

# How to Transition to Sustainable Democracies?

## Resisting Democratic Backsliding: The Urgency of Transnational Cooperation

by Dan Sobovitz and Omri Preiss

### **Introduction: The Growing Threat to Democracy**

Across Europe and beyond, democracy has been under siege, and the threat has only become more acute. From the erosion of independent institutions to the manipulation of the information space and electoral processes, democratic systems are facing sophisticated, coordinated and sustained attacks.

Wherever one looks, authoritarians and democrats are facing off. Romania, Georgia, Slovakia, Italy, Israel, France, Moldova and, most recently, Austria are just some of the flashpoints illustrating the fragility of democracy in the face of populism, disinformation and authoritarian tendencies. The upcoming German elections now will be another showdown. Ukrainians are still literally fighting for their lives – and ours. The new US administration is likely to take the world order we have taken for granted and throw it upside down.

Democracy and the rule of law, with transparent and accountable government that makes policy based on facts and evidence may appear to be dry and unexciting academic terms. In fact, they are the best way of dealing with any crucial issue in the world, from inflation to climate change, and from emerging tech to war and peace.

### **A Coordinated Effort: How Authoritarians Winning**

While democratic forces remain divided and struggle to respond, the authoritarian playbook is one of unity, coordination and shared goals. Across Europe, populists and authoritarian leaders are cooperating across borders, learning from each other and replicating successful strategies to undermine democratic institutions. For example, foreign influence in Romania, Moldova and Slovakia has spread through a network of disinformation, creating an

ecosystem of doubt and cynicism in their democracies. In Italy, hostile »Eurosceptic« forces have created alliances to promote nationalist agendas, countering the EU's commitment to shared democratic values.

Authoritarians recognise that their success lies in collaboration, investing in infrastructure, laying the long-term groundwork, amplifying each other's messages, funding campaigns and spreading disinformation that weakens democratic foundations. Aspiring authoritarians and oligarchs have a clear model: poison and degrade the information space to grab power, undermine institutions and norms, and then rob the state blind. The return on investment is colossal.

In contrast, democratic forces often remain fragmented, unable to the unified response that is essential for coping with transnational threats. Democratic civil society has been woefully underfunded and overstretched, resources are often spent on one-off parallel efforts instead of building robust sustainable organisations and ecosystems. Where there should be a business model, civic action is mired in a collective action problem. Democracy is becoming a tragedy of the commons.

## The Need for a Unified Response

The lesson is clear: resisting these coordinated attacks on democracy requires coordinated defence efforts. There is a rich variety of networks, associations, organisations, hubs and initiatives capable of doing this. They must be interconnected and they need more investment.

Democracy defenders must build exponentially on their networks, share best practices and construct platforms for rapid response to the emerging challenges. Failure to cooperate on a large enough scale has allowed authoritarian actors to make significant inroads across the board, and if there is to be a recovery, urgent action is required.

In this context, it's essential to foster greater partnerships across

sectors, between civil society organisations, think tanks, academia, international institutions, media and business. The fight for democracy cannot be waged in isolation, especially when the threat is cross-border and systemic.

## The Role of DemoCrisis: A Blueprint for Democratic Cooperation

In response to these challenges, [DemoCrisis](#) was created to bring together pro-democracy movements across Europe and its neighbourhood to counter the assault on democracy. Our approach is very practical, hands on and grounded in fostering collaboration and sharing best practices among stakeholders who defend democracy. By bringing together national and local voices, DemoCrisis facilitates learning, strategising, forming a common vision and using common approaches. Civil society organisations and movements coming together in solidarity and support, sharing what works and what doesn't, has had tangible positive outcomes.

The stakes are higher than ever, as democracy faces attacks from within and beyond Europe's borders. The trends we see and the reality before our eyes set a global demarcation line. To resist these coordinated attacks, we need an equally coordinated defence and the investment that entails.

DemoCrisis, with our focus on hands-on cooperation and mutual learning, is one example of how to begin to build the networks we need to move ahead. But we need more investment, more cooperation and a stronger commitment to defending democracy before it's too late.

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## **About the Brussels Democracy Papers**

In response to the rise of leaders with autocratic tendencies in advanced democracies, creeping autocratisation in many democracies previously considered consolidated, and faltering democratisation processes in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung EU Office Brussels and FES Democracy of the Future Office Vienna organised the first Brussels Democracy Dialogue on 20 November 2024. Just like the previous Hambach Democracy Dialogue (HDD), this expert conference is a platform to exchange progressive ideas and proposals for further developing European democracies.

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