

The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support

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This paper is the second in a three-part series examining U.S. and European democracy policy and their inter-relationship.

Introduction

As political trends in many parts of the world have turned in more illiberal or openly authoritarian directions, international policies to support democracy have struggled to retain traction. There is a widespread feeling that the era of dynamic and effective international democracy support has passed. Different kinds of regimes around the world have made life increasingly difficult for external democracy support, while democracies are being pulled toward more realpolitik priorities that seem to sideline concern for democratic norms. Skeptics suggest that Western democracies anyway have little credibility or normative appeal left to incentivize democratic reform elsewhere given the misfiring of their political systems at home.

In light of all this, it has been clear for a number of years that the long-standing model of international democracy support has passed its sell-by date. Carnegie's Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program has explored the implications of this for U.S. foreign policy,¹ and this paper considers what it means for European strategy. European democracy promotion was at its genesis built around the ambitious aims of weakening autocratic regimes, solidifying fragile democratic transitions, structurally transforming societies and political systems, ensuring democracy helped resolve conflicts, and exporting democratic values as a means of bringing other countries closer to the European Union—buttressed by the assumption that democracy in Europe was solid enough to serve as a reference point for reformers in other parts of the world. Policymakers and analysts have realized for several years now that this old paradigm no longer holds, and yet they have struggled to define or conceptualize its replacement.

In an effort to do just that, this paper argues that EU policies have already adjusted to the new era and that their emerging ethos can best be conceptualized as *defensive democracy support*. The first section identifies three axes of this approach. The paper then assesses its strengths and weaknesses, contending not only that the shift to a defensive democracy support is welcome and well-grounded in several crucial senses but also that it raises new doubts about the future of EU policies.

The Defensive Turn in Democracy Support

Analysis of European democracy support in recent years has been almost entirely critical. Many analysts, politicians, and diplomats appear to have inched toward a fatalistic view that the whole notion of international democracy support has largely had its day. The realpolitik perspective that the EU should rein back its democracy support to focus on narrower strategic self-interest has become strikingly widespread. From another direction, there is a greater conviction that traditional democracy promotion looks like an increasingly inappropriate neocolonial venture out of tune with citizens' preferences in different regions of the world.

These sharply contrasting critiques have become equally mainstream and ubiquitous, but they miss an essential factor: European strategies and approaches to democracy have evolved, and a new paradigm of democracy support has in recent years tentatively taken shape. Criticism tends to take aim at tactics and strategies that European donors have in some measure already left behind. The EU has adjusted to the dilution of its power and to the altered political trends in other regions. This does not entail the complete renunciation of democracy support but rather brings to the fore different ways of designing it and of understanding the democracy challenge. The new framework can be described and conceptualized through the notion of defensive democracy support. This involves different dynamics that overlap but are not necessarily in full harmony with each other.

Safeguarding Democratic Space

In the first axis of its defensive approach, Europe's current agenda is less about proactively expanding democracy into new areas and more about safeguarding a degree of open political space in ever more hostile environments and preventing antidemocratic trends from getting worse. It is a reaction to mounting threats and mainly about protecting islands of democracy. Pushing out authoritarian regimes now lies well beyond the ambition of European democracy support, even if some leaders still tend to talk in such assertive tones. As its focus narrows to core liberal-civic rights, this agenda is less about replicating or exporting wholesale "EU models" than used to be the case.

Democracy support has become more indirect as it adjusts to more attacks by different regimes on activists and on externally funded aid programs. Most European donors have shifted their democracy funding to provide support to individual activists, bloggers, and human rights defenders in their battles against regime repression. In a growing number of countries, the EU has not been able to continue many long-standing types of democracy support, and its focus has turned primarily to relocating activists to other countries—from, for example, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Egypt. A dramatically increased part of EU democracy and human rights budgets now goes to paying for this.

EU funding has also come to prioritize more indirect approaches to political change. In the last years, it has supported activists in adopting less overtly political strategies as civil society organizations (CSOs) seek to evade tighter state control and repression. In many narrowing democratic spaces, democracy support programs have moved their focus from the most sensitive political and rights-related issues to less directly political themes, such as culture and the arts, the environment, education and youth, media diversity, and gender and disability rights. Such initiatives are not entirely new, but they have become far more prevalent in recent years as CSOs reorient their actions in a less political direction in response to tighter regime restrictions.

