human and labour rights situation there. Political repression and severe restrictions on mass-media and the activity of opposition parties are particular issues of concern. If the country does not act to address them, sanctions will take effect in August 2020.
- Mainstreaming democracy in **development aid** has been a major objective during the current MFF. The EU has continued to condition its funding provided directly to governments as part of their national budgets ('budget support') on fulfilment of democratic standards. The new [budget support guidelines](#) published in 2017 reinforce this approach. Much of EU development aid and cooperation is conditional on respect of human rights and democratic standards, in line with the clause included in EU bilateral framework agreements such as the Cotonou Agreement with the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Since 2014, the clause has been applied only once – in relation to the political crisis in Burundi, leading to the suspension of development aid provided to the government. [The new European consensus on development](#) adopted in June 2017 recognises the tight link between democracy and development, asserting that democratic societies with accountable institutions are 'preconditions' of sustainable development. Fragile and conflict affected countries deserve a special focus.
- The EU is one of the leading international organisations in the field of **election observation**. Recognising that free and fair elections are one of the most important elements of democracy, during the 2014-2019 mandate, the EU sent over 30 EOMs to various countries,

mostly African, but also Latin American countries, as well as other parts of the world. The European Parliament plays a central role in the EOMs. Its delegation is integrated in the EU EOM, which is always chaired by a Member of the European Parliament. Moreover, it has often been involved in International Electoral Observation Missions organised by the ODIHR (the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). EU [electoral assistance](#) is complementary to election observation and consists of technical or material support to the electoral process, including support to NGOs. EU funding has been vital for organising elections in transition countries, for example in [Somalia in 2016](#), where the EU provided 40 % of the donor funding, which covered approximately 60 % of the total cost of elections.

- **EU enlargement policy** is centred on the [Copenhagen criteria](#) established in 1993, which place several political requirements on candidate states, namely stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities. This is an approach that has been considered very effective. The [EU 2017 Strategy for the Western Balkans](#) recognises that in order for the respective countries to 'strengthen their democracies, comprehensive and convincing reforms are still required in crucial areas', particularly with respect to the rule of law. The European Commission has expressed [concerns](#) in relation to Turkey, with regard to the erosion of sufficient checks and balances and the separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary.
- The EU Neighbourhood Policy ([ENP](#)) has continued to apply the 'more for more principle' defined in 2011 in the aftermath of the political change in the region. This principle conditions EU assistance and tighter relations on progress in partner countries on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The [2015 Review of the ENP](#) puts a stronger emphasis on the need for stability in the southern neighbours and advocates a differentiated approach towards these countries. The EU Global Strategy of 2016 has a chapter on investing in state and societal resilience in the EU neighbouring countries.
- One of the main aspects of the democracy regression over the last years has been the 'shrinking space' for **civil society** in many countries. The 2012 communication, '[The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations](#)', had acknowledged the crucial role of civil society in fostering democracy and a pluralistic society, as well as in fostering peace and in conflict resolution. The EU has taken additional steps to engage continuously with civil society organisations in third countries, such as through creating [roadmaps for engagement with civil society in partner countries](#).

European Parliament actions

The European Parliament has established its own measures to support parliamentary democracy in third countries identified as priority partners for democracy assistance. Some of these measures aim specifically at building trust and facilitating dialogue and consensus-building on legislative issues among conflicting political forces in parliamentary environments characterised by a lack of political trust, such as in Ukraine. Its Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group ([DEG](#)), established in the current format (composed of [15 members](#)) in 2012, has the role to provide political guidance and supervision on election observation, on promotion of parliamentary democracy, including training to staff and members, and on management of activities to support pre-accession countries' parliaments.

