

# Reversing the Gaze: Can the EU Import Democracy from Others?

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## Abstract

For over two decades, the EU has used a wide range of policy instruments to support democratic reform in third countries under the assumption that the rest of the world must learn from Europeans. This one-way democracy policy is out of tune with the times as political malaise spreads within the EU and as global geopolitics calls for genuine decolonial mindsets. In this contribution, we ask what it would take for the EU to reverse the democratic gaze. We argue that the EU could do more to open itself to the democratic innovations unfolding around the world where reformers have long been grappling with anti-democratic playbooks. We distinguish between three relevant realms, namely, that of power-sharing arrangements, democratic backsliding and regional mechanisms. We hope to offer a significant tweak to decolonization analysis and a political, normative supplement to this Special Issue's concern with outside influences on the EU.

**Keywords:** democracy promotion; European Union; foreign policy; mutual influence; post-colonial

## Introduction

This Special Issue on 'European integration outside-in' examines the influence of others on the EU. As the editors point out, this is a radical analytical turn, much needed in the field of EU studies. In today's international system, we might expect such an enquiry to be routine. The ostensible credo of the multilateral system is reciprocal influence, mutual learning and formal equality. As a self-proclaimed champion of multilateralism, the EU and its member states could be expected routinely to channel the influence of others into its own institutional and decision-making system, just as it engineers the diffusion of its norms and standards in the outside world. Yet, it rarely does so (Nicolaidis and Youngs, 2021a).

We make a specific contribution to this Special Issue by focusing on democracy and the policies designed to support democratic reforms by both states and transnational actors. Although grounded in empirical material, our concern has a normative element. We argue that the EU needs to 'reverse the gaze' by asking what it can learn from others' democratic experiences and innovations in order to act consistently on this basis. We start by explaining how our focus on democracy fits into the Special Issue's overarching framework and how epistemological decentring might help reshape international democracy support. We then show what practices in the rest of the world could usefully inform debates about democracy within EU member states. Finally, we ask how and to what extent the EU could act practically to absorb democratic influences and ideas from around the world.

## I. Conceptual Foundations

The article makes a specific and distinctive contribution to the Special Issue's analytical framework (Lavenex and Öberg, 2023). In categorizing different types of third-country influence over the EU, we distinguish between direct and indirect, as well as formal and informal, external influence. Of the different categories suggested in the analytical framework, this article corresponds to that of 'productive influence', referring to indirect and ideational influences over EU and member state norms and policy choices. This contrasts with more 'compulsory' dynamics that result from material, legal and institutional interlinkages. Other contributions in the Special Issue focus on formal structural factors that give third countries a *de jure* role in internal EU decision-making processes. Their concern is with formal agreements between the EU and third countries, and how these give third countries some leverage over EU rule-setting.

Our focus lies rather at a more political level, concerned less with formal *de jure* influence than with the transnational osmosis of democratic reform lessons to be drawn symmetrically between Europe and the rest of the world. These lessons have to do primarily not only with the actions of states and societies as they grapple with their democratic contract but also with the role of supranational and transnational actors as they weigh the relative effectiveness of various modes of pro-democracy intervention. Countries and communities beyond Europe have often pioneered democratic reforms and innovations, including in post-colonial, post-patriarchal, post-conflict settings, where struggles for Indigenous rights, the role of civil society organizations and the influence of international organizations all differ markedly from their European counterparts. Whatever the pitfalls and limitations of these experiences, they constitute a reserve of potential influence that could and should be positively harnessed. To be clear, we are not concerned here with external (aka Russian) interference in the functioning of European democratic processes, especially elections, although arguably this makes it even more urgent to tap outside experiences, including when it comes to countering transnational efforts at democratic destabilization.

In short, our starting point is not so much the role of formal structures of external influence within the EU but rather shared normative challenges raised by the common difficulties facing democracy within EU and non-EU countries. In the terms offered under the analytical framework laid out in the Special Issue's introduction, ideational and normative dynamics are also germane, in the varied ways that these are advanced by multiple actors, formal and informal. Third countries may not have meaningful formal let alone coercive power over European democracy, but the EU's internal democratic malaise cannot be held analytically separate from democracy-related trends elsewhere. This article shows that the Special Issue's 'outside-in' framework shines a useful spotlight on the current era's most politically sensitive concerns and is not limited to formal or technical decision procedures.

