

# Executive Summary

11 December 2023



**Living in a à la carte world – New global rifts and cleavages between democracies and autocracies**

Panel Discussion in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence

**Panelists:**

**Johanna Lutz**

Director, FES Regional Office for International Cooperation

**Leatitia Spetschinsky**

Baillet Latour Chair on EU-Russia relations, UCLouvain and oiip

**Cengiz Günay**

Director, oiip

**Vedran Dzhic**

Senior Researcher, oiip

**Moderation:**

Thomas Eder

Post-Doc Reseacher, oiip

**Date:** December 11, 2023, at the oiip

**Summary report authors:** Roman Rudenko and Vedran Dzhic

**Keywords:** Global Democracy Summit, Autocracy vs. Democracy, Illiberalism, Totalitarianism, Populism

## Takeways

- In an increasingly complex and multi-polar world, the promotion of Western democratic values has become increasingly difficult.
- There is a growing norm competition. The universality of liberal Western values has been challenged by alternative interpretations of states such as China. China has started promoting its own values system.
- A binary view of democracies versus autocracies does neither reflect realities nor does it convince “grey zone” regimes. Moreover, Western democracies need to cooperate with authoritarian regimes.
- The Democracy Summit, initiated by the Biden administration has been flawed. It follows a zero-sum logic that is reminiscent of the Cold War-era's geopolitical arrangement.
- The EU needs to address anti-democratic developments in countries that are candidates for membership.
- Globally, democracies are under threat. The major force that is threatening democracy are populist movements.
- Russia can be termed as a totalitarian state. In contrast to authoritarian regimes where citizens have the option to remain silent and opt-out, totalitarian regimes permeate private life. Remaining silent is no option. In order to participate in life quite often totalitarian regimes demand engagement such as membership in the regime-party or obedience in every matter.
- In Russia, the bureaucracy and judiciary are eager not to be perceived as too liberal or too weak. Therefore they act more "popish than the pope". Only President Putin as the leader of the system can afford to be mild, if he likes to be.

## Introduction

Today, more the majority of people on the globe live in semi-authoritarian regimes. These are regimes at the grey zone between liberal democracies and autocracies. The event discussed whether this has repercussions on foreign policy making and the international system and if so how. The trend of the opening of international politics towards cooperation, peace, justice, and liberal values has been largely reversed in recent years. The universalism of liberal values such as human rights and democratic freedoms are in retreat. International politics are less norm driven and all too often transaction. They often serve the interests of elites and business cliques, at the expense of basic democratic freedoms of citizens. Against this backdrop, the pressing question is what the defenders of liberal values, universality, and inviolability of human rights worldwide can do to rally support for their cause.

One possible way to go about this has been proposed by the United States with the Global Democracy Summit in March 2023. However, the initiative and selection of invitees have been met with skepticism and pose important questions: Who decides whether a state is democratic enough to be invited? What happens to those “sitting on the fence” who are not invited – will they be pushed towards global illiberal initiatives and cooperation formats instead? To answer these and other questions and address the overall theme of the day of how democracy can live up to expectations and withstand attacks by illiberal forces, the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip), in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Defense (bmlv) hosted a panel discussion on December 11, entitled “Living in a à la carte world – New global rifts and cleavages between democracies and autocracies”.

## Democracy promotion: solving problems by creating new ones?

What is problematic about the Global Democracy Summit? Johanna Lutz from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation argued that the geopolitical element strongly featuring in the initiative has spoiled its potential benefits by alienating states “on the fence” of the strategic confrontation between democratic and autocratic systems. The framework of the summit, in this view, was overly deterministic in that it forced countries to pick sides, and by doing so distance themselves from the other option. This zero-sum logic, reminiscent of the Cold War-era's geopolitical arrangement, misjudged the dominant foreign policy narrative. Surveys held in Western and non-Western countries,

indicate that an increasing number of people see cooperation with multiple states with concurring ideological or political standpoints as beneficial if it serves their interests.

Relatedly, transporting a static and binary view of the democracy-autocracy confrontation may interfere with democratic transformations in “grey zone” countries, because democracy is often rhetorically linked to the Western world and thus tied to US hegemony, which is framed as malign by such actors as China, Russia, or Iran. Cengiz Günay argued that the Global Democracy Summit has had a domestic as well as a foreign policy dimension. It was an attempt of the Biden administration to set itself apart from Trump-era's policies and also served the aim to building a “coalition of the willing” against China and Russia. Lutz and Günay concurred that this strategy may backfire, as the and its Western partners need to cooperate with authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar. A strong emphasis on democracy as a foreign policy tool might also further fuel anti-Americanism as it highlights the double standards in US foreign policy.

