



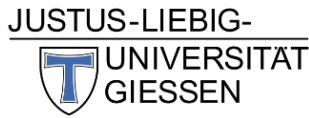
The EU pushes back a new democracy plan: A mistake?

A review of the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy

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Abstract

The EU's 2020-2024 Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, in its third iteration under the 2012 Strategic Framework, marks a renewed commitment to democracy as a stand-alone issue and introduces several new priority areas. However, it lacks clear guidelines for the implementation of its objectives, including specific timelines and designated responsibilities.

Crucially, the Action Plan has struggled to adapt to rapidly evolving global dynamics, including full-scale conflicts that challenge the EU's core democratic values. The decision to extend the Action Plan till 2027, so that it aligns with the Multiannual Financial Framework, delays the prospect of major qualitative improvement to European democracy support.

This policy brief critically assesses the 2020-2024 Action Plan and its Mid-Term Review, examining the implications of their design and implementation. It provides insights to inform the development of future policies in democracy and human rights, linking those with SHAPEDEM-EU approaches.

Introduction

The European Union (EU)'s democracy support practice abroad is currently implemented under the rubric of the 2020-2024 Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. Although this Action Plan introduces several important innovations, it falls short in offering robust implementation guidance, as it lacks clear indicators for measuring progress. Moreover, it has struggled to adapt to the significant challenges to democracy that have emerged since 2020, including the Israel-Hamas conflict and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2023, the EU conducted a Mid-Term Review of this Plan, offering an optimistic assessment and confirming progress across all identified priorities. However, the review notably lacks a spirit of self-criticism or a thorough reconsideration of EU policies in light of evolving global dynamics, and it suggests an inability to learn from and correct previous shortcomings in democracy support (Achraimer and Pace, 2024a).

Reflecting the recommendations of various stakeholders, the EU extended the Action Plan until 2027 to ensure sufficient funding for its priorities by aligning it with the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). This is less than ideal as the EU needs a new and fundamentally revised strategy for democracy and there will be downsides to postponing this. The current Action Plan was devised before COVID-19 and the full-fledge Russian invasion of Ukraine; moreover, since 2020, political dynamics around the world have transformed considerably. Given these circumstances, simply extending the current plan is insufficient and constitutes an overly passive approach to democracy.

1 The 2020-2024 Action Plan

In 2012, the EU adopted the Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy under the leadership of the European External Action Service (EEAS). This established for the first time a comprehensive strategy for promoting democracy and human rights in EU external action (Council of the European Union, 2012a). The 2012 Strategic Framework outlined key principles and priorities, emphasising the integration of human rights, a core principle of democracy, into all external policies and enhancing both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. To implement this Framework, in the



following decade, the EEAS adopted three successive Action Plans on Human Rights and Democracy (Council of the European Union, 2012b; Council of the European Union, 2015).

The 2020-2024 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy is then the third of these plans (Council of the European Union, 2020). The Plan addresses a wide range of issues, starting from long-standing EU priorities like the abolition of the death penalty, through to newer challenges such as digital technologies and climate change. It identifies five lines of actions, meant to shape overall EU external action in the field of democracy support (Council of the European Union, 2020).

The five lines of actions are protecting and empowering individuals; building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies; promoting a global system for human rights and democracy; new technologies; and 'delivering by working together' (Council of the European Union, 2020). They represent an improvement compared to previous action plans by introducing a dedicated focus on democracy and addressing emerging issues such as digital technology and climate change. Notably, the second line of action is of key significance as it is entirely dedicated to democracy. This represents a novelty compared to the first two Action Plans that focused mainly on human rights rather than democracy.

To operationalise the five lines of action, the Action Plan presents 20 priorities and 133 action-items (Council of the European Union, 2020). The EEAS and EU delegations continue to have the overall responsibility for implementing the Action Plan, working closely with EU Member States and other EU institutions. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights supervises the implementation and guides overall EU action in this field.

Lastly, the Action Plan identifies a number of implementation instruments, including human rights dialogues, aid conditionality, election observation missions and country-specific strategies (Council of the European Union, 2020). Country-specific strategies are developed in consultation with officials and civil society organizations (CSOs) from the respective countries, enabling national governments and civil society to play a more proactive role in implementing the Plan.

Despite all its advances, the Action Plan differs from its predecessors by omitting a clear timeline and failing to designate specific EU actors responsible for implementing each priority (Council of the European Union, 2020). Although this shift aimed to foster a more political approach to EU democracy and human rights support, it ultimately left the relevant actors without sufficient guidance and made it nearly impossible to assess the Plan's implementation progress. In addition, the Action Plan has not sufficed significantly to upgrade civil society's participation in democracy support practices; its involvement is primarily sought during the initial goal-setting stage, with little input during the implementation of the country-specific strategies.