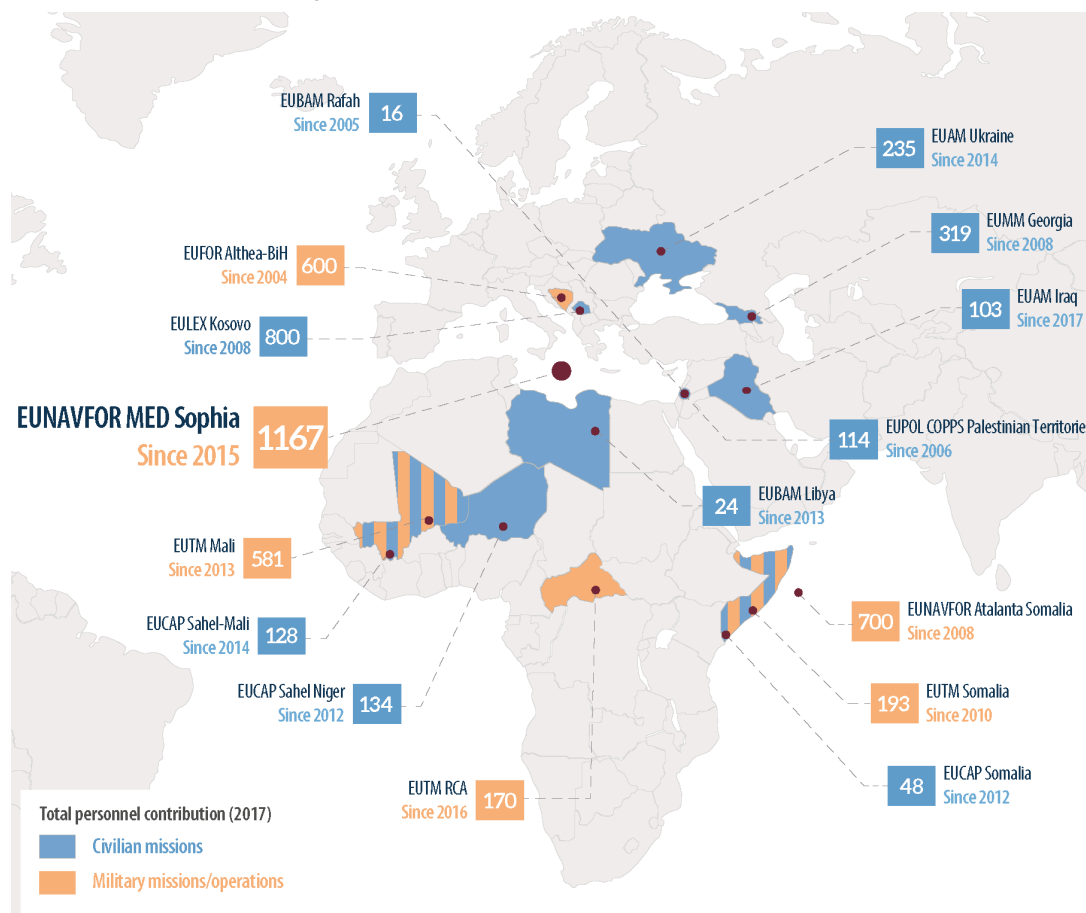
Policy initiatives in the area of peace

- Recognising the tight link between democracy and peace as two mutually reinforcing pillars of resilient societies, the [2016 Global Strategy](#) introduced the **promotion of resilience and capacity-building** in third countries as guiding objectives of EU external action.
- In response to the increasing number and duration of conflicts, the EU puts a **special emphasis on fragile countries**, with a [quarter of EU aid](#) going to the most fragile states in

the world. The new [EU Sustainable Development Fund](#) provides incentives for investments in Africa and the Union's Neighbourhood. Following an [amendment](#) proposed by the European Parliament, particular attention is given to fragile countries, in order to boost their socio-economic development and increase their resilience. The EU has also adopted comprehensive strategies in the Horn of Africa and in the Sahel, interconnecting different policies, such as security, development and humanitarian aid.

- The EU is active in **peace-keeping and stabilisation** in the world. The EU and its Member States contribute around [33 %](#) of the funding for UN peace-keeping. Currently, the EU has 16 CSDP missions and military operations on three continents, with a wide range of mandates (military training, capacity-building, counter-piracy, rule of law and security sector reform, border assistance, etc.). They deploy over 5 000 civilian and military personnel (see Figure 7). Most EU missions have taken place in Africa, often operating in parallel with UN peace keeping operations or African Union missions. Six of the current 16 missions are [active EU military operations](#) and benefit from special [funding](#) by Member States.

Figure 7 – CSDP missions/operations



Data source: European External Action Service (from the [Peace and Security Outlook](#), EPRS, 2019).

- The EU promotes peace through participation in **mediation and diplomacy**, including via the UN. The EU has developed its own mediation support capacity based on the 2009 [Concept](#) on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities. It carries out its mediation efforts through a variety of actors, including EU Special Representatives, EU Delegations and CSDP missions. In recent years, the EU has been involved in mediation efforts in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Libya and the Central African Republic. A number of [mediation initiatives](#) have been undertaken by Members of the European Parliament. The Parliament has called for improvements in the EU's conflict prevention and conflict management policies and tools.⁵ In line with its comprehensive approach to the conflict, in 2017 the EU [launched](#) its first [preventive stabilisation mission in Central Mali](#).