This observation leads to consider the battle of narratives and frames, as the view of what exactly makes a country democratic or autocratic is highly contested, not to mention challenged everywhere in a similar way, including in societies traditionally perceived as democratic. After all, China's official narrative does not differ much from the United States or countries in the European Union. The People's Republic claims to represent a true “people's democracy”. Even among democratic countries, as Johanna Lutz proposed, there exist different views of what defines a democracy, and not all agree to the US' proposition that democracy is mostly defined by growth and stability. The key is to remain flexible and adapt to others' point of view in a pluralistic manner without pushing for the “one and only” dominant view. After all, Western democracies still wield considerable soft power in most of the world. A poll conducted by the European Council of Foreign Relations reveals that most citizens of non-democratic countries would still prefer to live in Europe or the USA. However, the credibility of the promise of liberalism, as most often defended by democratic countries of the traditional “West”, has suffered considerably from prior breaches of the rules-based international order, such as at the hands of the United States during the invasion of Iraq or later on in Afghanistan. This, according to Cengiz Günay, has provided authoritarian states with arguments to delegitimize initiatives such as the Global Democracy Summit as hypocritical and accuse the West of double standards.

To understand this concern and the potential negative consequences of overly assertive democracy promotion agendas, it is essential to analyze and understand what provides the background for non-Western argumentation and critique.

### **The illiberal challenge: from electoral authoritarianism to totalitarianism**

Initiatives like the Global Democracy Summit paint a picture of a straightforward division between democracy and autocracy. In reality, and in the case of almost 80% of the world population, most people live in so-called “grey zone” countries that include features of both ideal types, argued Cengiz Günay. Thus, most such states follow a certain playbook in which basic democratic institutions are in place but are hollowed out by an authoritarian way of ruling and governance. This mostly includes capturing state institutions for political gain, replacing higher courts, making favorable amendments to the constitution if necessary, and reshuffling the distribution of capital in the economy to favor elites aligned with the ruling party. A primary example is Turkey, where close to 90% of media companies are owned or managed by government-friendly business elites after a series of buyouts enabled through heavy pressure to former owners by the ruling AKP party. The result in Turkey and similar cases like Hungary is that transition of power is not entirely ruled out as oppositional parties are in place but is made highly difficult due to serious institutional constraints.

Further problems arise if such anti-pluralistic measures of autocratic rulers are not treated with appropriate determination, argued Vedran Dzihic. Serbia has been steadily backsliding and constitutes a model case of a state embracing the “à la carte” mode of picking and choosing alliances that often contradict each other but serve immediate short-term interests of the ruling class. A model representative of a “grey scale” democracy, Serbia has been accepting cheap infrastructure projects that are harmful for the environment from Chinese contractors, and its leadership appealing to nationalist sentiments in the country by maintaining discursive frames of cultural closeness between Serbia and Russia. Rather than punishing such tendencies, the diplomatic response by the European Union has been informed by viewing Serbia as the dominant power in the Western Balkans whose goodwill is necessary to maintaining peace and stability, especially in the resolution of the dispute with Kosovo.

## Looking into the abyss: What is possible on the other side?

Laetitia Spetschinsky provided a glimpse into just how far an unshackled authoritarian system can spiral down into embracing elements of a totalitarian state akin to the horrendous regimes of the World War II era. Her analysis of political developments in Russia since 2022 allows to identify the precise elements that set a totalitarian system apart from authoritarian regimes. The expert names three main pillars of the Russian repressive rule. The first is “political correctness” which concerns ideology, and the drawing of boundaries between desired and undesired values. Thus, official pro-government discourse is permeated by frames of conservatism, “traditional values” of family and religion, and a hegemonic view of “rightful” Russian dominance regionally and globally because of its historical role as an imperial power (cf. Putin’s article of July 2021).

The second pillar is the repressive rule, which in Putin’s Russia has taken its genesis as a reaction to democratization processes represented by the “Color Revolutions” in countries like Serbia, Georgia, and especially Ukraine in 2004 and 2013-14. Citizens of formerly compliant and friendly authoritarian systems, many of whom are former vassals of Moscow, taking to the streets to question and challenge the distribution of power represented a serious threat to the survival of the repressive state under Putin. Developments in these countries were framed as “Western-influenced”. They were branded as attempts of illegitimate regime change. In response, drastic legal measures were introduced under the pretext of countering the threat of foreign influence. The most obvious outcome of this development has been the “Foreign Agents Act”, which is open to many interpretations by courts and administrators and provides the basis for the effective control and repression of dissident voices before they can even mobilize any popular support.