2 Mid-Term Review

The EU carried out a Mid-Term Review of the Action Plan in June 2023. The Review builds upon an inclusive and bottom-up process which envisioned in-person consultations and the submission of written inputs by key stakeholders, including civil society actors (Council of the European Union, 2023). Extensive dialogue with other EU institutions, including the European Parliament (EP), provided additional feedback. The Mid-Term Review was published in June 2023. Despite previous announcements that Council Conclusions would also be adopted on the Mid-Term Review, these did not materialise (International IDEA, 2023).



The Mid-Term Review highlights the severe impact on democracy caused by global challenges that have emerged or worsened since the Plan's launch in 2020 and takes stock of progress made under each line of action (Council of the European Union, 2023). Overall, the Review provides a strikingly upbeat assessment of the Action Plan's achievements (Council of the European Union, 2023). Carried out by EU institutions rather than independent bodies, it concludes that the EU is on track to meet the Plan's objectives and largely doing what is necessary to make its democracy support more effective. It claims "significant progress" across each of the different priority lines of action (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The Review lists all the new strategies and meetings held under the Plan's umbrella of specific themes. It notes that the EU agreed on 131 country strategies on democracy and human rights in 2020-2023 (Council of the European Union, 2023). It highlights the Gender Action Plan III and the EU's new target of ensuring that 85 per cent of all EU-supported external actions will be aimed at improving gender equality by 2025. It states that the EU has made more effort to support human rights defenders and that it has included human rights in its new trade strategy (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The Review also positively describes the sanctions adopted under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime and acknowledges the EU's active participation in two Summits for Democracy (Council of the European Union, 2023). It refers to the creation of the Team Europe Democracy network and the design of better election observation methods since 2020. In terms of funding, the Review lists new engagement with the parliaments and the youth. It affirms that measures to ensure security support should respect human rights norms and mentions advances in cooperation with international organisations and in the adoption of new EU digital plans and online regulations (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The Review insists that the EU has developed a "global and holistic approach to make democracies more resilient" and a "participative approach to conflict prevention" (Council of the European Union, 2023). It reaffirms the importance of the pre-established lines of actions and "confirmed that the Action Plan is a crucial roadmap to deliver on the EU's commitment to defend the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights and to promote democratic values" (Council of the European Union, 2023).

It is striking that the Review does not mention any strategies towards particular countries. It lists numerous new strategy documents on generic themes, like the Union's relations with the UN, but does not talk about achievements in any named country – or indeed, its failures to protect democracy in specific countries. Reflecting a somewhat apolitical framing, it boasts, for example, that the EU has helped more people gain access to drinking water but says nothing about its actions failing to prevent the huge number of democratic regressions since 2020 (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The Review conspicuously lacks a spirit of self-criticism and fails to effectively learn from previous mistakes in EU democracy support practices. Its general tone is that EU policies are on the right track and that the Action Plan suffices as a guiding tool for these policies. It commits the EU to carry on working in the same way across its current priority areas, while enhancing efforts to communicate the Plan's achievements more effectively.

Although the Review highlights the need for greater coherence between the EU's internal and external actions and emphasises the importance of long-term, strategic and flexible funding for local civil



society organisations, it fails to address the critical gaps left by the Action Plan. The Review acknowledges the impact of the changing global context but offers little else to adapt the Action Plan to these developments (Council of the European Union, 2023). As a result, the document does not provide the EU and its Member States with the detailed guidance necessary to effectively recalibrate their democracy support strategies in response to these major challenges.

As the Action Plan did not identify specific indicators for each priority, the Mid-Term Review was unable to provide a quantitative analysis against which it could have measured improvements and setbacks for each line of action. While the document does specify, for instance, that 19 election observation missions took place from 2020 to 2023, this number could not be compared to a pre-established target and did not present any expected results from such missions (Council of the European Union, 2023). The EU notes that it has attached priority to incorporating local voices but does not offer concrete metrics to substantiate this.

The Action Plan's emphasis on addressing emerging issues, widely recognised as one of the novelties and strengths of the document, was not reflected in the Mid-Term Review, which offered only limited coverage of these topics. For instance, regarding climate change, it simply stated that "substantial progress was achieved on human rights in relation to environmental degradation and climate change, as well as on the right to safe drinking water and sanitation", without providing details on the specific measures implemented (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The Review did not suggest or lead to changes to the current Action Plan, deeming these to be unnecessary. As such, it was rather framed as input for the next Plan. The failure to adopt the promised Council Conclusions on the Mid-Term Review further diminished the political impact of the document.

3 Towards a New Action Plan

During the Mid-Term Review process, civil society representatives from within and outside the EU called for the Action Plan to be aligned with the 2020-2027 MFF, arguing that this would ensure greater funding for its priorities (Brasseur, Pachta & Grigolo, 2023). In May 2023, the EU announced the extension of the Action Plan until 2027 (Council of the European Union, 2024).

While the decision to align the Action Plan with the MFF is logical in some ways, pushing back any far-reaching change to EU democracy strategy comes at a cost. The EU's Mid-Term Review and assessment of progress made under the Action Plan looks strikingly sanguine and self-congratulatory given the fraught international context. The EU has been updating its strategies on defence, climate security, economic security, enlargement, conflict prevention and others; democracy policy risks getting left behind.

