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## Research Report

# How democracy promoters respond to global autocratisation

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## How Democracy Promoters Respond to Global Autocratisation

Sonja Grimm, Brigitte Weiffen & Karina Mross

### Summary

Autocratisation has become a defining global trend, replacing decades of democratisation and forcing democracy promoters to rethink their approaches. Democracy promoters must adapt to several challenges, including autocratisation in target countries, the rise of powerful autocratic competitors in the global arena, and challenges to democracy in some of the very countries promoting it. Moreover, the crisis in development aid fuelled by the withdrawal of funding by the United States (US) and other countries, and their prioritisation of security, pose further structural challenges. This Policy Brief examines the effects of the global trend of autocratisation on international democracy promotion, summarising findings from a collaborative research project (Grimm et al., 2025).

The findings show that democracy promoters respond to these shifts in four ways: 1) choosing to “carry on and observe” by continuing existing programmes and maintaining cooperation rather than risking confrontation; 2) reinforcing rhetorical and diplomatic efforts for democracy, to signal continued commitment; 3) selectively adapting policies and strategies, with renewed focus on civil society, education and targeted funding, yet rarely making substantive policy changes; 4) disengaging by shifting cooperation toward less politicised fields or withdrawing entirely. So far, however, we lack evidence on the effectiveness of these responses to counter autocratisation.

Given the new challenges to democracy promotion arising from the changed international context, democracy promoters should consider taking the following actions:

**Ramping up efforts to counter the rise of autocratic powers:** Democracy promoters should proactively deepen their pro-democracy cooperation, reaffirm democratic alliances and maintain a clear normative profile. They should invest in long-term partnerships with governments and civil societies committed to democratic reform.

**Revitalising the norm of democracy:** Democracy promoters must make a case for why democracy matters, highlighting that it delivers rights and freedoms, as well as stability, prosperity, and peace – at least as effectively as autocratic regimes. Emphasising its tangible benefits can help restore faith in its long-term value, and counter the appeal of autocratic alternatives.

**Coordinating strategies and combining strengths:** Joint frameworks for action among democracy promoters are needed that allow for the simultaneous use of different instruments, e.g. political dialogue, development cooperation, human rights advocacy and economic incentives. Combining direct and indirect democracy promotion increases adaptability.

**Adapting democracy promotion to the context:** In contexts where democracy is being eroded, prioritise the defence of current democratic institutions, actors and practices rather than pushing for rapid reforms. Strengthen local actors who uphold democratic values, protect them against repression and maintain spaces for civic participation.

**Restoring credibility:** Democracy-promoting states and organisations should openly discuss challenges to democracy at home in order to rebuild trust, strengthen legitimacy and facilitate collaboration in defence of democracy. Reinforcing own democratic institutions and upholding the rule of law contributes to restoring the credibility of democracy promoters.

## Introduction

Over the last decade, autocratisation has become a dominant global trend. Yet, it remains an open question how democracy promoters can best respond to and counter these dynamics. In addition, pro-democracy engagement is challenged by declining commitment to the liberal paradigm, the focus on security and national interests, a (related) funding crisis, withdrawal of the US as a key actor, and a heightening of the systemic rivalry with autocratic actors. In this policy brief, we describe the consequences of autocratisation for global democracy promotion, systematise how democracy promoters react to this challenge, and reflect on the implications of these reactions for the future of democracy promotion. To this end, we draw on key insights from a collection of nine academic articles that comprise a coordinated effort to shed light on the topic (Grimm et al., 2025). We examine the role of state actors, regional organisations such as the European Union (EU), and non-state actors such as political party foundations as democracy promoters.

## Global autocratisation challenging democracy promotion

Autocratisation has been in full swing since the 2010s. Key democratic principles such as freedom of expression, deliberation, rule of law and elections show the most substantial declines. The space for civil society is shrinking while contestation of democratic norms is growing. Advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been reversed, and the number of autocracies is almost equal to the number of democracies, with a much higher proportion of the world's population now living under autocratic rule.

Such processes of autocratisation impact on democracy promotion in various ways. First, autocratisation in target countries creates a context that is less susceptible to the influence of external democracy promotion; instead of supporting democratisation, actors need to *counter autocratisation*. Furthermore, autocratisation plays into the

hands of non-democratic third actors, creating regime competition between Western democracies and autocratic powers such as China and Russia. For example, China proposes development projects without democratic conditions as an alternative to Western democracy promotion in order to counter Western influence (Cho, 2025). Together with Russia, it also bolsters the resilience of autocratic regimes in countries such as Venezuela and Nicaragua (Palestini et al., 2025).

