Part II - Role of the EU in the global cooperation of democracies and the problem of dependence of member states on totalitarian regimes (information war, disinformation, security of supply chains, strategic autonomy, etc.)

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The rise of authoritarianism - a refutation of Fukuyama's thesis about the end of history and the victory of liberal democracy?

The rise of authoritarianism globally represents one of the key issues in contemporary thinking about the world. Political scientists, philosophers, sociologists, and political practitioners have been concerned with the direction of global society. However, the deteriorating tendency of democratic governance, according to some of them, goes against the interests of individual citizens whose lives are directly affected by creeping nationalist authoritarianism. Indeed, it cannot be accepted that personal freedoms and the values of liberal democracy can be curtailed in order to halt the decline in living standards.

A report by the non-profit organisation Freedom House from 2020 pointed to a shift in the long-term balance between democratic and authoritarian systems. This completes the observed trend of a decline in global democratic governance. Indicators of democratic governance have deteriorated for 73 countries surveyed; that is, around 75 % of the world's population lived in a country where the quality of democracy had deteriorated. At the same time, 2020 represented a milestone when the largest number of cases where deterioration began in 2006 were among the countries classified as *Not Free*. In spite of this, the Freedom House has noted a significant number of civic initiatives that support the democratic direction of their country. In this regard, the report also notes the positive fact that democratic governance is proving resilient through other examples, including free judicial decision-making, security, and the independence of journalists.

The EU's contribution to democracy promotion

As the public demand for quality of life, which includes the values of democratic governance, grows, so does the European Union's social responsibility, as the beacon of quality democracy in the world, to play its part in promoting democracy and protecting human rights globally.

In the light of the course of last European elections, the Union has presented an Action Plan to promote European democracy in 2020 to ensure that the quality of democratic governance in the Member States does not deteriorate. In doing so, the Union is responding to the challenges that individual Member States face in the context of geopolitical global competition.

The European Action Plan for Democracy reflects the growth of extreme views, the interference of foreign powers in pre-election debates, and the influence of election results and intimidation of journalists through misinformation and misleading and harmful information. One of the key elements influencing the current shape of political competition and its challenges is the digital transformation and the rise of the influence of social networks on everyone's lives. The tools that social networks use, with the knowledge of their users, but also on the basis of very complicated algorithms, obscure and to some extent distort the reality on the basis of which citizen-voters make their decisions. Protecting voters' decision-making and those who participate in that decision-making through the provision of information is crucial to a healthy democracy. Indeed, **information transparency and knowledge are proving to be central to decision-making**.

The Action Plan focuses on three areas; in the **first area**, it elaborates on **strengthening the resilience of the electoral system, procedures and mechanisms** by addressing, through legislative measures, the shortcomings of the current regulation of political campaigns, in particular greater transparency of sponsored contents in political campaigns and the funding of political parties at European level, so that it is absolutely clear who is involved in providing funding to parties to cover their political campaigns. The **second area** is **support for private and public media**, including both supporting individual journalists and creating a safe space in which journalists do not face any threats, as well as making it more difficult to use lawsuits to discourage journalists from doing their job. The Union will also work to ensure transparency in the ownership structure of media houses and to harmonise rules on state support for the media so that all media across Europe have the same or similar conditions. The **third area** is **measures against inaccurate, misleading, or deliberately false information** and related influence operations. In this area, the Action Plan builds on the EU's experience with both the Action Plan against Disinformation and the European Parliament's own initiative on foreign interference in democratic processes through disinformation (establishment of the INGE Special Committee). A key premise of the fight against disinformation is that freedom of speech cannot be restricted, but the quality of information based on which the citizens make their decisions must be considered. Strategic communication, as well as cooperation between Member States on a programme of early detection and early countering of disinformation campaigns, is therefore a key tool. Not only social networks, media, and influencers, but also the users, and the citizen voters, have to adapt to the situation. The Union will therefore support media literacy programmes for the general population and the involvement of experts and civil society in media education.

Some of the measures outlined in the European Action Plan for Democracy are of a public nature, but private actors (e.g., media and social media owners) must be involved in some of them alongside those affected. With a similar aim, the Digital Services Act has made social network operators more accountable for how they can prevent the spread of harmful content online. One of the tools is the obligation, introduced in February 2023, to publish the number of active users on social networks; this can prevent the phenomenon of trolling, where the reach of posts is artificially inflated and the promotion of a particular position. Owners and users must prepare for all measures to come into force at the beginning of 2024.