Although this is not an article about external EU democracy policies *per se*, there is clearly much interface between inward and outward dynamics. Indeed, as with other contributions to this volume, the starting point of our enquiry has to do with the EU's external action and how it may induce these 'outside-in' dynamics through the enduring power of reciprocity. The EU has for over two decades been supporting democracy in third countries. But the positive impacts from this have been increasingly dampened *inter alia* by

others' perception that such support reflects Europeans' sense of moral superiority inherited from the colonial pasts of some EU member states – a sense that explains in part a general lack of openness to non-Western experiences, viewpoints and analytical mindsets (Acharya, 2014; Börzel and Zürn, 2020; Hurrel, 2017; Nicolaidis, 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2015; Nicolaidis and Howse, 2002; Nouwen, 2022; Youngs, 2015). Our ambition therefore is to add to the introduction's conceptual framework the increasingly prominent decolonization agenda to show its resonance in the field of democracy.

Thus, we expand here on the long-held argument that the idea of Europeans as standard-setter for others populating a supposed periphery persists in the one-way EU external support of norms (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). In failing to look beyond Eurocentric 'universalisms', or 'EU universalisms', EU policies ignore alternative epistemic traditions and, in particular, the possible contribution of 'epistemologies from the south' to democratic renewal within Europe (de Sousa Santos, 2018). This is not a matter of rejecting core universal values but taking seriously critical thinking and emerging practices from other regions of the world (Grosfoguel, 2012, p. 101). Arguably, European democracies' notion of liberal toleration may be in tension with effective pluralism in political forms, for it is based on a presumed superiority of one (white) epistemology, which has been described as characterized by 'immanence, ignorance, and innocence' (Sabaratnam, 2020).

Normatively, there has been little discussion in either analytical or policy circles about how two-way influences over democracy might help not only Europe's own democratic renewal but also the external EU democracy agenda. The EU's own models are now increasingly contested on both normative and empirical grounds, opening up more conceptual doubt and question marks (Lenz and Nicolaidis, 2019). Yet adverse political trends in recent years have pushed much academic research to focus predominantly on acute threats to core liberal norms rather than on exploring different variations of democracy from around the world (Wolff, 2022).

If the EU is to truly own up to its vocation as a 'post-colonial power', it needs to reflexively decentre its external relations (Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis, 2013; Nicolaidis and Fisher Onar, 2015; Wolff et al., 2022). Adopting a different approach to much critical analysis, we suggest that the kind of radical decentring implied here should not be a matter of simply pointing to the historical baggage in EU external policies (a matter beyond this article's remit). Rather, it should go a step further and focus more on what useful experiences the EU should be looking to learn or even *import* from others. For many years, academic work has centred on the notion that EU norms have been diffused into other societies and political systems, with a focus on the conditions under which such diffusion occurs or does not occur. Whether or not this way of conceiving cross-border democratic influences was ever justified, today it is clearly out of tune with trends in global politics. Instead, we need to appreciate that there are democratic and anti-democratic practices in all societies and that both sets of dynamics cross borders in different directions (Youngs, 2022).

Although contexts obviously vary, and there is no universal recipe for democracy, it can be argued that societies face similar challenges when developing democratic practices capable of ensuring that public power serves the public interest (Dahl, 1989). These can be understood in *procedural* terms – according to which a state is sufficiently

democratically constrained when its decisions have been subjected to processes like deliberation or a majority vote that are as inclusive as possible. Or they can be understood in more *substantive* terms – according to which societies need to ensure that public power is used for genuinely public purposes and not captured by private or factional interests (Bagg, 2021). If these goals can be considered as universal, it follows that lessons can be learned from the means adopted to approximate them in different contexts.

Our focus on democracy and inward influences over political reform adds an additional layer of outside-in dynamics to this Special Issue. Unlike other contributions to the Special Issue, our concern is less with ‘influence by necessity’ and more with ‘influence by choice’. The former stems from the direct demands of co-operation structured around different forms of integration with the EU. Influence by choice rather relates to areas where others’ claim on Europeans’ own ways of being in the world originates from deeper and more engrained structures of knowledge and power that will not be debunked without conscious engagement. If other contributions to the Special Issue examine the ways in which the EU’s entanglement with others entails some degree of differentiated integration or differentiated co-operation with them, we are concerned with political choices *per se* and, in this sense, how global experiences should condition democracy within EU member states (Nicolaidis, 2021). In the area of democracy, this means that there are lessons to be drawn from many different actors elsewhere – individual activists, civic and political actors, regional bodies and government reformists. It also means that the same multiple social and political actors within Europe are potential recipients of outside-in dynamics, not just the formal EU institutions.