Finally, some democracy-promoting countries have recently experienced democratic backsliding themselves, reducing their political commitment to this practice and damaging its international credibility. The US provides the clearest example of large-scale disengagement. Under both Trump administrations, funding for democracy promotion and diplomatic engagement was drastically reduced, thereby weakening global support for democratic actors and institutions (Leininger et al., 2025).

Autocratisation in target countries of democracy promotion and the rise of autocratic competitors pose new challenges to democracy promotion, calling into question the ability of democracy promoters to effectively counter such challenges, particularly when democracy is also under threat from within the political systems of the promoters themselves.

## How democracy promoters react to the new challenges

Democracy promoters are currently responding to the challenges attached to global autocratisation in four ways. These responses are not mutually exclusive, and promoters may, for example, carry on and observe in one target country, withdraw from another, and at the same time increase pro-democracy rhetoric, or change their approach in reaction to further developments.

**“Carry on and observe”:** Many democracy promoters continue existing programmes in autocratising contexts with few adjustments, choosing to monitor developments rather than to confront autocratisation directly (Grimm et al., 2025). This

response may reflect uncertainty about what a more proactive course of action would entail, or it may result from competing geopolitical and economic interests that discourage stronger engagement. In some cases, domestic authoritarian tendencies within democracy-promoting countries themselves further explain this passivity.

This approach can have mixed consequences. Maintaining established cooperation helps preserve diplomatic relations and channels of influence. For example, close ties with Western actors, such as the EU, in the form of association agreements or membership aspirations, have helped to contain the spread of illiberal legislation in the post-Soviet region (Shyrokykh & Winzen, 2025). However, this strategy has its limitations when democracy promotion policies conflict with other interests, such as migration control. While “carrying on” may appear pragmatic in an increasingly competitive and uncertain environment, it risks undermining the effectiveness and credibility of democracy promotion in the face of persistent autocratisation (Grimm et al., 2025). Türkiye is a case in point, where the largely unchanged EU democracy promotion policy, with its traditional tools such as funding adjustments and public condemnation, has proved ineffective in protecting civil society organisations from a downward spiral of delegitimisation and criminalisation, and has failed to prevent the shrinking of civil society space and the growing contestation of European norms (Coskun & Dück, 2025).

**Reinforcement of pro-democratic rhetoric and diplomacy:** Several actors have intensified their public rhetoric and diplomatic efforts in favour of democracy. For example, the Summits for Democracy convened by former US President Joe Biden signalled support for democracy while maintaining cooperation with autocratic partners (Leininger et al., 2025). However, this change in rhetoric is not necessarily accompanied by tangible changes in democracy promotion activities. Sweden’s Drive for Democracy exemplifies increased diplomatic engagement in promoting democratic values. Other examples include multi-

lateral resolutions and awards in support of pro-democracy actors, such as those granted by the European Parliament. However, the European Parliament’s democracy promotion in Bolivia and Venezuela, for example, is hampered by a limited capacity to counter autocratisation in polarised conditions (Braga & Ferreira-Pereira, 2025).

**Adaption of policies, concepts and strategies:**

This approach focuses on learning and adaptation. Some state agencies and political foundations adjust funding schemes and instruments to cope with autocratisation in target countries (Leininger et al., 2025). For example, they redirect resources to civil society, invest in civic education, and create safe spaces for dialogue (Ohlig, 2025). Western states and regional organisation are also increasingly employing coercive tools, such as sanctions. However, despite long recognising *shrinking spaces*, substantial adjustments and policy adjustments remain rare. For instance, while the EU has revised its strategy on paper several times in response to the autocratisation of Belarus, there has been little change in practice due to personnel changes and the inertia of EU bureaucracy. Hence, the EU’s responses have remained limited to ad hoc learning and rhetorical adjustments rather than substantive change (Bosse, 2025).

**Disengagement and discontinuation of democracy promotion activities:**

Faced with restricted civic space and rising autocratic pressure, some democracy promoters have shifted, scaled back or withdrawn their activities (Grimm et al., 2025). In order to continue operating in increasingly restrictive contexts, they have shifted activities toward less politically sensitive fields, such as environmental or urban policy (Ohlig, 2025), thereby weakening the democratic substance of their engagement.