The European Action Plan for Democracy was presented as a comprehensive plan to ensure transparent and fair elections to the European Parliament in 2024, but the Union envisages strengthening the electoral process and mechanisms within all Member States. Through the operational mechanism, national experts should work together on the topics of election cybersecurity and data forensics to ensure that national systems are sufficiently resilient and provide a transparent environment for voters. The Union shall initiate exercises to assess the risks and preparedness of the electoral infrastructure based on previous recommendations.

The topic of the European Action Plan for Democracy was also addressed by the European Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE). Based on its three years of work, the plenary of the European Parliament adopted a resolution in March 2022 endorsing the European Action Plan for Democracy and supported the Commission to continue its work in implementing the necessary measures. Also because of its importance, the European Parliament has established a successor of the committee scheduled to work until August 2023, and has also extended the scope of the committee to include the area of integrity, transparency and democratic accountability in the European Parliament.

EU support for democracy abroad

The Union is not limited to its territory only. Since 2012, strategic materials on the EU's promotion of human rights and democracy globally have been regularly prepared. The [EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020 - 2024](#) highlighted the EU's role of a global leader in the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy. The Communication identifies the changing geopolitical situation, technological changes that have an impact on human rights, and climate change, which increasingly affects everyday life, as key factors that have affected the nature of the world compared to previous periods. In this document, the Union has, among other things, expanded the set of instruments it uses to promote human rights and democracy. In addition to public diplomacy and political dialogue, it has also focused on technological communication tools and campaigns. However, as the Plan is now entering the second half of its life, a critical review of the Communication can be initiated; discussions on the shape of the Union's continued approach to this issue must also be initiated in the light of the prevailing challenges.

Contribution of National Parliaments to promotion of democratic governance

EU national parliaments and the EP are involved in a range of democracy promotion activities with third country parliaments, with different levels of involvement, different instruments, and different priorities. These democracy promotion activities are becoming an integral part of the daily work of parliamentary administration, and national parliaments are increasingly involved in these activities. They represent a specific tool for parliaments to contribute to their general political commitment to promoting democracy in the world. To this end, **parliamentary administration has a unique expertise which, if shared with parliaments in third countries, can make a significant contribution to strengthening the democratic functioning of parliaments and the development of parliamentary democracy**. The ways in which parliaments organise their involvement in democracy promotion activities and the activities themselves vary from one parliament to another. Back in 2020, the European Parliament has therefore initiated the establishment of a **'Democracy Support Network'**, consisting of liaison officers responsible for democracy support activities in national parliaments and the EP.

EU strategic autonomy

The Union's desire to act autonomously without depending on third parties has been developing over the last decade. Initially, it was an autonomous defence cooperation initiative, but it also supported Member States' commitments in other organisations of a purely defensive nature. Over time, the space of autonomy has shifted. The European Commission recognises the vulnerability of the Union's dependence on third countries since 2020. For this reason, it promotes a model of an [open strategic autonomy](#), in which economic relations are to be governed by mutual benefit and protection against unfair practices, placing the Union in a vulnerable and exploitable position. The main thrust of such strategy is then to diversify resources and strengthen the role of the Euro as the currency of international trade.

The definition of a new goal of strategic autonomy came after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation; in March 2022, the [Versailles Declaration](#) of the European Council set the necessary goals of autonomy for the Union in the field of defence, including joint investment in defence, and a robust economic base and reduced dependence in the areas of raw materials and semiconductors, pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, based on the experience of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, digital technologies and foodstuffs. The Versailles Declaration set the objectives while the existing initiatives and legislation (e.g., the aforementioned Digital Services Act)

will be used to address them. Similarly, measures to strengthen strategic autonomy require funding from the EU budget.

But the strategic autonomy is not just an EU commitment. All Member States and societies need to understand the challenges and obligations arising from this situation. A report by the [European Parliamentary Research Service](#) argues that a society-wide understanding of strategic autonomy needs to be strengthened. The commitment to diversify resources may not be understood in the same way by all actors. Therefore, a clear vision and communication of what diversification of resources can and should contribute to is also necessary. The national parliaments of the Member States closest to the electorate can help with this by explaining and justifying these commitments, including their added value and positive effect.