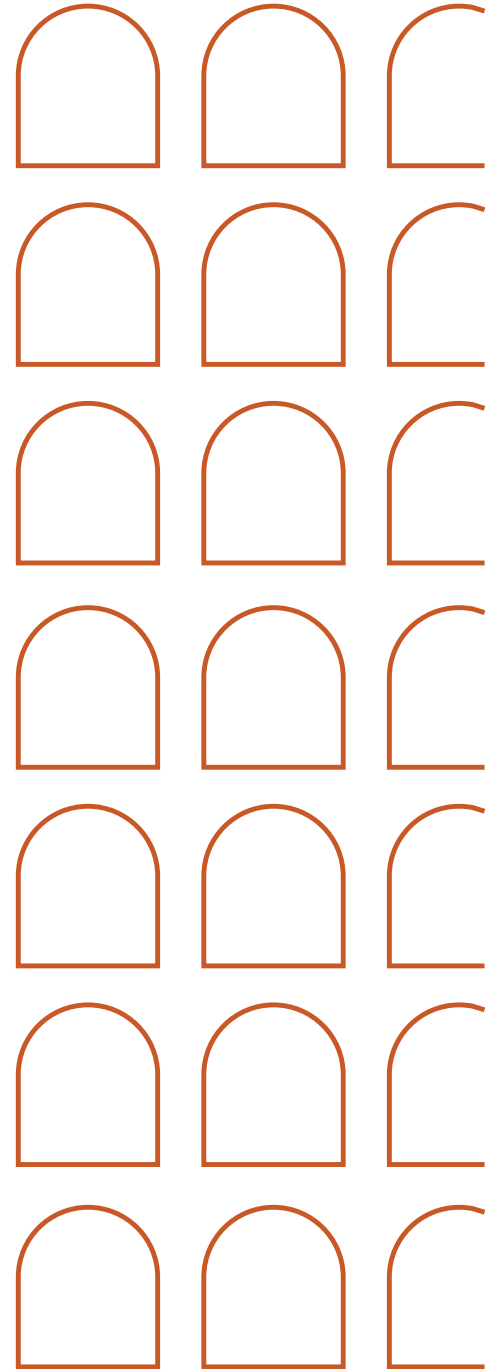


STG Policy Papers

POLICY ANALYSIS

**IS DEMOCRACY BECOMING A
FACTOR IN THE EU'S SECURITY?
THE EVOLUTION OF EU POLICIES
AND DISCOURSES RESULTING
FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The founding aspiration of European integration was to provide peace. Over the decades, commitment to democracy has become a feature of the EU, enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon among its core values. At the same time, security, particularly after the failure of the European Defence Community in 1954, has remained outside the core of European integration. These two policy streams, democracy and security, have remained separated from each other for decades.

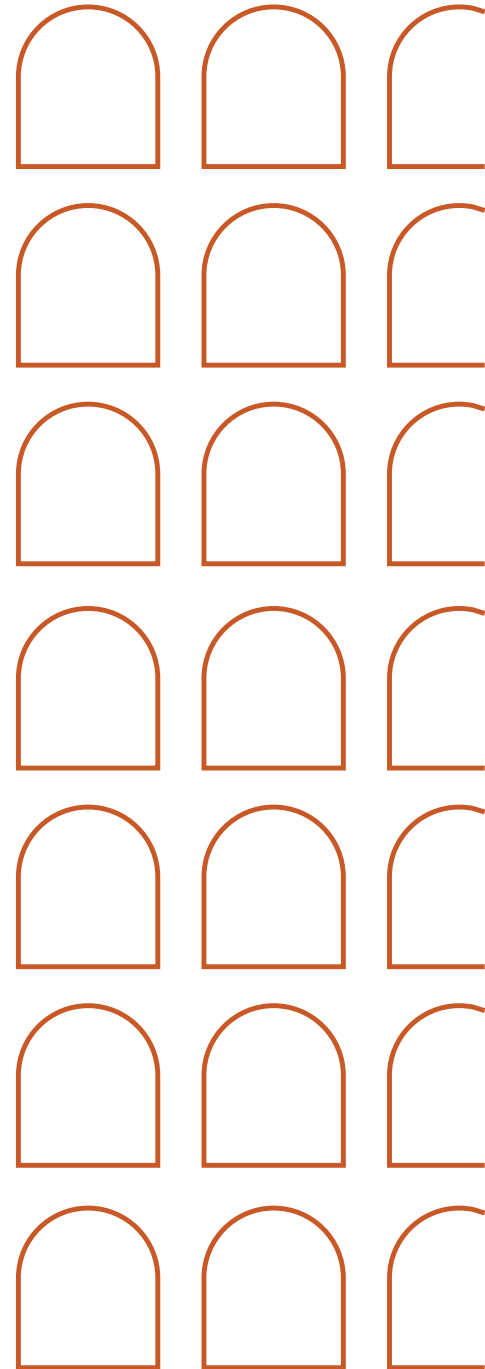
The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought a shift in EU discourses and policies, highlighting the prospect, if supported by further political commitments and actions, for democracy to become a factor in European security and a guiding pillar of EU policies.

This policy analysis presents and discusses the evolving discourses and policies of the EU with regard to democracy, focusing on the impact the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had on this process.