Alluding to a quote in which “Lenin’s goal was to change the world by blowing it up”, Spetschinsky drew a parallel with modern-day Russia which actively challenges democracy with its military invasion in Ukraine, and through covert operations in Western countries, including the support of far-right parties. All these actions are mirrored in domestic Russian politics where dissent is crushed with the help of a ruthless repressive bureaucracy that interprets the already restrictive laws in a more brutish way in what the analyst calls, with reference to Andrei Kolesnikov, “automated control”. According to this logic, bureaucrats in the authoritarian, nearly-totalitarian Russian system, are most afraid of showing weakness and signs of liberal thought. Therefore, orders from top to punish dissidents are

carried out with even more rigor in court verdicts, which explains the extremely high sentence of 25 years given to Vladimir Kara-Murza. From the judge to the police officer, each civil servant is complicit in his or her own way in reproducing the authoritarian machine, which rewards them for doing so.

Such aspects may exist in other authoritarian states as well. What makes Russia special is its current drift towards totalitarianism, going down a spiral of increasing repression that negates the possibility of staying silent, of choosing the exit option of tacit compliance with the system. Thus, whereas authoritarianism is based on a form of consensus but allows for passivity by those who choose to not participate and not challenge the given order, totalitarianism permeates the private life of citizens to achieve unanimity. This is evident in Russia from the attempts to rewrite history in a way favorable of the regime's narrative of greatness, forced mobilization into the armed forces, and the recent move to ban certain types of birth control to boost birth rate. With Russia's huge proportion of public sector workers and civil servants, including in the security apparatus, the base for recruitment of individuals carrying out such policies is unlikely to shrink.

## **Common challenges to democracy**

The developments in Russia and elsewhere can seem difficult to perceive for individuals living in democratic societies. However, it is important to understand that the potential for the decline of democracy, or even its reversal, exist everywhere. Cengiz Günay argued in this context that the difference between democratic and authoritarian states is increasingly blurred. What concerns all countries is a fault line running along not so much the mode of governance and the institutional arrangement, but the way in which political forces attempt to gain traction by appealing to people's fears and by promising to address them – populism. Even in authoritarian states, public opinion can hardly be ignored anymore, as elites rely on frames of messianic nature in which the dominant narrative becomes the only one tacitly accepted in a manipulated public discourse aimed at preserving the entrenched rule. According to Günay, fear as the main driver of populist politics is a major challenge to democracy worldwide and an aspect that should be addressed beyond the rhetoric division between democratic and autocratic states. Rather, the fact that democracy is in crisis, and that people feel left behind or excluded from politics should be seriously addressed against the backdrop of the dominant economic arrangement of neoliberalism, which has entered many other spheres far beyond economic exchange. Thus, the dominant mode of perceiving political life has come to be



informed by a business-oriented mindset of quick decisions and pragmatism, which are often incompatible with the procedural nature of democracy that requires constant dedication. Only if democratic states start to take seriously the concerns of those who feel left behind by politics and vote for populist parties that pose a threat to democracy can a promotion thereof be credible. Similarly, Western democracies should take seriously the criticism of double standards and address concerns of many “grey zone” countries that point towards a dichotomy between promotion and the practicing of the rules-based order, especially considering that the United States has lost its formerly much stronger foreign policy gravitas.

Against this backdrop, Vedran Dzihic diagnosed a “nervous breakdown” on global level, a state in which prior tendencies of democratization and the predictability of a rules-based global order of the 1990s and early 2000s are being largely eroded by a process of power competition between dominant players like China, the US, the EU, India, and Russia. Speaking with Gramsci’s “age of monsters”, in which the old has not yet died but the new has not been born yet, some current developments point to the (re-)birth of tendencies that were long believed to be overcome. In this situation, keeping in mind and following a normative horizon of universality, as most strongly represented by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, plays a crucial role in preventing the proverbial nervous system of global pro-democratic contestation from collapsing. One of the best possible descriptions of the concept of universality is provided by the Treaty of the European Union, but its geopolitical significance is in a state of decline, reducing the potential for positive spillover. Some core reforms in the EU must be undertaken to reverse this trend, especially in the voting procedure to soften veto power by countries like Hungary that often amount to outright blackmail, and in the enlargement procedures and treatment of aspirant countries. Especially the present and past EU approach towards Serbia, which has been backsliding considerably in recent years, has not been conducive to positive change in that country and in its prospects for EU accession. On the other hand, success stories like North Macedonia have not been rewarded for far reaching internal reforms, which may pose a threat to the gains from positive developments and reforms. Taking a principled stance against autocrats while rewarding democratization efforts in aspirant countries informs the imperative of maintaining strong support for Ukraine’s victory against threats not only to itself but the fundamental values of democracy and a rules-based order that the European project is based on.