As part of this trend, European donors have increasingly supported high-profile democracy CSOs in reaching out to less-known informal and grassroots civic groups, initiatives, and movements that try to work through local community projects that are less exposed to being targeted by regimes. The ethos among donors today is that more democratic space can be retained at the community level and on local issues than on the most contested political terrain in national capitals. European democracy aid has also been oriented more toward CSOs working on economic activities that might offer some linkages to rights-based issues. One notable example is the increased backing for social entrepreneurs, on the basis that regimes are often keen to allow space for such socially oriented economic activities even as they clamp down on political CSOs.

European democracy support still seeks to push the frontiers of democracy outward when opportunities present themselves, but this aspect is more modest and secondary than it used to be. Even where some degree of positive democratic breakthrough occurs, the EU has frequently found itself trying to limit a subsequent unraveling and is forced back into a defensive mode. Its policies in Armenia, Ethiopia, and Tunisia are examples of such an evolution. Some of the largest European democracy aid allocations in the 2010s were switched from building positively on democratic potential to a narrower portfolio aimed at limiting instability and institutional unraveling; for example, in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Myanmar, and the Palestinian Territories.² The EU has also effectively outsourced the more expansive and forward-leaning kinds of funding to organizations like the European Endowment for Democracy, expressly to give itself and its member states some deniability when it comes to challenging nondemocratic regimes.

The general aim underlying all these funding adjustments has been to protect key *civic infrastructure*—networks, hubs, spaces, community forums, and the like that provide activists and members of the public with opportunities to meet, deliberate, and plan actions to address civic or socioeconomic needs. With more regimes blocking standard forms of grant giving, EU donors have also been forced to turn to other ways to channel funds to democratic reformers, like very small cash transfers or even cryptocurrency on very informal bases. The aim is now less about wholesale systematic transformation at the level of regime type and more about helping protect a modest degree of basic social capital and civic agency as these come under threat.³ The EU has long been criticized for aiming for formal, limited democracy without extensive human or social rights.⁴ Yet, the shift to defensive democracy support seems to entail the very opposite: a scattering of funding initiatives designed to defend core rights-based activism and without any pretension at systemic democratization or regime transformation.

Democracy Support as Order Protection

In the second axis of the defensive approach, democracy support has come to be reframed as integral to countering systemic shifts in the international order that are detrimental to EU strategic interests. This involves some quite assertive diplomacy but is defensive in the sense that it fuses the protection of the beleaguered liberal order and that of democracy. This strand of policy is not necessarily framed or implemented as part of a single coherent strategy, alongside the democracy funding changes outlined above. Rather, it is a more oblique approach to democracy that is not always fully in harmony with on-the-ground support programs. But it is imbued with the same ethos of seeking to preserve core liberal norms from assault. Although this concern with shaping the geopolitical ecosystem in democracy's favor is most prominent in U.S. policies, it has also increasingly appeared in EU strategies too.⁵

The concern with geopolitical order has become a significant part of European framings of the democracy agenda. It relates to heightened and increasingly predominant European concerns with assaults on core aspects of liberal order. The commitment to upholding rules-based order is a priority for EU external relations that is much repeated in formal policy statements and speeches. This defensive strategic focus has reshaped the EU's democracy support. Previously, this agenda was invariably couched in terms of exporting democracy to an ever-expanding circle of countries that were waiting to be prompted along the path of democratization. Today, EU leaders often talk instead about containing the threat posed by autocracies to democratic norms at the international systemic level. In this sense, democracy support now is one strand of a wider EU ethos of “protective power.”⁶

This has been evident in several initiatives in recent years. In 2019, EU member states issued Council Conclusions on democracy support, which they had last done before in 2009. The difference between these two key policy statements is revealing: the 2019 one frames democracy support in terms of changing global power balances and as part of an agenda to

shore up a liberal notion of order in a geopolitical tone that was absent from the 2009 one.⁷ Since then, many member states have developed new security partnerships with democracies in different regions and framed these as being about defending democracies from autocratic threats.

The order-related shift is also clear in the Summit for Democracy (S4D) process, under which democracies have committed themselves to coordinating in defense against global authoritarian dynamics. The process began in 2021 under U.S. leadership and has gained some momentum since then. Despite some initial ambivalence, European states have gradually deepened their participation in the S4D, acknowledging the need for a wider global set of partnerships to help defend democratic values within the international order. In this sense, the S4D has become part of the EU's broader strategy in relation to multilateralism and global order—a distinctive shift in its democracy agenda.