Potential for the future

Budgetary outlook

On 14 June 2018, the Commission published its proposal on a new external financing instrument for the 2021-2027 MFF. This establishes the [Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument](#) (NDICI), which merges most previous external instruments into one single instrument in order to bring about increased flexibility. This will allow for using and re-using unutilised funds on a multi-annual basis. The thematic part of this new instrument includes four programmes on human rights and democracy; civil society organisations; stability and peace, and global challenges, with a proposed total budget of €7 billion. According to the proposal, the human rights and democracy component will be allocated €1.5 billion (a slight increase compared to the €1.3 billion allocated to the EIDHR under the current MFF), and the stability and peace component, €1 billion – the same budget as the current IcSP. The human rights and democracy thematic programme will keep the defining EIDHR features, in that it will provide assistance independently of third countries' governments' consent and will have a global coverage.

The Commission proposal mentions explicitly that EU development aid in general shall take a comprehensive approach to supporting democracy through all aspects of democratic governance. In line with this approach, the neighbourhood geographic programme – which continues the current ENI – establishes a 'performance-based approach' to reflect the commitment of neighbouring countries 'to and progress in building deep and sustainable democracy'. With regard to budget support to developing countries, the proposal reaffirms the existing approach, according to which this shall be based on 'shared commitments to universal values, democracy, human rights, [and] the rule of law'.

The European Parliament adopted its position on the draft NDICI regulation in March 2019 with an overwhelming majority of 420 votes in favour to 146 against, with 102 abstentions. The [resolution](#) adopted by the plenary proposes several [amendments](#), some with respect to EU support to democracy, human rights and civil society:

- it reinforces the focus on democracy and human rights by inserting additional references to the respective EU Treaty articles, to EU policy documents in the area, as well as to international human rights norms;
- it proposes an increase of €4 billion in the NDICI budget compared to the European Commission's proposal, including an increase in EU funding for civil society organisations. Funds for human rights and democracy activities worldwide should be increased to at least € 2 billion under the human rights thematic component;
- the Parliament insists on stronger democratic conditionality. It considers that in the case of persistent breaches of the principles of democracy, the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, EU support should be partially or fully suspended. The Commission shall be empowered to decide to suspend aid, taking into account the EP resolutions.

Further progress on this file will depend on how the new Parliament and the other institutions decide to proceed.

Policy strategies and debates

Supporting democracy and peace in the world is a complex policy, the results of which are not always straightforward and immediately visible. Democratic progress is often non-linear and democratic consolidation requires a longer-term perspective. As outlined in the EU Global Strategy, preserving peace is most effectively achieved through conflict prevention and building resilient societies, which also requires time. These long-term objectives are sometimes hard to reconcile with the imperative of short-term policy efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, by its very nature, democracy is the expression of the will of the people, and therefore cannot be imposed from outside. As is explicitly recognised in various EU policy documents, EU external democracy support

can only play an **assisting role** in relation to national and local actors, who retain ownership of the genuine change processes required to build and enhance democracy.

In the current context of **democratic 'backsliding' and increasing authoritarianism** in many countries, democracy support has to respond to the twofold challenge of opening democratic spaces in authoritarian regimes, on the one hand, and supporting fragile emerging democracies (such as Tunisia in the EU Neighbourhood), on the other. One of the EU's preferred responses to increasing authoritarian tendencies has been to focus its support on independent civil society. The Commission's new financial proposal recognises, however, that the shrinking space for civil society poses additional difficulties to democracy support, making it 'challenging to work on these issues'. Therefore, it is necessary to identify [new ways](#) for supporting civil society in increasingly restrictive environments. With regard to democracies still in need of consolidation, the lack of reform, or even the deterioration, of the rule of law and democratic standards in several candidate countries, as well as in neighbourhood countries such as Ukraine, despite extensive EU efforts, highlights the difficulties of EU's democracy support endeavour. The European Parliament has repeatedly called for a firmer EU stance on democratic standards in its relations with partners. For example, in its [2016](#) and [2017](#) resolutions the Parliament called for EU negotiations with Turkey to be frozen, the latter occasion being in response to the constitutional reform that did not respect the fundamental principles of the separation of powers and did not provide for sufficient checks and balances, in violation of the Copenhagen criteria.