## Questions from the audience broadening the horizon

Additional topics were addressed by the audience and taken up by the panel, such as the question whether civil society “has been lost” considering that in some states, including most recently in Europe in the case of Slovakia and the Netherlands, the electorate has been opting for rightwing populist options. Vedran Dzihic concurred that the formerly idealistic picture of civil society-based movements as democracy promoters is currently much more blurred, as there exist also far-right civil society organizations. Another aspect is the professionalization of civil society organizations especially in transitional countries whereby former activist groups formalize their activities and become professionals, but in the process earn a bad reputation by becoming overly bureaucratic and detached from citizens. However, it is important to keep in mind the potential of contentious movements and the significance they can bare for political transformation, such as in the case of the women’s rights movement in Poland that strengthened the electoral chances of Donald Tusk’s coalition against PiS. The momentum of contentious movements may thus inform positive change on a larger scale, as they often raise questions and problematize aspects that are missing in mainstream political debates. Johanna Lutz likewise pointed towards the challenge posed by the far-right spectrum represented within civil society, who are often well-connected and funded.

Another question focused on the distribution of power in the United Nations, asking whether Global South countries were underrepresented and if yes, how this fact impacted the democracy vs. autocracy debate. Cengiz Günay appealed to modesty as a principle to follow by Western democracies, and honesty about the ambitions and capacities related to democracy promotion. The notion of promoting a certain way of life and perception as “our way” does not work anymore. Relatedly, problems and threats to democracy within Western countries should be addressed before promoting standards abroad. The analyst challenged the view of “altruistic” democracy promotion in the name of abstract values and argued that the West has often acted in self-interest under the disguise of universalism. The same is true for non-Western states in the Global South, whereby it is always imperative to keep in mind the distinction between the true interests of the people and that of the ruling elite.

Reacting to a question about the European Union’s role in worldwide democracy promotion and tools at its disposal, Vedran Dzihic argued that the EU’s geopolitical weight, especially with the Israel-Hamas war, has been reduced to its merely symbolic value. And even though the EU struggles to prevent

autocrats from abusing the principle of international cooperation for their own gain, the normative power of its Treaties and its claim of representing a long-term peace project cannot be overlooked. Ultimately, the geopolitical significance of the EU, but also of democratic values, is very much dependent on whether it manages to support Ukraine to victory over the Russian invasion, and how it handles the topic of enlargement. To do this, there needs to be a debate on the internal decision-making, including on the majority voting system, and a firm stance against autocratic pressure and blackmail from within and without the Union.

A related concern coming from the audience addressed the rise of the far right and rightwing populist parties in European countries, asking what has gone wrong and what can be done to revert the trend. According to Cengiz Günay, fear and uncertainty about life are what determine much of the appeal of far-right populists. In their rhetoric strategies, such politicians appear as authentic and genuine to people who have lost faith in democratic procedures. They raise topics that many do not dare to ask in public, and thus provide simple but controversial answers that politicians of established parties likewise to not dare to address fearing the loss of popularity. Laetitia Spetschinsky, in turn, relativized the capacity of populist parties to hold on to power after being elected to office, pointing to the decade-long role as oppositional troublemakers and the resulting lack of staff and organizational potential.

Citing the Democracy Perception Index 2023<sup>1</sup>, Johanna Lutz pointed out that in the survey representing 75% of the world population, most respondents believed that economic inequality was the largest threat to democracy, with 69% choosing this answer. Likewise, the representative principle of democracy ought to be overhauled, as many feel detached from political decisions. The expert stressed the need for innovative tools in democratic practices on societal level, for instance through citizen's assemblies and other tools that would enable citizens to turn democracy into a lived and meaningful experience instead of the mere act of occasionally casting a vote. Rather than "running a country as if you run a company" according to a neoliberal mindset, there is a need for policies that impact many people's lives in a positive way and allow citizens to participate in democratic processes other than voting. Likewise, public communication of such policies and of the dangers of the authoritarian challenge ought to be improved to inform the public of what is at stake and what freedoms could be

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<sup>1</sup> DeVaux, Frederick and Ekaterina Golovanova. Democracy Perception Index 2023. Latana, Alliance of Democracies. 2023. <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/democracy-perception-index/>

lost following a far-right electoral victory. Such communication should not be left only to the media or politicians, but everyone has the power to contribute to the debate and influence their personal networks by posing important questions and challenging undemocratic tendencies.