The S4D has not yet functioned especially well and is subject to multiple doubts and criticisms. Its participants still differ on the best way to manage what might be termed the geopolitics of democracy. The United States and European states have favored a big-tent approach of including in the S4D many governments whose democratic record is far from perfect, precisely because the nexus between supporting democracy and defending the global order has tightened. While the EU as such is not a participant (due to Hungary's exclusion owing to its democratic backsliding), the European Commission and member states have worked as co-leads in eleven out of the S4D's seventeen thematic cohorts. After a low-key second summit in March 2023, European governments supported South Korea's offer to host a third summit in March 2024 to carry forward the process. The challenge is for the S4D to fashion a new approach to democracy support that effectively chimes with issues related to multilateral order.

The EU's flagship Global Gateway initiative also fits into the order-defense model of democracy support. The EU describes it as a democratic alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Global Gateway is a program of infrastructure funding and bears little resemblance to classical democracy support; most projects in its first round of funding have been in nondemocratic countries in Africa and Asia, and it is not concerned with fomenting any kind of overtly political dynamic in such places. Yet policymakers stress that Global Gateway is set to become one of the EU's most powerful foreign-policy tools and that democratic values are one of its six core principles. The EU promises that projects funded under the initiative contain guarantees of transparency, accountability, civic consultation, labor rights, and gender equality. The logic is to mobilize such norms to push back against the BRI and to tie other states into an economic space underpinned by such multilateral-order-related principles.⁸ Whether or not this is really the case, it represents a notable change in the way the EU conceptualizes the protection of democratic principles.

The prioritization of economic security is another fundamental change in EU policy with crossover implications for democracy policy. Underpinning the EU's new strategy in this field is the claim that external economic policy is now to be fashioned with additional

priorities in mind, including defense of the liberal order and containment of authoritarian powers. This has bred a ubiquitous narrative that economic security strategy is being deployed to limit the authoritarian threat to liberal order and defend democratic norms. It manifests itself in tighter rules to limit the transfer of certain technologies to authoritarian rivals and to screen foreign investments by those regimes. Again, this is very different from classical democracy promotion, and EU economic security policies do not include a direct aim to spread democratic norms in authoritarian countries. But they do nominally have a political dimension to the extent that they seek to use economic power to prop up democratic norms within the global order.

Perhaps most dramatically, Russia's war on Ukraine has pushed the EU to focus on the order-related aspects of democracy. European leaders have repeatedly framed their support for Ukraine as support for democratic norms within the wider international order. In her 2022 State of the Union speech, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "This is a war . . . on our values and a war on our future. This is about autocracy against democracy." NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept defines "advancing authoritarianism" as a key threat and promises to increase support to countries outside the alliance for resisting autocratic challenges.⁹ In a similar vein, the EU Strategic Compass released the same year states that "the EU needs to take a more active stance to protect its values" and that security policy must now be framed around a "competition of governance systems."¹⁰ Germany's 2023 national security strategy mentions the defense of democracy over thirty times¹¹

At least in formal terms, the war has brought democracy-defense commitments to the center of European security aims related to the international system. How far governments follow through on this logic remains unclear, but here too the shift is striking in the way it posits democracy support as core to defensive geopolitics. Although the priority in Ukraine has been warfighting and not the finer details of democratic reform, the EU and several European states have channeled some of their increased aid to the country to democracy-oriented programs.

The EU's new enlargement process reflects this order-defensive lens on democracy. It might be said that the opening of the accession process with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and a supposedly revived accession momentum for countries in the Balkans, take the EU back to a very old style of democracy promotion through enlargement. This could bring back accession as leverage over democratic reforms—the most *sui generis* of EU instruments that many observers believed had run out of steam. However, it is more likely that the new round of enlargement will be different from previous ones, precisely because of its connection to order-related concerns. If enlargement to Central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union was about expanding democracy and anchoring emerging transitions, now the narrative is more about taking in new members better to protect a democratic European order from authoritarian attack. This has triggered EU policy debates about designing enlargement more tightly around strategic issues as opposed to technocratic compliance to EU standards. This change has implications for the ways in which pre-accession processes are used for

democracy support. One example is the EU launching, as an underpinning to accession, a Common Security and Defence Policy operation in Moldova to counter Russian interference and information manipulation.¹²

Internal-External Links

The third axis of defensive democracy support consists of a more even balance between internal and external policies, combined with a less uniquely outward dynamic to EU approaches. The EU is frequently told that it needs to get its own house in order instead of trying to support democracy in other countries, and yet its internal democracy policies have multiplied and expanded far more than its external ones in the last few years. Its democracy agenda is increasingly framed in terms of supporting internal and external initiatives that are relevant to protecting democratic norms within Europe. There is today a lot more EU policy activity on defending democracy internally, with a spillover into external strategies.