We offer this contribution not as an exhaustive empirical review but as an agenda-setting exercise laying out a conceptual grid weaving illustrative examples together. We draw not only from conceptual literature but also from interviews with policy-makers, as we are interested in the very practical policy steps that might help import democratic ideas into the realm of national and transnational politics in the EU. Obviously, reversing the gaze should not entail idealizing other countries’ democratic experiences and models. Nor should it be interpreted as (neo-colonial) ‘appropriation’ of others’ ideas and practices. And it does not mean that norms present in the EU are irrelevant to the rest of the world. But we do believe that two-way decentring can be useful to both domestic and external EU policies. In the end, we need to acknowledge that modernity has been and continues to be a global co-creation, which implies that mutuality must be at the heart of modern transnational relations (Táiwò, 2022).

We suggest why this is important in relation to democratic renewal in Europe; we examine the global lessons from which the EU could usefully draw; and we consider tangible policy changes needed to put these into practice.

## II. Trouble at Home

A greater commitment to reversing the gaze is overdue for the very direct and obvious reason that democracy within the EU is not in robust health. If the EU’s own house is not in order, how can the EU possibly be in a position successfully to support democracy elsewhere? (Notwithstanding the necessary distinction between the EU and the EU’s member states, we consider the EU in a holistic way, as including both EU institutions and the institutions of its member states.)

It is striking that as the solvency of European democracy has itself come under scrutiny, the EU has done so little to cast around for innovative ideas from external sources. Democracy indices all show that the quality of democracy in Europe began to deteriorate after the late 2000s, although the trends vary between European states. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EUI)'s democracy scores for 2021 reached a new low, in particular as a result of Covid-19-related abridgements of democratic rights.

As of 2021, the EUI index classifies only eight member states as full democracies. In addition to the more infamous cases of democratic backsliding, France, Spain and Italy all fall outside this category and no member state is exempt from criticism (Azmanova and Howard, 2022; EUI, 2022). But the latter should not blind us to the fact that democratic recession in the EU does have something to do with the way in which accession was managed with the waves of enlargement in 2004 to *inter alia* Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic and in 2007 to Bulgaria and Romania. When it comes to democratic practices, we need to unlearn as well as learn in Europe. Although all European countries have much to learn from the rest of the world, the troubled EU positioning of some Central and Eastern European countries with very different historical experiences and political cultures makes this injunction more urgent than ever. Ultimately, outside-in lessons ought also to be relevant to the enlargement realm whereby so-called 'democracy promotion' will ultimately become an internal EU policy. Hence, the criticism that EU neighbourhood policy tends to maintain democracy-subverting governance models under which top-down blueprints subvert and sometimes annul bottom-up democratic dynamics which by definition ought not to be designed from the outside (Staeger, 2016; Theuns, 2017).

Varieties of Democracy (or V-Dem) annual reports show that from 2009 to 2019, the democracy scores of 23 EU member states worsened. The scale of Hungary's decline was the worst and that of Poland's was the third worst in the world (V-Dem, 2021, p. 31). V-Dem's 2022 report suggests that six EU member states are 'autocratizing': apart from Poland and Hungary, also Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece and Slovenia. Only 15 are now liberal democracies, whereas 11 are one category down as electoral democracies, and Hungary is classified as an electoral autocracy (V-Dem, 2022). In similar vein, Freedom House scores for 2021 show the 16th consecutive year of decline in the overall level of global democracy, with scores for Europe as a whole worsening in all categories of measurement in this time span. In the decade between 2009 and 2019, 16 member states' scores worsened and only 5 states improved (Freedom House, 2022). Against this troubled backdrop, one might expect to see more demand inside Europe today for outside inspiration in correcting the continent's democracy problems.

The most negative impact on overall democracy scores has come from restrictions on civil liberties. As of 2021, the Civicus monitoring organization reports that of 29 European states (27 EU member states plus the UK and Norway), civic space is 'open' in only 14 of these, has 'narrowed' in 13 and is 'obstructed' in 2 (Civicus, 2022). Restrictions on civil society organizations and protests have tightened in most states as a combined result of security laws, migrant and refugee policies and measures linked to Covid-19. These trends are present even in the countries with the highest democracy scores. In addition, many governments have tightened their political control over judicial bodies. This rule of law problem is, of course, most dramatic and evident in Poland and Hungary but present in more nuanced form in other EU member states too, both Western and Eastern European.



These worsening trends are not only about the much-covered populist surge. Many forms of democratic deterioration come from so-called mainstream governments. In terms of populism itself, trends have fluctuated, with some far-right parties losing support in recent years whereas others gain ground. Some European populist parties represent a clear and explicit threat to liberal-democratic norms, whereas others are illiberal but not unequivocally anti-democratic (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018). Much has been written about surveys, indicating that populists' popularity is rooted in the rise of authoritarian value preferences amongst European populations – although other polls paint more positive pictures and experts continue to differ over how such polling should be interpreted (Youngs, 2021).