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Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute



INTRODUCTION

Robert Schuman's [founding European idea](#) of 1950, which had political, security and economic dimensions, has evolved over the decades. At its start, following the failure of the [European Defence Community](#) in 1954, European integration's pathways of democracy and security parted ways for many decades to come. The attack on Ukraine reminds us, however, that post-1945 European security was founded on democratic principles. The war brings with it an opportunity for democracy and security to come together in the core of European integration and shape its future developments.

Given the ongoing discussion concerning the repercussions of the war in Ukraine—often referred to as “a watershed moment”¹ or the “beginning of a new era”²—on European Union policies, this policy analysis aims to contribute to the debate on EU democracy and security policies. As both external and internal challenges to democracy are affecting the European Union simultaneously, a research gap has opened; at its core is how the European Union, while facing these two internal and external issues at the same time, could defend its values and democratic principles and provide lasting security for the continent.

The analysis triggers then a core question: How has the war in Ukraine impacted discourses and policies concerning the place of democracy as a security factor of the European Union and its member states? To respond to this question, the analysis discusses and reviews EU democracy and security through discourses and policies gathered in three major areas as case

studies: EU periodic strategies and policies, EU democracy and rule of law, EU foreign and security policy.

The analysis compares democracy and security-related discourses and policies of the European Union before and after 24 February 2022. It was conducted through a review of publicly available European Union policies on democracy and security as well as discourses (e.g. publicly available transcripts of statements, speeches) of leaders of the main EU institutions (e.g. European Council, European Commission, European Parliament). Accordingly, it divides EU discourses and policies into three areas, focusing on the most relevant from the perspective of democracy and security: strategies and policies periodically adopted by executive branches of the European Union; EU policies covering democracy and rule of law; and EU policies addressing the area of foreign and security issues. The analysis was enriched through information obtained in the course of interviews conducted with EU analysts and researchers.

This analysis does not include a literature review, instead focusing on examining the European Union's reaction to the outbreak of the war through the discourses of its leaders and relevant policies.

Part 1 outlines the gradual development of European integration in the fields of democracy and security, highlighting their accelerated path as of the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon and throughout the 2010s. Part 2 provides an analysis of EU discourses and policies in the years preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Part 3 provides an overview of discourses of the main EU stakeholders in reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Part 4

1 Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union address, 14 September 2022.

2 Extraordinary plenary session of the European Parliament, 1 March 2022.

details and analyses discourses and policies adopted after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, including those initiated as a direct result of 24 February events. Part 5 gathers findings acquired in Parts 2 to 4 and assesses the evolution of policies and discourses concerning the role of democracy within the security realm following the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Part 6 provides conclusions and recommendations with regard to strengthening the role of democracy and establishing it as a European security factor.

While the analysis outlines the broad context of the European integration process since its foundation in 1950, it covers the discourses and policies undertaken since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009.

1. PART 1. DEVELOPMENT OF EU DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY POLICIES SINCE THE LAUNCH OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

The European integration process at its origin remained focused on economic matters, notably with the [1957 Treaty of Rome](#) establishing the European Economic Community. It was the [Single European Act](#) adopted in 1986 that included the first references to non-economic matters, including democracy. The Act committed the member states to “work together to promote democracy on the basis of the fundamental rights” and aimed to increasingly “display the principles of democracy and compliance with the law and with the human rights”.

Fifteen years later, the Treaty of Lisbon provided a set of values guiding the European Union. The preamble of [the Treaty on European Union \(TEU\)](#) refers to universal values of “the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law”. Article 2 of the Treaty sets the foundations on which the EU is founded as “values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities”. Building on the origins of European integration, the Treaty states accordingly that the EU’s aim is to “promote peace and its values”. With relation to democracy, Article 10 specifies that “the functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy”.

While the Treaty outlines the EU’s values broadly, democracy has a rather narrow, election-focused, description, indicating that the functioning of the EU is founded on representative democracy while European citizens automatically enjoy political rights. Accordingly, the Treaty envisages that EU external action will be guided by the same values that founded the Union itself, including democracy and the rule of law.

The Lisbon Treaty introduced [the Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), first established in 2001, as a binding source of European Union law. In its preamble, the document refers to common values as a foundation for “a peaceful future”. As indicated by [Dawson and de Witte \(2022\)](#), the Charter made a distinction between judicially enforceable rights and principles to be elaborated in EU policies. Democracy was listed in the Charter among the latter.³ Within the

³ In the infringement procedure initiated by the European Commission against Poland for violation of EU law with regard to the law on the State Committee for the Examination of Russian influence on the internal security of Poland between 2007 and 2022 (so-called Lex Tusk) that entered into force on 31 May 2023, the EC indicated that the law violates the principle of democracy included in Articles 2 and 10 of TEU qualifying them as directly enforceable rights. At later stages, the matter could be submitted by the EC for judgement to the Court of Justice.

definition of democracy, the document established, however, some democracy-related rights, such as to vote and stand in the European elections, to petition the European Parliament and to have a fair and public hearing before the independent and impartial EU bodies.

In 1993, the EU adopted [the Copenhagen Criteria](#), the conditions that EU candidate countries must meet before joining the European Union. Among the three conditions, one was political and referred directly to democracy, indicating that a candidate country must prove the “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities”. The Treaty of Lisbon adopted in 2007 indicated that a country wishing to join the European Union needs to conform with the EU values as set in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union.