It will now be another three or four years before the EU has the chance to significantly upgrade its democracy support through a new Action Plan. It would have been better not to wait so long to align democracy strategy with the many changes that have occurred since 2020. If this timeline is now set in stone, the EU should at least begin setting the parameters for a radically improved Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.

The EEAS should use this time to conduct broad consultations with a wider range of stakeholders and create a more inclusive and effective strategy, enhancing the Plan's success and relevance in addressing key issues. The EU has made progress in listening to local civil society in third countries, and

this goes beyond mere window-dressing; recent examples of where the EU has responded directly to local requests include its efforts to speed up emergency visas for threatened activists and for diplomats to attend more trials against these figures. Still, it has scope to go much further in this by systemically building in local democratic knowledge and learning. Consultations should be organised both in Brussels and, most importantly, at the level of EU delegations, where local experiences and democratic practices can be effectively shared. Member State representatives and other EU institutions beyond the Commission should also be actively involved in the process of drafting a new Action Plan. This would ensure a wider dissemination of the Plan's objectives among a broader network of stakeholders.

The new Plan needs to build in much more systematically the security dimension to EU external action that has become so dominant since the last Plan was defined in 2020. Currently, the only reference to security appears under Line of Action II, which aims to “continue strengthening the links between human rights, including gender equality, security, environmental degradation, and climate change” (Council of the European Union, 2020). This mention is insufficient given the diverse and complex conflicts that now directly impact the Union and its core values. The future Action Plan should better address the securitisation of democracy by clarifying how security measures, taken in the name of democracy, can genuinely support and uphold human rights and democratic values.

The new Action Plan should also revert to having clear timelines for objectives as in the first two Actions Plans during the 2010s. It needs to develop indicators for each priority or action-item and identify which actors are responsible for their implementation. This would provide the technical and workable guidance needed for EU institutions and Member States to implement priorities effectively.

Similarly, the new Action Plan needs to set clear targets for EU spending on democracy assistance, from the Commission and member states alike. In its current version, the Plan only mentions that “the work will be backed with robust financial and political resources”; it fails to specify the amount of aid committed to democracy (Council of the European Union, 2020). This is in line with a shocking lack of data and transparency on the overall financial support allocated to European democracy assistance – compared to very clear budget lines on issues such as security and defence. The new Action Plan must rectify this longstanding problem.

The post-2027 Plan should specify better linkages between new accession processes – another major change since 2020 - and democracy support. Namely, it should clarify the relation between the priorities enunciated in the Action Plan and the narrower benchmarks identified in documents such as the 2024 Enlargement Package. A failure to address this issue would fuel the perception that the Action Plan does not apply to countries such as those in the Eastern Partnership (Brasseur, Pachta & Grigolo, 2023). This is already becoming a thorny issue in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, where the triangular complexities of fusing security challenges, enlargement and standard democracy support have become increasingly daunting.

The EU also needs to identify processes and mechanisms to better respond to democratic openings; these have become more numerous since 2020 and the EU has generally not been able to leverage them. Additionally, while the Action Plan does aim to “develop tools to detect and respond to early signs of closing civic space and democratic backsliding (...) to prevent and counter the closing of space and democratic backsliding”, it does not identify or generate effective measures to respond to such democratic backsliding once the early signs are detected (Council of the European Union, 2020).



Lastly, the future Action Plan needs to be mainstreamed across EU institutions and gain higher degrees of awareness. Unlike its counterparts in the fields of defence or climate action, the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy is unknown even by most other parts of the EU institutional machinery, let alone by national governments, civil society, or the general public. Its next iteration must fulfil EU leaders' often repeated promise to make democracy core to the Union's new approach to geopolitical challenges and be built around inclusive dialogue and mutual learning among all relevant stakeholders (this latter point being the specific focus of the SHAPEDEM-EU conceptual framework).

Conclusion

The 2020-2024 Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy has been instrumental in advancing EU democracy support through a broad range of commitments. Yet, the rapid evolution of challenges to democracy has outpaced the Action Plan's capacity to adapt. The Mid-Term Review arguably failed to address these gaps, offering an overly optimistic assessment of EU policies and deeming changes unnecessary.

The decision to extend the current Plan until 2027, rather than launching a new, upgraded version in 2024, is less than optimal. Although aligning with the MFF may enhance funding for democracy initiatives, and much valuable work can continue under the existing Plan, the EU's cautious 'more of the same' approach disregards the significant failures of the Union to curb democratic regression and shows the Union's inability to learn from its previous mishandling in EU democracy support.

This decision means that, unlike in the past, the new EU leadership is beginning its institutional term in 2024 without the promise of an enhanced democracy strategy. Although the new Commission President has proposed a Democracy Shield to combat online interference from external actors, the broader EU strategy for external democracy support remains outdated. As the EU rolls out new strategies in most other areas of external policy, the absence of a refreshed democracy policy stands out as a glaring and serious oversight.

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