The EU was slow to react as the quality of European democracy suffered during the 2010s. The member states and the EU institutions belatedly recognized the risk that the digital sphere and tech companies represented to democracy. The EU failed to respond in any effective manner to democratic backsliding, most notably in Hungary and Poland but in other member states too, and it failed to offer much concrete support to activists seeking new forms of democratic renewal across Europe. Many of the EU measures during the eurozone crisis were implemented with little accountability or popular debate and made the democratic malaise worse.¹³ However, this neglect has gradually given way to a long menu of policy initiatives aimed at defending democracy within Europe.

In 2023, the EU drew up a Defence of Democracy package that upgrades support for democratic elections, civil society, and media pluralism in its member states, as well as for increasing transparency about outside interference targeting democratic norms. This initiative was delayed after CSOs called for making sure that protection against interference by China, Russia, and other actors did not infringe civic liberties within the EU. In addition to the package, there was an unprecedented wave of policy initiatives in 2022 and 2023 to protect democracy from various threats. A new regulation aims to counter foreign interference in European political parties through enhanced transparency.¹⁴ The new European Media Freedom Act promises stronger support for pluralism in public broadcasting, safeguards against political interference in editorial decisions, and protects against surveillance.¹⁵

Other policies reflect concerns directly linked to Russia's war on Ukraine and its perceived wider menace to democracy. The war has added urgency to governments' preexisting plans for stricter digital regulations and the protection of online privacy. Policymakers routinely frame the new Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act, and AI Act as vital EU tools for protecting democratic norms in the digital age. The European Commission issued a tighter anti-disinformation Code of Practice and drew up tighter restrictions on online political

advertising.¹⁶ The new EU Cyber Solidarity Act strengthens defenses for democratic institutions and processes. The EU Information Sharing and Analysis Centre started working to counter disinformation attacks on EU democratic processes by Russia and other countries. After an extended enquiry in the European Parliament, the EU has begun to tighten rules on the use of spyware that clearly threatens democratic rights, although many member states have diluted this effort. Germany introduced a law on defending democracy, and its 2023 national security strategy stresses the internal protection of open politics; the United Kingdom has set up a Defending Democracy Task Force; and many European states have ramped up their disinformation agencies and laws.

There has been more funding for these internal democracy priorities. The EU's €1.55 billion Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) program has upgraded funding for democracy projects in member states. The European Parliament significantly raised the 2023 budget for this initiative, especially to support citizen engagement linked to the follow-up from the Conference on the Future of Europe. Into 2024, several non-member states were poised to join the CERV program, illustrating the tightening internal-external nexus in EU democracy policy.¹⁷ The European Commission increased its sizeable financial commitment to strengthening the media sector in Europe after 2022, concerned especially with rebutting Russian and other disinformation.¹⁸ For years, observers noted the mismatch between EU external democracy budgets and the lack of such organized funding within the union; the CERV program has now brought internal and external democracy funding somewhat into line with each other. In some areas, they are partially merging, and the Defence of Democracy package promises to make this inside-outside democracy link a priority. For instance, the EU increasingly funds rights-focused CSOs in third countries that target their regimes' disinformation and digital influence operations of the kind used against internal EU democratic processes.

The European Commission has also begun to adopt a tougher approach to member states' infringements of democratic values and the rule of law. In the cases of Hungary and Poland, the European Commission triggered the EU's rule of law mechanism and used conditionality related to the Charter of Fundamental Rights—and member states supported these moves when previously they had rejected the idea of punitive measures. In late 2022, the European Commission held back €22 billion of aid allocated to Hungary in a complicated set of moves involving Cohesion Funds and the post-COVID-19 Recovery and Resilience Facility. It released €10 billion of that aid at the end of 2023 after Hungary's government introduced some judicial reform (although this release was also linked to getting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to back the opening of accession talks with Ukraine). But the commission held back the remaining funds as leverage over other areas of reform.