The European integration process was launched with the Schuman Declaration as an attempt to establish peace in Europe, this effort was therefore coupled with the intention to set up a European security and defence framework. In 1952, the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community was signed in Paris by the six countries that were involved in the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community. Rejected, however, by the French parliament in 1954, the Defence Community failed. The Western European Union, founded later as an attempt to fill this gap, played a marginal role over the years and was first incorporated into the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and then transformed further following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty.

After decades of stagnation, a major breakthrough came with the Treaty of

Lisbon, which introduced the position of [High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy \(HR/VP\)](#) tasked with implementation of EU common foreign and security policy. Article 24 of TEU set a perspective for EU security, indicating that “all questions relating to the Union's security, including the progressive framing of a common defence policy that might lead to a common defence”. Importantly, the Lisbon Treaty introduced the mutual defence clause, [Article 42.7](#), which obliged the EU countries to support a fellow member state by “all means in their power” in the case of armed aggression on its territory.

The Treaty also established a possibility for EU member states to engage, on a voluntary basis, in [Permanent Structured Cooperation \(PESCO\)](#) in the area of security and defence. However, in the years following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, EU member states lacked a sense of urgency with regard to EU security and defence to the extent that European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, in 2017, called PESCO “[a Sleeping Beauty of the Lisbon Treaty](#)”.

A couple of years later, a consecutive chain of events—the election of Donald Trump, Brexit and the first Ukraine invasion by Russia in 2014—triggered several EU security initiatives. In 2016, the EU published a Global Strategy calling for greater levels of defence coordination so that member states could unite and “act autonomously if and when necessary” to promote “peace and security within and beyond” Europe’s borders. The UK’s exit from the EU unblocked PESCO and the June 2017 European Council [agreed](#) “on the need to launch an inclusive and ambitious Permanent Structured Cooperation” to strengthen Europe’s security and defence.

This declaration was confirmed on 11 December 2017, when the Council formally established PESCO with 25 member states participating. The 2018 [Meseberg Declaration](#) announced by France and Germany envisaged the creation of other security formats, such as the EU Security Council.

However, despite an acceleration in the field of EU security policies resulting from the 2014 Russian invasion, one of the major obstacles for the development of a new EU security approach, as identified by [Koenig \(2022\)](#)—divergent threat perceptions among the EU member states—remained largely unchanged.

These two features of the European Union—democracy and security within its borders—were recognised in 2012 with the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel Committee [stated](#) that the EU “contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe”. The Nobel Committee emphasised that “the successful struggle for peace and reconciliation and for democracy and human rights” remains the European Union’s most important result, having transformed most of Europe “from a continent of war to a continent of peace”. The Nobel Peace Prize has pointed out the interdependence of peace and democracy as a constitutive factor for the European Union, highlighting the extent to which democracy has played a role for the security of its member states.

However, the role of democracy and, in a broader sense, the European values in the functioning of the EU, is a matter of political and academic debate. As indicated by [Joseph Weiler \(2002\)](#), the European debate over this matter divided into a functionalist project-oriented approach focusing on specific tasks to be delivered by the EU, and into an approach in which the European

Union is a process-oriented community of values, an endeavour of a dimension going beyond projects and policies alone. Since the 1990s, the European Union has been making attempts to respond to what its critics have been calling a ‘democratic deficit’. As noted by [Dawson and de Witte \(2022\)](#), several policies have been implemented, such as an enhanced role for national parliaments, the creation of citizens’ initiatives, tying the European Parliament elections to the appointment of the President of the European Commission and, most recently, the establishment of the Conference of the Future of Europe.

2. PART 2. EUROPEAN UNION DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY-RELATED STRATEGIES AND POLICIES ADOPTED BEFORE 24 FEBRUARY 2022

2.1 EU periodic strategies and policies

At the beginning of the current term of European institutions, the European Council adopted its strategic document, ‘[A New Strategic Agenda for the EU 2019-2024](#)’. In the introductory part, the document mentioned the rule of law as a guarantor to protect European common values, which constitute “the foundation of European freedom, security and prosperity”. It also highlighted that European institutions are to respect the principles of democracy and rule of law, as well as tasking them to promote democracy and human rights on the global stage. Despite these declarative statements, none of the actions assigned to the agenda’s four pillars explicitly addresses democracy; it is absent in the action covering freedoms and internal security as well as in the action covering Europe’s interests and values externally. The task of promoting democracy indicated by the ‘Strategic Agenda’ refers to EU external policies only.

The European Commission's priorities are inspired by agendas approved by the European Council. The current Commission's agenda was approved when Ursula von der Leyen outlined six priorities for the European Commission for the term to come in '[A Union that Strives for More. My Agenda for Europe](#)'.

Von der Leyen's agenda, contrary to the European Council's agenda, included a priority focused on democracy matters, called 'A new push for European democracy'. It was broadly defined to cover: the integrity of elections, democratic participation, media freedom and pluralism, external interference, disinformation, online hate speech, strengthening of the legislative process. While the EC president spoke to the European Parliament plenary session in November 2019 she promised "[a fresh start](#)" for the EU. She was, however, not very vocal on democracy; she mentioned democracy 5 times, much less than, for example, climate (11 times) and digitalisation (13 times). President von der Leyen devoted a short paragraph to the rule of law—in the context of authoritarian rule in Hungary and Poland—urging that it "can never be compromised" and mentioning the EC's focus on dialogue and prevention in this field.

While the EC president mentioned cybersecurity as one of the issues her Commission would tackle, interestingly, she covered it in part of her speech in which she discussed policies related to digitalisation, not to democracy.