Although European democracy scores have not dramatically collapsed due to Covid-19, the pandemic sharpened many second-order challenges. The economic impacts are likely to prevent parts of the population from effectively exercising their formal democratic rights. The rise of an anti-vaccination, libertarian populism may auger ill for future democratic trends. Processes of accountability are lacking in relation to the rising influence of health experts and scientists. Overall, the pandemic accentuated the problems of fragmentation and governability and indeed frustration with government performance across Europe (Maduro and Kahn, 2020). To be sure, there are huge variations in democratic practices between member states. The challenge therefore starts with a greater awareness of the array of lesson the EU as a whole and different member states individually can find relevant at different times, places and circumstances – an array to which we now turn.

### III. Lessons from Elsewhere

These trends alone justify our enquiry. Reversing the gaze starts with the broader recognition that democracy has long been a global experiment. The historical role played by various regions of the world in shaping contemporary international law, norms and institutions remains to be studied in depth (Long and Schulz, 2022). Fast forwarding to the 21st century, we offer a few examples of where some of the most productive influences from Europe's 'elsewhere' might lie. Developing earlier, preliminary work (Nicolaidis and Youngs, 2021b), we unpack three (non-exhaustive) categories of democratic issues: those related to foundational social contracts and the distribution of power; the methods and potential for empowering civil society; and the role and instruments of transnational organizations and actors.

#### *Social Contracts, Power-Sharing and Participatory Innovations*

Perhaps most fundamentally, the current pathologies that affect most democracies around the world have to do with the legitimacy of the social contracts that sustain them and their respective capacity to adapt to changing social mores and technologies. Europeans may find some inspiration beyond their borders in at least two ways.

First, on procedural grounds, many countries across Africa and Asia that emerged from the imperial era as places of direct settler colonialism sought novel ways of fashioning inclusive power-sharing settlements that guaranteed minority groups or a plurality of ethnic groups political ownership of their social contract. India and later South Africa pioneered

what came to be known as transformative constitutionalism as the constitutional procedure for such balancing of different societal interests (Hailbronner, 2017). Although the European context is of course markedly different, the continent's problems with polarization and political fragmentation suggest that EU states need to cast around for ideas to foster inclusion and both limit majoritarianism's roughest edges whilst also catering to majoritarian anxieties (Orgad, 2015). These approaches may even be relevant at the EU level as the union verges on revisiting its own constitutional contract following the 2022 Conference on the Future of Europe.

Within these constitutional premises, India and Indonesia both have distinctive processes for managing diversity. Power-sharing in Nepal helped the country deal with internal conflict and incrementally deepen democratic rights (Miklian, 2008). In Taiwan, a quota reserves government positions for Indigenous groups and this share of power is generally welcomed as having made democracy more inclusive and stable (Tan and Preece, 2021). Tunisia's power-sharing between Islamists and secularists, leftists, unions, business groups and civil society helped take democratization forward in its early stages after 2011. Power-sharing innovations have been tried in Liberia, Nigeria and Sri Lanka as part of democratization processes and to dilute majority dominance (Juon and Bochsler, 2022).

Second, democracies in developing countries have often explored ways of combining economic, social and political rights into single reform agendas, thus exhibiting greater concern for economic justice than their European counterparts. Indeed, it is this difference in emphasis that has inspired criticism of the Western penchant to artificially separate political over economic rights with an emphasis on procedural over substantive democracy. Economic inequities are clearly part of the reason for Europe's own shortfalls in democratic quality and so this nexus must be pivotal to the continent's political renewal – *pace* Alexis de Toqueville's stress on the importance of economic equality to countries' democratic health. To this end, it is still the case that Europe may benefit from tapping into other countries' efforts to ensure that improvements to democracy relate in more tangible ways to demands for economic and social justice, in particular as youth-led climate activism spreads across the world.

Most recently, many countries around the world have resorted to participatory innovations to achieve the kind of inclusiveness that electoral dynamics have failed to deliver. Indeed, some of the most interesting and promising innovations on democratic participation have come from outside the West. In developing countries, these new forms of citizen engagement have allowed activists and local communities to press harder for their governments to combat corruption and provide local services. They have also sometimes found ways of bringing together professional democracy-focused NGOs and more traditional forms of community organizing (Youngs, 2015). Although an increasing number of mini-public deliberative forums have recently been organized in Europe as a potent source of democratic renewal, these citizen panels and assemblies are just one model of participation – and focusing on this model exclusively eschews other kinds of innovation that have been tried around the world (Min, 2009, 2014).