The European Commission also held back most of Poland's funds, including €75 billion of Cohesion Funds, and it did not release these after the government offered reforms that only partially met the commission's conditions on judicial independence. Some of this pressure appeared to pay off in October 2023, when the governing Law and Justice party lost the elections. Even though these are long-running issues and all this funding, pressure,

and conditionality requires improvement, the balance has clearly shifted from external to internal democracy support. And the EU has framed this shift as being part of addressing democracy challenges that span the two dimensions. For all the remaining weakness to EU internal democracy policies, this is very different from its original democracy promotion agenda.

In Tune With the Times?

The three axes outlined above attempt to describe and categorize the current phase of European democracy support. The defensive democracy support framework is a way of analytically ordering how the EU has adjusted its policies to a different era. The framework does not suggest that the strands of defensive democracy support are pursued within one coherent and purposive strategy. Rather, it identifies common principles that have come to the fore across different areas of foreign and domestic policy. The question that follows is whether the turn to defensive democracy support represents the right kind of change.

It is widely accepted that democracy support has lost momentum and impact in recent years, in its perceived strategic relevance and in its legitimacy with citizens around the world. Many have come to ask whether the whole venture of promoting democratic norms globally has any future or whether it should be wound up as the liberal momentum of the 1990s and early 2000s recedes.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, it is crucial to address whether the emergence of defensive democracy support helps cure this agenda's ills: Does it bring policy into line with contemporary political and international dynamics? Does it put democracy support on a sounder and more solid footing to show continued relevance, or does it hasten its irrelevance?

There are highly welcome and positive aspects to the defensive turn in EU democracy support. It is clearly more attuned to geopolitical trends and more aware of the broader strategic contexts within which democracy support is nested. Much of the hubris that drove earlier democracy promotion has gone, and the EU's more measured ambition comes with greater sensitivity to local political realities across the world. It is common for critics to question democracy promotion on the grounds that it fails to realize that the era of global democratic progress has ended; however, this standard charge now looks unfair, simplistic, and inaccurate to the extent that democracy promoters have adapted their policies to the less auspicious geopolitical environment. Standard critiques of European democracy promotion tend to take aim at features of policy that are no longer widespread.

The EU has also stepped back to some extent from externalizing its own norms and rules, and it is now less primordially focused on technocratic cooperation—a long-standing criticism of its approach to democracy support being that it is too reliant on the latter. Its policies are now more pointedly about defending democratic actors from authoritarian

assault. Notwithstanding the tendency to celebrate the “Brussels effect” as a rising element of European power,²⁰ the focus on exporting regulations has not been especially good or effective for democracy and, after years of disappointing results, the EU has moved away from equating the regulatory focus with democracy support. This shift has given its support initiatives a less technocratic and more political feel. The EU now offers more immediate and direct protection to democracy activists, and its funding is less tied to an agenda of EU regulatory harmonization, which activists generally see as a positive change.²¹

The EU’s growing focus on its internal democracy problems also addresses the long-standing criticism that it lectures others while declining to address its own shortcomings. While this may have been a fair criticism some years ago, it is questionable today. If anything, the situation has inverted: the comprehensive program of new democracy-related initiatives within the EU contrasts with the dilution of its external democracy promotion. This is not to argue that its current efforts suffice to deal effectively with democracy problems in member states, but it does denote a significant rebalancing in democracy support priorities. As the EU has routinely been enjoined to get its own house in order, this is a welcome change, reflecting the reality that democracy is facing challenges everywhere, including in its European heartlands.

Shortcomings persist, of course. Democratic movements outside the EU still complain of not having strong enough influence over its funding decisions, and its Eurocentric reflex has not entirely disappeared, even if this is less pervasive than it was a decade ago. Nevertheless, the defensive turn has lessened the extent to which EU democracy policies can be criticized for being overly assertive, unrealistically ambitious, rigidly uniform, rooted in simplistic political analysis, or blind to local sensitivities—the standard charges made against them.

Notwithstanding the welcome elements of adjustment, it is pertinent to ask whether EU democracy support has begun to tilt *too far* in a defensive direction. The focus on minimizing democratic decline rests on a starkly pessimistic reading of politics worldwide, when the data suggest an increasingly mixed combination of positive and negative democratic trends.²² The prevalent criticism is that there is little point to democracy support when autocratic regimes are dug in so firmly and are not strongly challenged from within. Yet in recent years there have been dozens of at least partial breakthroughs driven by internal democratic demand—for example, in Ecuador, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Malaysia, and Sudan—that European governments have failed to support decisively with the full array of their diplomatic leverage and resources. Protests aimed at widening political space in closed regimes have proliferated in the last several years—as in Algeria, Armenia, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Sri Lanka—and yet EU actors have generally discouraged such direct action rather than supporting it.