In her last, pre-war State of the Union [speech](#) in September 2021, President von der Leyen did not substantially cover democracy, although she referred to the post-World War II origins of the EU in which democracy and common values played a unifying role. She referred, too, to the post-1989 transition of former members of the

Soviet block to democracy, flagging the importance of the rule of law, media freedom, and fighting against corruption. She announced the EC's flagship Media Freedom Act to protect freedom of the press against authoritarian rulers.

The EC's 'A new push for European democracy' priority, while broad, has had the reputation of being less prominent among the other five areas. Accordingly, at the mid-term of the Commission in 2022, assessment showed that the democracy-related priority had delivered the fewest number of policy proposals, [55 compared to 504 in total](#) across all priorities (Stratulat, 2022). The general public's perception of the European Commission in this area has been largely shaped by its indecisive approach to the deepening authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland.

2.2 EU democracy and the rule of law

Despite democracy not being a substantial focus of the EU priorities' sets mentioned above, the European Commission in its [2020 Work Plan](#) envisaged presenting the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP). Its intention was to protect and strengthen EU democratic values and principles, as well as to address the issue of foreign interference in democratic processes. The Plan covered various aspects of the functioning of democracy covering three main pillars, including promotion of free and fair election, strengthening media freedom and pluralism as well as countering disinformation. The juncture of democracy and security was included in the EDAP in one context only, with regard to the cybersecurity of elections.

The EC's performance on the issues related to democracy has long been perceived (Stratulat 2022) in the context of '[a political Commission](#)' concept, an approach once defined by Jean-Claude Juncker, and

continued by his successor, who labelled her team as “a geopolitical Commission”. Juncker’s concept was seen as an attempt to add democratic legitimacy to the European Commission ([Russack, 2019](#)), as opposed to the reputation of previous EU executive powers, largely perceived as technocratic. The key element of the Juncker approach was to design the Commission as sensitive and responsive to political developments happening in the EU. However, the attempt to gain increased political legitimacy for the Commission had the side-effect of making it a less active player in its role of guardian of the EU treaties and values. This in turn led the EC to take a zigzag approach to deepening the rule of law problem in Hungary and Poland. R. Daniel Kelemen and Tommaso Pavone (2021) [indicated](#) that the Juncker Commission had been initiating an increasingly lower number of infringement procedures for violations of EU law by its member states, in which rule of law cases had its prominent place. The indecisive approach of the European Commission led to escalation in October 2019 when the European Parliament initiated a lawsuit at the European Court of Justice against the Commission for its inaction in implementing the EU funds’ conditionality mechanism related to countries breaching EU rule of law standards.

Ursula von der Leyen’s ‘My agenda for Europe’ announced the upcoming organisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), another attempt to democratize the Union in a participatory manner. The [final report of CoFoE](#) was the result of two years of work, the substantial part of which was conducted before the 24 February invasion. Topics such as ‘European democracy’, ‘Values and rights, rule of law, security’ as well as ‘EU in the World’ (covering EU external policy) were included in the CoFoE agenda.

Various CoFoE proposals included in the final 49 did not associate democracy with European security and peace. Instead, as in many previous EU strategies and policies, different aspects of democratic life—e.g. media freedom, participatory mechanisms—were discussed, bringing up policy proposals for them while not explicitly defining the central role of democracy in the European architecture. These proposals often referred to the Nobel Peace Prize received by the European Union in 2012 for contributing to European peace and security but somehow missed indicating the essential role that democracy had played in this process.

As only a minor portion of CoFoE work happened after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it did not substantially influence the content of the final proposal. However, a change of tone in the political discourse could have been noted, particularly in Ursula von der Leyen’s speech during the [CoFoE closing event](#) of 9 May 2022. Referring to the war in Ukraine, she mentioned “democracy, peace, individual and economic freedom” as principles of Europe at the time when the war reached its borders. The EC president made a bridge between the war ravaging Ukraine and European democracy: she addressed President V. Zelenskyy thus, “the future of our democracy is also the future of your democracy.” Similarly, the President of France Emmanuel Macron, during the same event, linked the critical security situation with democratic principles saying, “we realise all the more from the heroic combat of our Ukrainian friends, how precarious democracy and freedom is. So we have to rebuild these through new commitments.”

The rule of law, one of the key European Union values, has been continuously violated in recent years by two member states, Hungary and Poland (until late 2023). Both countries have already been covered

by a procedure under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union in response to “a clear risk” of a serious breach by an EU member state of the values referred to in the Treaty’s Article 2. In December 2020, the [Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation](#) was adopted by the EU institutions, linking EU funds to respect for the rule of law principles by the member states, envisaging financial sanctions for breaching them. This decision was preceded by the publication of the [Communication](#) of the EU institutions ‘Strengthening the rule of law within the Union. A blueprint for action’, in which the Commission emphasized the importance of the rule of law for democracy.

However, the conditionality Regulation’s scope was narrowed in the course of negotiations and eventually covered only EU law breaches that “affect or seriously risk affecting the sound financial management of the Union budget or the protection of the financial interests of the Union in a sufficiently direct way”. Based on the Regulation, as indicated by [Theuns](#) (2023), to breach the Regulation, a member state needs not only to systematically undermine democracy and the rule of law, but these practices must directly implicate EU finances.