A further challenge is the evolving nature of democratic processes in the context of citizens' political apathy and dissatisfaction. There is strong popular support in many countries for **better and more direct citizens' involvement** in decision-making. In order to strengthen the inclusion of dissatisfied or politically less active groups (such as young people), new forms of political participation better adapted to the digital age need to be explored. EU external actions and financing tools have started addressing such issues.

In conjunction with the challenges to democracy, new types of **threats and insecurity factors**, such as climate change, terrorism and uncontrolled migration, call for innovative and comprehensive approaches that interconnect various policy areas. The re-emergence of long-term inter-state strategic competition driven by authoritarian powers (Russia and China) but also, more recently by the United States, the assertiveness of 'rogue regimes' (North Korea) and action by violent non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, profoundly reshape the global security environment and call for appropriate responses from the EU. The Union is strongly committed to multilateral action, but as other major powers sometimes favour unilateral action, and geostrategic competition in the world increases, it is vital that the EU consolidates its capacity to act more autonomously on the international scene, as underlined by Commission President Juncker in his September 2018 [speech](#) on the State of the Union. Particularly at a time when the United States, which has for decades been the leading force behind a multilateral system based on values, seems to weaken its commitment to the liberal values agenda, there is a need for the EU to step in to support this system.

By its very nature, the Union remains a normative power committed to the fundamental values enshrined in its Treaties, including ensuring peace through integration – a model that it promotes in the wider world. Its external policy will necessarily reflect these internal ambitions. Even if it strengthens its military capabilities, it remains primarily a soft power that places particular emphasis on multilateral cooperation, on diplomacy and mediation to resolve conflicts. Nevertheless, the EU faces the difficult task of **ensuring consensus among its Member States** about promoting its fundamental values in the world. This remains a serious challenge, as recognised by Commission President Juncker in his 2018 State of the Union address. One solution envisaged is to use majority voting, for example when deciding on EU civilian missions. Moreover, in certain cases, the pursuit of fundamental values by the Union can conflict with short-term economic and security interests of its Member States, such as those related to trade and investment (e.g. arms exports or imports of much needed oil and minerals from non-democratic regimes), or to the control of irregular migration and addressing security threats (sometimes requiring cooperation with non-democratic regimes).

Supporting human rights and democracy is not only a matter of principled commitment, but has also the potential to help the EU deal with its own **internal political challenges**. For example, consolidating democratic systems respectful of human rights in fragile countries generating irregular migration to the EU, such as in Sub-Saharan African, is considered a very effective way of tackling the root causes of irregular migration. [Available data](#) show that half of the world's migrants come from authoritarian countries and a significant share of them move to liberal democracies. A more peaceful and democratic world will without doubt increase Europe's own security.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Electoral democracies are political systems that hold fairly free and fair multi-party elections but have serious shortcomings regarding the rule of law and checks and balances on the government, as well as liberal rights. The classification as liberal versus electoral democracies and the corresponding data originates from [V-DEM Annual Democracy Report 2018](#).
- ² This section has been drafted by Alina Dobrova, with graphics by Nadejda Kresnichka-Nikolchova.
- ³ Trade agreements include a reference to a clause used in framework cooperation agreements, which states that democracy and human rights are 'essential elements', the breach of which by one party would entitle the other to take appropriate measures, including the suspension of the agreement. The strategic partnership agreements signed with [Japan](#) in 2018 and with [Canada](#) in 2016, at the same time as the free trade agreements with these countries, include a democracy clause, the validity of which extends to the latter. The European Parliament gives its consent to both types of agreement.
- ⁴ See, for example, [European Parliament resolution of 25 February 2016 on the opening of negotiations for an EU-Tunisia Free Trade Agreement \(2015/2791\(RSP\)\)](#), [European Parliament recommendation of 14 September 2017 to the Council, the Commission and the European External Action Service on the negotiations of the modernisation of the trade pillar of the EU-Chile Association Agreement \(2017/2057\(INI\)\)](#).
- ⁵ See, for example, resolution of 7 June 2016 on the EU 2015 Report on Policy Coherence for Development ([2015/2317\(INI\)](#)); resolution of 14 February 2017 on the revision of the European Consensus on Development ([2016/2094\(INI\)](#)); resolution of 5 April 2017 on addressing refugee and migrant movements ([2015/2342\(INI\)](#)).

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