In contrast, innovations outside Europe offer many different models (Min, 2014; Youngs et al., 2016). As part of an ongoing project on non-Western democratic innovations, we found many experiments aimed to enhance citizen participation that differ from the kind of formal, citizen assemblies that now predominate across Europe. Many public

authorities have focused on building participative components into public consultation mechanisms – for example, in Georgia and Korea. Many kinds of what might be termed more ‘open participation’ have gain traction in the form of multi-actor participative forums – India and Brazil provide particularly good examples of this. And crucially, in many countries, efforts have emerged to develop more connected forms of deliberation, linking direct citizen participation to other democratic channels – Malawi, North Macedonia and Taiwan show successful cases of this approach (Godfrey and Youngs, 2022).

In a development that seems to square the circle between this most recent wave of democratic innovation and constitution building, Chile’s constitutional process that began in October 2020 benefitted from several distinctive levels of citizen participation. Three referendums were offered: one on whether citizens wanted a new constitution; another for the election of a constituent body; and a final one to ratify the new constitutional text. The process entailed citizen participation through public hearings, the online submission of proposals and forums. The ease with which citizens could present themselves as representatives for the Constitutional Convention led to many independent candidates being elected. But the ultimate defeat of the draft constitution in the September 2022 referendum will lead to much reflection on the meaning of ‘inclusiveness’ and the embeddedness of democratic experiment in societies at large (Gardels, 2022).

Nevertheless, amongst the many other lessons still to be drawn from this Chilean experience, the political representation of women will probably take pride of place. Gender parity was pursued proactively through a requirement that lists be headed by a female candidate. Chile became the first country in the world in which the body in charge of drafting the new Constitution was composed of an almost equal number of men and women. More broadly, the pursuit of gender equality around the world in the last two decades has in many places combined with a wider legal recognition of the customary or religious law of minority and Indigenous groups – and this combination has generated more pluralist participation benefitting both (majority) women and (minority) men (Rubio-Marín and Kymlicka, 2018). Even though Europeans have been at the forefront of some of these reforms, they can learn from others to look beyond the adoption of gender quotas in national legislatures, to other ways to promote women’s role as decision-makers and to the global re-interpretation of non-discrimination principles, and to different ways to engineer genuinely inclusive participation (Desai, 2015).

### *Lessons in Countering Democratic Backsliding and Repression*

In a second category of imported influence, European civil society actors and their external supporters could also garner useful lessons from their counterparts beyond Europe when it comes to the slippery slope of democratic regression, from ways of countering widespread corruption and state capture to abuse of the more egregious kind. In many countries, civic activists and civil society organizations have for several years been grappling with the challenge of countering more draconian repression and the current authoritarian surge. Often, these actors are more advanced than their European counterparts in thinking through novel tactics to mitigate government attacks on civil liberties and have more experience in remoulding their activities to protect against intense repression. Their experiences could help European civil society organizations better resist the kinds of civil



rights restrictions that constitute a prominent part of EU member states' democracy deficiencies.

From Brazil to Lebanon, the development of participatory democracy has allowed for greater agency of activists and local communities in combating corruption and building proxies for failed state institutions (Geha, 2021). Across the Middle East, social entrepreneurship is a distinctive form of civic organization that has allied political rights to economic and social concerns and in a form that avoids more politicized NGO activism. Before the war, *ProZorra* in Ukraine enabled citizens to monitor corruption in the awarding of public procurement contracts and ensure more local community access to state funding. In Kenya, a civic Flour Movement has similarly approached the democracy issue through the prism of advocacy over the right to basic foods.

Protest movements in other countries have increasingly linked together social and political issues in a way that broadens their appeal. Particularly impressive examples include Iran's Green movement, Tunisia's Hasebhom movement and the Hirak movement in Algeria. Korean protests in 2016 and 2017 linked presidential corruption to wider changes in the country's economic model. In some Latin American countries, the extension of Indigenous political rights has gone hand in hand with protection of their local economies and environment from new oil and mining exploration and privatization. There are lessons here for European civil society and the way activists frame democratic goals and also for public authorities in terms of linking political and socio-economic reforms in a single agenda beyond constitutional debates.