The tools introduced by the EC in ‘Strengthening the rule of law within the Union’ included an annual Rule of Law Report, a preventive measure designed to facilitate rule of law monitoring in the member states, and would provide synthesis of significant developments in the Member States and at EU level. There were two Reports published before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, in [2020](#) and [2021](#). While the last pre-war 2021 Report was strongly focused on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, it made it clear, too, that the rule of law constituted part of the overall EU effort to “promote and defend its founding values”—democracy

and fundamental rights—mentioning EDAP and the Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 as available EU tools in this context.

In 2020, the European Commission published the [‘Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU’](#), a document that aimed to incorporate the Charter into EU policymaking, building on a similar document adopted in 2010. The European Commission’s intention was to complement the EDAP and the first Rule of Law Report published in 2020 to jointly demonstrate the EC’s holistic approach to promoting and protecting EU fundamental values, both internally and externally. The Strategy turned out to be the most vocal on democracy within its second strand, which covered civil society organisations, calling their role ‘vital’ for a healthy democracy and discussing the challenges they face in member states, such as difficult access to funding or abusive lawsuits.

The [2021 pre-war Annual Report](#) on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights focused on the impact of the digital transition on democratic discourse. It also flagged populism and an increasingly polarised political debate as factors undermining democracy in the European Union. In this area, the Report made a bridge between democracy and security, pointing out polarisation as a factor that has multiple negative consequences.

2.3 EU foreign and security policy

In 2016, the European Union published [‘A Global Strategy for the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union’](#) (EUGS), a strategic framework guiding the EU’s foreign and security policy, which replaced the 2003 ‘European Security Strategy’. The document was published two years after the 2014 Russian attack on Ukraine while it also

had a particular internal EU context; EUGS was adopted just a few days after the Brexit referendum that put EU cohesion in question. Speaking about the EU's place in the world a few months before the publication, HR/VP Federica Mogherini [emphasised](#) that "the world has become more dangerous, divided and disorienting... more connected but also more contested; more integrated but also more fragmented".

The opening part of EUGS listed democracy, along with peace, security, prosperity and rules-based global order as being vital interests of EU citizens. The EUGS put an emphasis on promoting Europe's interests and values in the face of mounting external and internal challenges, making a lofty declaration referring to European democracy "living up to our values will determine our external credibility and influence".

It is the first of EUGS five priorities, the Security of our Union, that discusses democracy and envisages fostering resilience to "live up to the values that have inspired its creation and development". The EUGS firmly stated that "the EU Global Strategy starts at home" pointing out that the strength of the European Union depends on its internal performance, including within the field of democracy (referring, among other things, to the illiberal surge in Hungary and Poland). In the context of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014, the Strategy recognised that Europe's peace and stability "are no longer a given" and sought to combine values and interests through the notion of "principled pragmatism."

However, the 2016 Strategy was scaled down with regard to the area of democracy externally compared to its predecessor, which preached in 2003 that "the best protection for our security is a world of well-

governed democratic states". The EUGS put an emphasis on reducing the fragility of states (e.g. Egypt) in the EU neighbourhood rather than on advocating the democratisation of their regimes.

The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014 accelerated the cooperation between the EU and NATO. It was showcased during the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, where the EU leaders and the NATO Secretary General signed the [first Joint Declaration](#). The document stated that it served to provide "new substance and new impetus to the NATO-EU strategic partnership" and to respond to the unprecedented challenges faced by both organisations. The Declaration did not cover the area of democracy, although both entities could have been well entitled to do so. In the NATO case, the Washington Treaty [states](#) that its members are "determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." The document did contain, however, some technical elements that may be seen as relevant from the perspective of democracy, such as countering hybrid threats and enhancing cyber defence by both partners. The areas of EU-NATO cooperation outlined in the 2016 Declaration were later developed through the adoption of [42 measures](#) that detailed how NATO and the EU work together.

The 2016 Declaration was followed by [another adopted in 2018](#), which confirmed "the essential nature of continued cooperation" of both organisations. The document emphasised that both organisations are based on the same values. It also recalled their cooperation in the fields that are relevant from the point of view of democracy, such as countering hybrid threats, enhancing cyber defence cooperation and fighting disinformation.

3. PART 3. DISCOURSE OF EU LEADERS AND INSTITUTIONS IN REACTION TO THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE, 24 FEBRUARY 2022

The Russian invasion of Ukraine of 24 February 2022 profoundly shook Europeans and European institutions. Already in the morning on the same day, President Ursula von der Leyen and HR/VP Josep Borrell, delivered [media statements](#) during a joint press conference. President von der Leyen declared that President Putin would not be allowed “to replace the rule of law by the rule of force and ruthlessness”, expressing her belief in the resolve and strength of European democracies. HR/VP Borrell’s statement, while delivered in tough language and calling the EU “the strongest group of nations in the world” did not refer to democracy and other values of the European Union.

On the same day in the evening, a special meeting of the European Council took place in Brussels. Its president, Charles Michel, [proclaimed](#) that Europe had entered “a different world” following the Russian invasion. He also emphasised that the rules-based order “has been shaken”, undermining peace, security, and stability. President Michel did not mention democracy in his post-meeting remarks, focusing instead on the undermining of the international order. President von der Leyen, who spoke too after the European Council meeting, called the Russian invasion “a watershed moment for Europe” and “a beginning of a new era” that fundamentally “puts into question our peace order”.

In turn, it was the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, who [introduced](#) a narrative strongly oriented towards democracy. She directly qualified the invasion as a threat to democracy itself, saying that the war constitutes “a path that pits authoritarianism against democracy”.