Regional organisations, such as the EU, have either withdrawn or are no longer invited to conduct electoral observations in autocratising countries (Braga & Ferreira-Pereira, 2025). Some non-state actors have gone so far as to close local offices in countries where democratic work has

become increasingly risky due to repression (Ohlig, 2025). This withdrawal may be perceived as a lack of commitment, which leaves room for autocratic competitors such as China and Russia to expand their influence (Cho, 2025; Palestini et al., 2025).

## Implications for democracy promotion

Democracy promotion is at a crossroads. In an era when the number of autocracies nearly equals the number of democracies, democracy can no longer be considered the dominant model. With autocratisation accelerating in target countries and within the international system, and funding for and commitment to democracy waning, a fundamental adjustment to democracy promotion is necessary.

First, democracy promoters must rethink their strategic approach. Coordinated efforts by various democracy promoters can increase their leverage against autocratisation in target countries and against autocratic competitors. Joint strategies and complementary instruments can strengthen the democratic alternative in countries where authoritarian governments are gaining ground. Diversification in the practice of democracy promotion – such as the simultaneous use of different instruments – increases the chances of promoting democracy in a given country. Combining the defence of liberal and rights-based principles with approaches that link democracy to socio-economic development can show that democracy can deliver (Leininger et al., 2025).

Democracy promotion also needs to address credibility issues and enhance mutual learning. The erosion of democratic norms and institutions in major donor countries has undermined the legitimacy of democracy promotion. To restore credibility, democracy promoters must address internal democratic issues while maintaining their

external commitments. Institutional learning and long-term engagement with civil society can sustain limited democratic openings, even in autocratising contexts (Ohlig, 2025).

Finally, democracy promotion must evolve from supporting democratisation to *protecting* democracy and actively defending it as a global norm. This includes protecting existing democracies against autocratisation by safeguarding democratic institutions, ensuring the independence of the judiciary, defending freedom of expression, and protecting civil society against repression. But it may also involve supporting the remaining democratically oriented actors and institutions within authoritarian regimes, with the aim of re-establishing democracies where they have been eroded. Facilitating the work of transnational networks can support narrow openings for civic engagement (Ohlig, 2025).

Democracy promoters should maintain the visibility and viability of democratic alternatives by providing consistent external incentives for democratisation and by supporting reform-oriented political and social actors who are aiming to prevent the spread of illiberal norms (Shyrokykh & Winzen, 2025). Maintaining spaces for democratic debate and participation, even under adverse conditions, helps to counter the normalisation of authoritarianism. Otherwise, reform-oriented actors will lack the necessary support to resist authoritarian pressures, and the spread of illiberalism will continue unchecked (Shyrokykh & Winzen, 2025; Grimm et al., 2025).

Ultimately, democracy protection must be understood as a long-term, continuous effort that combines political commitment, development cooperation and multilateral solidarity. Only through sustained coordination, credible engagement and resilience-building can democracy promotion remain a meaningful force in the face of global autocratisation.

## **Contributions to *Democratization* special issue “Democracy promotion in times of autocratization” summarised in this policy brief**

Bosse, G. (2025). Policy-learning in EU democracy support: Strategic adaptation and (un)learning in the EU's response to authoritarian consolidation in Belarus. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1708–1728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2484591>

Braga, G.G., & Ferreira-Pereira, L. (2025). The European Parliament's democracy promotion activities in the face of autocratization in South America: The cases of Bolivia and Venezuela. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1752–1773. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2455551>

Cho, S. (2025). China's active defence against democracy promotion: A conceptual analysis. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1663–1683. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2494739>

Coskun, M., & Dück, E. (2025). Downward spirals in EU democracy promotion: How contestations and shrinking spaces for civil society organisation limit the EU's influence in Turkey. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1684–1707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2514767>

Grimm, S., Weiffen, B., & Mross, K. (2025): Democracy promotion in times of autocratization: A conceptual note. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1617–1639. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2543778>

Leininger, J., Mross, K., & Wolff, J. (2025). Strategic responses to autocratization in international democracy promotion. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1640–1662. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2465876>

Ohlig, L. (2024). German political foundations' democracy promotion in autocratizing Tanzania: Opening spaces for civil society support and transnational learning. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1729–1751. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2024.2448849>

Palestini, S., Quispe, L., & Telias, D. (2025). Autocracy promotion in the Americas: Scrutinizing the effect of China and Russia on democracy protection in Venezuela and Nicaragua. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1797–1819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2483420>

Shyrokykh, K., & Winzen, T. (2025). International actors and democracy protection: reventing the spread of illiberal legislation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. *Democratization*, 32(7), 1774–1796. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2461463>

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