Activists elsewhere have track records of finding ways to maintain protest activities by circumventing government constrictions; as many EU governments narrow the freedom of assembly, these experiences could be highly instructive domestically. Ukraine's Euromaidan protests offer lessons in how activists can make the move from protests into self-help volunteerism and then into politics. Mass mobilization in Belarus has occurred on and off for over a decade and found creative and artistically oriented ways of continuing in the most constrictive of circumstances. In an effort to curb ethnic and religious polarization in Syria, many community initiatives got different factions working together on local governance issues even in the midst of conflict. In Tunisia, co-operative style mutualist initiatives have emerged at a local level around issues of corruption and governmental democratic backtracking. In Turkey, many civil initiatives have found informal ways of campaigning without formally registering as civil society organizations. Protestors in Ethiopia, Uganda's Black Monday movement and informal groups led by mothers in Zimbabwe have all adopted new repertoires of tactical action.

Following on from the pioneering practices by Hong Kong's student movements, the rise of digital activism across Southeast Asia in the past half-decade has featured a new generation of protesters connected in online collectives like the grassroots MilkTea Alliance (Lee, 2021). Leveraging social media through their intimate knowledge of digital tools to protest authoritarianism, democratic groups in Hong Kong and Thailand have found fluid organizational forms and tactics in the face of severe oppression. They have also perfected ways to resist the prohibition of privacy protections, using virtual private networks to access the internet and avoiding facial recognition technology – practices likely to become increasingly relevant in Europe too. In the last decade, hundreds of similar examples could be cited from around the world of different kinds of democratic activism prospering under difficult conditions by shifting shape and moving well beyond

European-style civil society organizational templates, often to great effect (Youngs, 2019).

### *Regional Mechanisms for Democracy Support*

Finally, a third category relevant to reversing the gaze has to do with the role and modes of influence of transnational actors. Arguably here too, even though overall the EU has the most highly developed set of democracy-related policy instruments, other regional mechanisms have in some cases and in some senses performed better. They offer a select number of experiences that could help the EU improve its own lagging record in defending democratic norms within Europe. Some writers have argued that a vitally important fillip to global democracy would come from more mutual engagement between regional organizations (Lenz, 2021).

To start with, several non-Western international institutions, especially regional bodies, have novel mechanisms for suspending states that breach the democratic criteria of membership and have more elaborate democratic clauses than those of the EU (Closa, 2017). The African Union and the Commonwealth of Nations have permanent bodies that scrutinize potential breaches of their respective democratic standards. Members of the Organization of American States (OAS) can be sanctioned over democratic infringements if such a motion gains the support of two-thirds of its members. The 1998 Ushuaia Protocol requires Mercosur's members to uphold democratic norms.

Moreover, and in contrast to the EU's failure to confront backsliding governments like those in Hungary and Poland, many of these regional bodies have suspended membership rights when member states flout democratic norms. In reaction to a 2009 coup, the OAS suspended Honduras's membership. Mercosur suspended Venezuela for defying democratic norms from 2017. Paraguay has also been suspended from Mercosur, Cuba from the OAS, Madagascar from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Libya and Syria from the Arab League. The Economic Community of West African States has imposed severe economic and trade sanctions on Mali, as well as less strict punishments for Burkina Faso and Guinea, in response to coup attempts over the past 2 years. Even if such measures are not necessarily effective, it would surely be instructive to look at how other organizations' processes have allowed for such steps to be taken when the EU seems to be unable to take decisive action in response to democratic recession.

Some of these regional organizations have also found better ways at including civil society influences than the EU has been either able or willing to do. The Economic Community of West African States uses multistakeholder fact-finding missions as well as mediation, facilitation, negotiation and reconciliation efforts. SADC has institutionalized national committees that include civil society actors; these committees give input on the formulation of the bloc's regional policies. Meanwhile, various regional organizations in Latin America have crafted wider consultative networks of societal actors than the ones customarily included in EU decision-making. Mercosur, for example, has a consultative forum composed of representatives from the various subnational levels of government in its member states, such as municipalities, provinces and departments – an arrangement that casts a much wider net than the EU's corresponding Committee of the Regions. For its part, the Andean Community has a consultative forum for representatives from the

municipalities of its member states and a forum for Indigenous people in these countries, offering better minority representation than the EU has provided in most areas.

We do not claim to have exhausted the relevant universe of cases across these three different categories – our aim instead is to suggest what could be a fruitful research agenda. Crucially, none of the examples given should be read as idealizing other countries' experiences and innovations. Attempts to deepen and improve democracy exhibit shortcomings everywhere; levels of democracy remain higher on aggregate in Europe than elsewhere in the world. Rather, the point here is that many state and non-state actors at multiple levels from cities to national and regional authorities outside Europe have a wealth of experience in defending and fine-tuning different kinds of democratic practices. They have often experimented in different ways to address many of the problems that increasingly afflict European democracies. Even if these non-Western experiences may not have found fully worked-out, successful solutions, the attempts surely merit close attention and more of a willingness on the EU's part to 'import' best practice and promising innovations from alternative takes on democratic forms and activism within and across national borders.