Metsola emphasised that freedom and democracy constitute the foundation of the European way of life.

On 1 March 2022, during the extraordinary session of the European Parliament, President Metsola [linked](#) EU values with those defended in Ukraine: “we will not look away when those fighting in the streets for our values face down Putin’s massive war machine”. During the session, President von der Leyen [made](#) a link, too, between the Ukrainian struggle and the future of Europe: “the destiny of Ukraine is at stake, but our own fate also lies in the balance”. The EC president continued echoing Metsola’s words expressed on the day of the invasion: “this is a clash between the rule of law and the rule of the gun; between democracies and autocracies; between a rules-based order and a world of naked aggression”. Proclaiming that “we must show the power that lies in our democracies” the EC president reiterated measures taken against Russia by the EU.

4. PART 4. EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIES AND POLICIES ADOPTED AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

4.1 Periodic EU strategies and policies

Delivering the 2022 State of the Union address on 8 September 2022, Ursula von der Leyen made a [speech](#) strongly oriented in favour of democracy. The EC president mentioned democracy 21 times in her speech (compared to 5 in her maiden speech in 2019), calling on the European Union member states to “to deepen our ties and strengthen democracies on our continent”. She called the Russian invasion of Ukraine a war waged “on our values” and qualified the war as an assault of “autocracy against democracy”. The EC president referred in her delivery to the foundations of

the European integration process based on the “promise of democracy and rule of law”.

The EC president also addressed internal threats to democracy, denouncing “autocracy’s Trojan horses” attacking European democracies from within. She announced the initiation of work on a Defence of Democracy package (DoD) directed at addressing foreign interference in the EU’s democratic processes. She ended her appeal for democracy calling for a combative approach of European societies: “we must fight for our democracies”.

A couple of weeks later, the European Commission presented its [2023 Work Programme](#) (WP). The 2023 WP followed the EC president’s narrative, making a clear link between the war in Ukraine and EU democracy, stating that 2023 would be not only about the future of Ukraine, but about the EU’s “freedom, democracy fundamental rights and the rule of law”. The WP went even further making an explicit connection between European security and the upholding of EU democratic values and institutions.

The 2023 WP envisaged continuing the implementation of the EDAP, including the presentation by the EC of the European Media Freedom Act to protect the media from authoritarian interference. Within the EDAP, the WP indicated that a Defence of Democracy package announced by President von der Leyen would be made public in 2023, putting an emphasis on the promotion of free and fair elections, media freedom, pluralism and fighting disinformation.

The Defence of Democracy package was finally [adopted](#) by the European Commission in December 2023. The package built on the strong democratic rhetoric used Ursula von der Leyen during

the 2022 State of the Union address. Recognising that the Russian attack has constituted “a war on democracy and EU values”, it emphasised the EU’s increasing acknowledgement of the need to proactively safeguard democracy, including the rule of law and fundamental rights.

While the DoD attracted attention mostly for its Directive on interest representation by third countries, it included two accompanying Recommendations, on electoral resilience and promoting citizen engagement in policymaking. It is in these parts where democracy and security are linked to each other in the reference to the deliberate manipulation of the information environment by foreign countries, which “constitute a security threat to EU democracies.”

Compared to the strong focus on democracy in her 2022 State of the Union address, Ursula von der Leyen’s [2023 annual address](#) brought very little reference to democracy. While the EC president made several references to the historic legacy of European integration, which provided peace to the continent, she devoted her speech to showcasing the achievements of her EC term mostly in the field of economics. The EC president spoke extensively about EU enlargement in the coming years, placing it as ‘a catalyst’ for democracy in the candidate countries. She proposed to include those countries in the annual Rule of Law Reports to further encourage democratic reforms. This element can be considered the only tangible element related to democracy in her speech.

In line with this cautious approach, the European Commission’s [2024 Work Plan](#) also offered little content on democracy, apart from the commitment to “defend and promote democracy, human rights, the rule of law and effective multilateralism”.

4.2 EU democracy and the rule of law

The [2022 Rule of Law Report](#) was published a couple of months after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, on 13 July, and turned out to be strongly influenced by the invasion. The accents of the Report shift from discussing challenges to the rule of law brought about by the pandemic to highlighting in broad terms the dangers of the Russian invasion for the EU in the fields of European security, stability, democracy, and the rule of law. The document pointed out explicitly that the war emphasised the importance of democracy and also mentioned threats to democracy coming from ‘foreign actors’ using disinformation and cyberattacks. The Report made a direct reference to EU values defined by the Treaty of Lisbon, such as democracy and the rule of law. The Report clearly stated that its aim was not to cover only the area of the rule of law but to contribute to upholding democratic values within the EU and beyond.

On 5 July 2023, the [most recent](#) edition of the Rule of Law Report was made public. The document opens by referring to the war in Ukraine, qualifying it as a reminder that the EU values of democracy and fundamental rights “can never be taken for granted”. It called accordingly for defending and upholding democracy proactively, calling it “a vital priority”. The Report indicated that the EU work on the rule of law gained “even greater focus” following the invasion of Ukraine.

4.3 EU foreign and security policy

The first major EU security-related policy launched after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was ‘A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence’, [approved](#) by the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council on 21 March 2022. While the Compass was a result of a two-year long preparation process, the outbreak of the war in February 2022

necessitated the last-minute revisions of the document.