The defensive mindset therefore risks generating a self-fulfilling and not entirely warranted fatalism about democracy. The ostensible merit of calls for more cautious democracy support is that they move with the grain of current political trends—but the defensive turn cedes

an important part of its justification if it is based on a misreading of some of these trends. Moreover, contrary to the common assertions that democratic groups, movements, and activists do not want outside help, their demand for EU support in fact far exceeds the funds available. Most commonly, a push for democracy emerges from local communities and fails to find adequate EU backing—the inverse of the commonly heard claim that the democracy agenda is foisted on uninterested citizens outside the West. For example, in 2023, the EU allocated a negligible €2 million from its democracy and human rights aid program to the Middle East and North Africa—virtually nothing for a huge region still roiling with local social movements and protests as well as citizen efforts to contest authoritarian regimes.²³

Criticism can also be made about the EU's focus on protecting democracy within the international order. This focus risks diverting attention from domestic political dynamics and in practice can often serve as cover for a great deal of expedient support to autocracies. The EU's focus on containing authoritarian influence at the international level in some cases places a premium on security alliances that do little to foster domestic democratic deepening. A policy of countering China and Russia's authoritarian expansionism has driven European countries to tighten their partnerships with other autocracies on ostensibly liberal-order aims—in the same way as U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has done.²⁴

Both the EU and United States risk going too far in framing their efforts to counter authoritarian powers as a form of democracy support. Democracy support will certainly in the future be embedded within or more indirectly approached through the prism of wider order-related initiatives, but greater clarity is needed in this regard as pushing back autocracies' influence on the international order is a very different venture from helping cultivate bottom-up self-government in individual countries. It reflects a very statist way of thinking about democracy defense, not a citizen-centered one, and it is in this sense not fully aligned with current political dynamics.

Finally, the necessary inward focus on the EU's democracy problems might be diverting attention and funds away from democratic reformers outside it. While the EU's efforts to address its internal shortcomings are long overdue, activists elsewhere express concern that this might come at their expense. Rather, this emerging inward-looking focus should be a way of fusing internal and external democracy support in a mutually enhancing fashion, adding vitality and weight to external democracy support. It could serve as a platform for the EU to import lessons from outside Europe or to build networks of European and non-European democracy activists. Yet, there is so far little evidence of the EU making these kinds of linkages. Instead, the risk is that skeptics are seizing on the (necessary) inward orientation to weaken external democracy support.

Conclusion

This paper proposes a very general framework for conceptualizing the current era of democracy support, deliberately painting a broad, overarching picture to this end. The EU has transitioned toward defensive democracy support in response to a combination of external and internal trends. A creeping sentiment of geopolitical weakness has combined with the malaise in Europe's own democratic quality to give a more defensive, ideational grounding to the European integration project. The interplay of external and internal drivers is key to accounting for the incremental shaping of the new dynamic. While EU democracy support has become more limited in its goals and more defensive, it has not died out completely. And—as numerous critics from all points on the ideological spectrum posit many reasons to drop the democracy agenda against the current, fraught geopolitical backdrop—the fact that it endures at all must count as significant.

However, while democracy support needs to adapt and reinvent itself beyond minor cosmetic changes, there is also a risk of overcorrection. If the defensive approach is rooted in an unduly one-sided reading of political and geopolitical trends, it risks being too passive to meet its own declared aims. Certain myths have taken root about democracy support—and the defensive turn amplifies how false or inaccurate many of these are. In the United States, progressive and conservative critics have been labeled “restrainers”; the same ethos of restraint in Europe has grown with both left and right pushing to dilute democracy commitments.

Getting the balance right in European democracy support requires intricate geopolitical calculation and strategic design across many—at present, highly disparate—instruments. This is an important challenge that remains overlooked in analysis. It is revealing that nearly all European think tanks today have programs on geopolitics, European power, or sovereignty, defense, and economic security, but for virtually none is the fate of democracy important enough now to merit similar attention. What was supposedly the very core of European identity and leverage in the world has been relegated to an afterthought or apparent inconvenience in the new era of geopolitical power quests. Even though the new paradigm of defensive democracy support embraces many necessary policy adjustments, the EU must take care not to replace one set of overly bold assumptions with another.

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