#### IV. Can the EU Import Democratic Experiences?

We are interested in the policy measures that could prompt the EU to incorporate such experiences from around the world. How might the 'import' of such lessons, ideas and innovations be reflected in practical EU policy initiatives? What possibilities exist for the general conceptual call for mutuality to be given concrete policy form? Some in the EU have begun to express interest in two-way mutual learning on democracy across the divide between Western and non-Western powers and between traditional donors and recipients (Carothers and Brown, 2021; Sadiki and Saleh, 2022). A small number of policy initiatives at the global level are moving in this direction inspired in part by the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 16 for the 'promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies'. The Open Government Partnership has established a network in Europe to bring those with global experiences in governance reform together with EU decision-makers. The Community of Democracies has overseen many initiatives that involve both Western and non-Western representatives in training and discussions about shared democratic challenges.

However, this emergent spirit of 'shared' reform agendas has in general not yet translated into significant change in the way that concrete EU democracy policies are designed. Beyond their lip service to mutual learning, the EU institutions and member states in practice have done little to give it tangible substance. If one difficulty is the EU's ideational tendency to see its own experiences as superior in democratic quality, another problem is more prosaic: Institutional decision-making is not set up to allow for the import of democratic influences in the same tangible form as external democracy support, nor for that matter the kind of regulatory processes described elsewhere in this Special Issue.

The EU has a complex array of different institutional actors involved in democracy issues, but it contains no decision-making apparatus for receiving external feedback from other countries in this realm. EU delegations do not report on best practices and democratic innovations in other countries and there is no mechanism for these to feed into

the union's decision-making processes on internal democracy considerations. To be sure, the EU has created several forums and initiatives for local voices from other countries to give feedback on its external democracy policies; most funded projects now follow proposals coming from these actors themselves (European Commission, 2017). Yet it is striking that these changes do not involve mechanisms for other countries to exercise equivalent influence over Europe's own democratic malaise – the direction of democracy support remains one-way.

The many European organizations involved in external democracy support do not have remit that cover internal democratic challenges. This is true of formal EU institutions, national governments and democracy foundations. There is widespread reticence amongst practitioners about mixing the internal and external aspects of democracy policy (Interviews 1 and 2). Many government donors, foundations and EU policy-makers fear that engaging in sensitive internal political issues would divert attention from their long-standing external democracy support. They also insist that acute authoritarian challenges outside the West are not comparable with the more nuanced set of problems facing European democracies (Interviews 3 and 4). There are a small number of democracy foundations that work on both internal and external democracy challenges. The German party foundations or *Stiftungen* are the main case in point. However, even when they have this joint mandate, their programming hardly ever involves drawing on external lessons to inform internal European reform efforts.

The internal and external elements of European democracy policy still mostly function as two separate worlds. The EU's internal funding profile has remained quite distinctive from that of its external democracy support. The European Commission for many years supported civil society organizations under the Europe for Citizens initiative and the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme. Under the EU's 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework, these programmes have been fused into a new Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme, which has a budget of 1.6 billion euros. Those involved in the programming for this fund have had no link to those responsible for support channelled to democracy actors elsewhere in the world. The policy-makers in charge of the CERV Programme recognize that this initiative has not drawn from the lessons of EU funding for external democracy support (Interview 5).

Twenty years of lessons from supporting democracy externally in these ways have so far found little resonance within EU internal democracy policies. A truly reversed democratic gaze would entail the EU, its member states and other European governments, as well as democracy foundations, funding many more initiatives that join European and non-European democratic reformers together. This kind of joint internal–external focus could become the norm and advanced as standard best practice in democracy support. In order to foster mutual learning, the EU's international democracy-related activities could more readily include domestic actors, and the union's domestic rights and values activities could more routinely include international actors.

A key question is whether any kind of EU-targeted influence is possible beyond such mutual-learning exercises. Support for more projects bringing together internal and external democratic voices would be valuable but still a soft form of two-way influence. European democratic reformers could incorporate lessons and experiences from their counterparts outside Europe and learn new tactics, but this would not entail any sensitive political engagement or pressure in relation to democratic quality. A step beyond soft mutual

learning would be for third countries to fund democracy programmes inside Europe that increase pressure on non-reforming governments. Korean funds have explored some work on populism in Europe, but such external funding is generally conspicuous by its absence within European states.