The Compass has constituted the most concrete [roadmap](#) for the EU as a security provider (Koenig, 2022), referring also to the EU democratic principles calling for the European Union to become “a strong political actor to uphold the values and principles underpinning our democracies”. Accordingly, mentioning that democratic values are being targeted worldwide, the Compass defined a challenge facing democracies as “a competition of governance systems accompanied by a real battle of narratives.” The outbreak of the war contributed to a sharpening of the Compass’s language concerning Russia, detailing the threat to the European community coming from Russia as active interference, “through hybrid tactics, compromising the stability of countries and their democratic processes.” In the context of the emerging hybrid threats, the Compass called to protect “our democracies and EU and national electoral processes.”

The Strategic Compass provided a number of clear references to democracy and its values in the EU security context, distinguishing the document from 2016 EUGS, which had been much more vague on this matter. However, as flagged by Koenig (2022), a major challenge to the Compass implementation in the years to come would be that the gradual nature of changes in the EU would not be able to match the scale and speed of a shift in the EU security environment.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine further enhanced the cooperation between the EU and NATO. On 10 January 2023, both organisations announced a [third Joint Declaration](#) expressing determination to “tackle common challenges”. The document pointed out the shared values

linking both organisations, highlighting for the first time, compared to previous Declarations, that democracy was being challenged by authoritarian actors. In response to that, the Declaration envisaged engaging the political, economic or military instruments at the disposal of both organisations. Importantly, it is not only values that the European Union and NATO share, 23 of the 27 EU member states are already NATO members.

The NATO Vilnius Summit held in July 2023 reconfirmed the bond between the EU and NATO. In its [Communiqué](#), the EU was called “a unique and essential partner for NATO”. It was emphasised, too, that both organisations’ strategic partnership is based on “shared values”. The statement recalled that NATO’s values are those of “individual liberty, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law” and that the organisation is committed to “safeguard our freedom and democracy”. Interestingly, with regard to the future NATO membership of Ukraine, it stated that the organisation would review and support Ukrainian reforms not only in security, but also in relation to democracy. Democratic values, the rule of law, domestic reforms and good neighbourly relations were areas listed as ‘vital’ to Euro-Atlantic integration.

While not reflected in the above mentioned documents, NATO conducts a discussion concerning the importance of democracy for the security of its member states, with the leading role of NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly (PA). In 2019 the former NATO PA President Gerald E. Connolly [proposed](#) establishing the NATO Democratic Resilience Centre, which would serve as a focal point, a resource and a centre of expertise and information on best practices, and cross-fertilisation on threats to democracy and democratic benchmarks. The proposal has been formally endorsed by the NATO PA. Accordingly, during the

2023 NATO Vilnius summit, the member states agreed on a set of ‘[Alliance Resilience Objectives](#)’ pointing out that resilience is “vital in our efforts to safeguard our shared values”. The formal establishment of the Democratic Resilience Centre has been however blocked by some of NATO member states.

The NATO Strategic Concept, which was [adopted](#) in July 2022, emphasised that NATO member states are “bound together by common values: individual liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law” and pledge to reinforce “our shared democratic values”.

5. PART 5. ASSESSMENT OF THE EVOLUTION OF POLICIES AND DISCOURSES CONCERNING THE ROLE OF DEMOCRACY WITHIN THE SECURITY REALM FOLLOWING THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE: CONCLUSIONS

The research conducted within this analysis has confirmed the gradual progress and evolutionary character of the development of European Union democracy and security policies since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, which listed democracy among the core European values and defined the EU as “an area of freedom, security and justice”. It has unveiled, too, an ongoing shift in European discourses and policies toward an increased perception of democracy as an element of EU security as a result of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The research has indicated accordingly how the place of democracy has been evolving as a security factor in the policies of NATO and EU-NATO cooperation.

In the years following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, the policies and discourses related to democracy gained traction, mostly in the context of EU external action in line with the provisions of the TEU, which indicated that EU external action will be

guided by a set of values, including democracy and the rule of law. This focus on the external area has, however, been in contrast with the minor attention that democracy received in EU internal policies. Jean-Claude Juncker's Commission did not significantly cover democracy-related issues during his term (with the exception of the rule of law crisis in Poland and Hungary), focusing mostly on enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the European institutions' actions.

Juncker's successor, Ursula von der Leyen, expanded the internal EU democracy agenda, even though the European Council's priorities for 2019-2024 remained silent on this area. The EC president devoted one of the priorities of her presidency to democracy and proposed a number of legislative proposals throughout her term, such as the EDAP or EMFA, which were to respond to the authoritarian threats to democracy the EU has been facing externally and internally. However, democracy remained far from being the biggest part of the van der Leyen Commission's agenda; issues such as climate or digitisation covered much more space, both in the EC president's discourses and in the number of presented legislative proposals.

The research confirmed that until 24 February 2022, democracy was not associated with European security in EU discourses and policies. There was, however, the one notable exception of the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which linked the impact of the democratic performance of the EU internally with the quality of its actions in external relations. Some of the pre-war discourses and policies linked cybersecurity to democracy in the context of foreign interference, attacks on electoral infrastructure or disinformation. Interestingly however, cybersecurity has usually been covered in relation to

digitisation policies, rather than to democracy. Also, some of the EU policies provided links between security and climate or between security and gender equality while being silent on the intersection between democracy and security.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine provided a major impulse for European stakeholders to address the relation of security threats to EU democracy. In their first wave of reactions, it was the president of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola who linked democracy directly to EU security, proclaiming that the war constituted "a path that pits authoritarianism against democracy". It was also the EC president who associated the Russian attack with an assault on European values, not on Ukrainian territory alone.