Another step beyond mutual learning would be for other countries to place democracy-related conditions on their partnerships with the EU in the same way the EU does with them. This would appear unlikely, once again revealing the imbalance between inward and outward democratic influences. Would Japan, Korea, Taiwan or Australia really suspend co-operation and strategic dialogue with the EU over the latter's failure to address authoritarian abuses in Poland and Hungary? It is at this political level that the spirit of mutuality and evening out of inward- and outward-bound influences is likely to remain limited and devoid of substance.

A more indirect way of generating outside pressure to help democracy within Europe would be for the EU to establish a commission made up of non-EU activists, leading democratic reformers and experts to prepare regular monitoring reports on European democracy. The EU could also invite democracy figures from outside Europe to help mediate where sharp differences are weakening European democratic processes. The EU operates Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders to help protect democratic activists around the world from assault and legal cases; some of the activists that have benefitted from EU protection could be charged with drawing on their experiences in a plan of action to begin applying these guidelines to protect rights activists *within* EU member states too.

For a body that protests its multilateral credentials, the EU could also do more to draw from the United Nations (UN) in the field of democracy support. It could support processes that would push it towards learning from other regional or global multilateral institutions by encouraging an exchange of best practices on democracy under the aegis of the UN. The EU could seek to use existing multilateral bodies to fashion an inclusive space for mutual monitoring in terms of democracy support.

The US-led Summit for Democracy process might be harnessed for two-way mutuality. President Biden convened a first summit in December 2021, with a second set for March 2023. Over 100 leaders attended and made a series of reform commitments to improve their own countries' democratic quality. At present, it is unclear what follow-through there will be to these commitments and who will decide what measures are taken if governments fail to implement their promises. Rather than have the United States make decisions unilaterally about the future of this process – such as who to invite to the next summit – an alternative would be for a civil society body made up of representatives from across different regions to exert primary influence. Similarly, non-Western democratic figures could hold monitoring leverage over the state of democracy in Europe through their involvement in follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Finally, we can only speculate on the possible effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on these prospects. On one hand, the war has put more policy focus on democracies defending themselves and has given rise to much talk about intensified competition between democracies and autocracies as the key cleavage in international relations. The priority for now seems to be co-ordination amongst democracies for the more geopolitical purpose of pushing back against Russian and Chinese influence rather than for a decentred and self-reflexive democracy agenda such as the one we are discussing here. However, although the exigencies of war are understandable for the moment, the lesson



that Ukrainians' democratic resistance is giving to the rest of Europe surely makes the spirit of mutuality in democratic renewal far more germane. Most tellingly perhaps, the reluctance of much of the Global South to follow the West in its sanctions and diplomatic approach speaks to a deeper critique of unilateralism that might be assuaged in part by more genuine attempts at reversing the gaze.

## Conclusions

Correcting the EU's asymmetric one-way approach to democracy might help restore the ambition of democratic empowerment both within and beyond Europe. In order to do so, and in light of its Eurocentric way of viewing the world, the EU needs to go through a process of unlearning. Moreover, notwithstanding hopes for the EU's future, for now the union remains a hugely technocratic machinery and bureaucracy misaligned with the highly, politically sensitive concerns it needs to handle. Perhaps this is precisely where its core challenge lies.

Reversing the gaze can be part of the EU's geopolitical narrative. Being more open to experiences and ideas from outside Europe could help revive the EU's whole democracy agenda and turn this into a conversation with the rest of the world rather than a lecture. Indeed, such a conversation could be further theorized as a game of infinite mirrors as others further incorporate the EU's perceptions of them into their own political practices. In the terms of the Special Issue's analytical framework, it is necessary to reflect not only on *de jure* influences over the EU but also on discursive and 'productive influences' beyond formal structures of EU agreements with third countries.

Democratic innovations and experiences from elsewhere in the world are far from perfect and suffer multiple problems. The fact that other, non-Western democracies are going through their own crises is not a reason for the EU not to learn from them. To the contrary, for the EU to be more open to importing democratic influences would entail taking on board democracy strategies that have both worked and failed. Ultimately, these practices need to reflect this fundamental truth: The right to self-sovereignty and autonomy are pursued equally by all citizens of every country around the world, and such aspiration can only be combined with the requisites of interdependence under the sign of mutuality. Considering current political trends in the EU, this should be more abundantly clear than it appears to be within policy circles: It is surprising that we should be surprised that democratic experiences elsewhere may be relevant for Europe.

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- Interview 1: Representative of a European Democracy Foundation, June 2021
- Interview 2: Representative of a Semocracy Funding Organization, June 2021
- Interview 3: Representative of European Commission, May 2021
- Interview 4: Representative of European External Action Service, May 2021
- Interview 5: Representative of EUJUST (running CERV programming), April 2021