The change in rhetoric was strengthened in the 2022 State of the Union address, when the EC president delivered a resolute speech qualifying the Russian invasion as an attack on European values and found it an assault of "autocracy against democracy". The EC president went further, denouncing "autocracy's Trojan horses" within the EU, which had been attacking democracy, and announced a Defence of Democracy package to address foreign interference in the EU's democratic processes. This rhetoric was matched by the EC 2023 Work Programme, which made a direct reference to the relationship between European security and the upholding of EU democratic values and institutions. The WP's actions related to the field of democracy have been covering both external and internal dimensions of challenges faced by EU democracy. Deepening the realization of the EDAP, the European Commission aimed at increasing the resilience of European democracies from within; with a Defence of Democracy Package, it intended to defend democracy from outside influences. Accordingly, the

annual Rule of Law Reports published in 2022 and 2023 provided a much strengthened language and linked the war in Ukraine to the protection of EU democracy.

Politics seems to continue to burden the EU approach to democracy. While in her 2022 annual address Ursula von der Leyen covered democracy substantially and its intersection with security, in the pre-electoral year of 2023, the EC president remained silent on the matter. This was followed by Victor Orban bargaining with the EU in the context of Ukraine funding, which led to the release of EU funds to Hungary despite the ongoing Article 7 procedure.

The reluctance to cover democracy in the 2023 State of the Union address may have been well related to pre-electoral calculations. Ahead of the 2024 European election, Ursula von der Leyen likely chose to emphasise the achievements of her term in the field of economics, following the spirit of a 'Europe that delivers', once promoted by Jean-Claude Juncker to display the EU's "concrete and tangible results for its citizens". The EC president's approach might also have been related to the Polish election scheduled in October 2023, and in particular, to avoiding the instrumentalization of her words by the propaganda machine of the government controlled by the authoritarian Law and Justice party.

Within the tightened cooperation between the EU and NATO that followed the outbreak of the war, democracy found its place in the joint narrative of both organisations. The 2023 NATO-EU Declaration went beyond military technicalities alone and discussed shared values linking both organisations, mentioning democracy as the target of authoritarian actors. NATO, too, embarked

on discussing the intersection of democracy and security, considering the establishment of the Democratic Resilience Centre, an effort led by its Parliamentary Assembly. The 2022 EU Strategic Compass identified Russia as a major threat to European security, but also to EU democracy targeted by Russia with the use of hybrid methods.

The increasing policy convergence between the EU and NATO has been matched by similarities in discourses of the EU and US leaders. Presidents von der Leyen's and Metsola's anti-authoritarian rhetoric used after 22 February might have been inspired by similar words of US President Biden during his [2022 State of the Union](#) speech, delivered just days after the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such transatlantic inspirations could also have been spotted in similarities between both partners' democracy-oriented policy proposals. The European Media Freedom Act and the Defence of Democracy package bear similarities to the US Presidential [Initiative for Democratic Renewal](#) (in areas of work such as Supporting Free and Independent Media as well as Defending Free and Fair Elections and Political Processes) announced during the first Summit for Democracy in 2021 convened by Biden.

Beyond politics, the EU has not provided a clear scope of how it defines democracy. Throughout the EU policies reviewed in three areas, both external and internal, democracy has usually been referred to among other EU values listed in the Treaty of Lisbon, being mentioned in a multitude of contexts, in relation to various EU values and priorities. However, democracy itself has not been coherently defined. This leaves the impression that the efforts EU institutions put into reinvigorating the democracy agenda in the security context are incoherent, lack political leadership and are influenced by democratically dubious

politics in some of the EU member states, and their eventual effects will be difficult to grasp.

6. PART 6. HOW TO FULLY EMBED DEMOCRACY AS A EUROPEAN SECURITY FACTOR: RECOMMENDATIONS

The change to European discourses and policies within the areas of democracy and security that has emerged in the two years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely to continue. However, it needs to be supported by further political commitments to provide a lasting change through which democracy would become an irremovable factor of European security. In that way, democracy and security—two strands of European integration—, which were separated when the European Defence Community failed in 1954, could then together shape the future decades of EU integration.

The war in Ukraine provides then a chance for democracy, if strengthened in EU treaties and policies, to become a guiding pillar of the European Union for its external and internal security.

Some recommended tools to make this happen are as follows:

1. **Democracy needs to be defined in a clear way.** This coherent definition needs to be used across EU policies, both external and internal. The definition ought to be included in any upcoming EU Treaty revision and the link between democracy and security needs to be explicitly highlighted.
2. **The democracy agenda needs to be expanded within the European Union's political dialogue with NATO.** EU-US cooperation in this field needs to be strengthened,

through the establishment of a dedicated body focusing on democracy and values similar to the EU-US Trade and Technology Council.

3. **Future enlargement processes of the EU need to be redesigned** in such a way to avoid new states abandoning democratic values and fundamental rights after having joined the Union.
4. **Defence of democracy needs to be included and linked to European external and internal security** in the European Council's priorities for upcoming terms of EU institutions.
5. **Budgets of the democracy-focused EU granting schemes** that directly reach civil society in member states, such as Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, need to be increased and should prioritise security aspects within the Programme.

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