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Forum: Global Perspectives on Democracy Support in Light of the Wars in Gaza and Ukraine

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Abstract: This forum critically reflects on the democracy support agenda and its future in light of the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, the decline of Western political and normative dominance, and overall global democratic backsliding. Posing four topical questions to five leading scholars in the field—from Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia—it finds that these wars appear systemic in the sense that they sharpen already existing crises in world order. They have evidenced a structural weakness in the international liberal order (ILO): the West's selective adherence to and application of key principles of this order, effectively undermining Western credibility, influence, and its capacity to maintain the ILO and to promote democracy globally. They have also intensified practices of competitive norms promotion at the global level, with Russian norms promotion in particular scoring some successes in South America, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. This is taking place to the backdrop of multipolarity, which has led to greater strategic autonomy for states outside of the West, including in their responses to democracy promotion attempts. Taken together, these phenomena have allowed autocratic tendencies to gain strength globally, from the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia to Europe and the Americas. At the same time, democracy

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is also becoming more locally and regionally driven and diverse and might thus possibly become more resilient. In this new world in the making, Western democracy supporters will need to become mindful of the historical legacies of colonialism, their own internal problems with democracy, and stark normative inconsistencies of their policies—if the agenda should be kept. They will need to respect the unique historical and cultural contexts that have shaped democracies around the world and become more humble, inclusive, and dialogic with non-Western democratic middle powers such as South Africa and Brazil.

Resumen: Este foro reflexiona de manera crítica sobre la agenda de apoyo a la democracia y su futuro a la luz de las guerras en Gaza y Ucrania, el declive del dominio político y normativo occidental y el retroceso democrático global en general. Se plantean cuatro preguntas de actualidad a cinco destacados académicos en el campo (de Europa del Este, América Latina, Oriente Medio, el Norte de África y el Sudeste Asiático) y se concluye que estas guerras parecen sistémicas en el sentido de que agudizan crisis ya existentes en el orden mundial. Estas han puesto de manifiesto una debilidad estructural del orden liberal internacional (OLI). Nos referimos a la adhesión selectiva por parte de Occidente a los principios clave de este orden y su aplicación, debilitando de manera efectiva la credibilidad y la influencia de Occidente, así como su capacidad para mantener el OLI y promover la democracia a nivel mundial. También han intensificado las prácticas de promoción de normas competitivas a nivel global. En particular, cabe destacar que la promoción de normas rusas ha logrado algunos éxitos en América del Sur, el Norte de África y el sudeste asiático. Esto ocurre en el contexto de la multipolaridad, el cual ha creado una mayor autonomía estratégica para los Estados fuera de Occidente, incluso en sus respuestas a los intentos de promoción de la democracia. En conjunto, estos fenómenos han permitido que las tendencias autocráticas ganen fuerza a nivel global, desde el Mediterráneo hasta el Sudeste Asiático, Europa y las Américas. Al mismo tiempo, la democracia también está cada vez más impulsada a nivel local y regional y es cada vez más diversa y, por lo tanto, resulta más posible que se vuelva más resiliente. En este nuevo mundo en formación, los partidarios de la democracia occidental tendrán que tomar conciencia de los legados históricos del colonialismo, de sus propios problemas internos con la democracia y de las marcadas inconsistencias normativas de sus políticas, si es que quieren mantener la agenda. También, Tendrán que respetar los contextos históricos y culturales únicos que han dado forma a las democracias de todo el mundo y volverse más humildes, inclusivos y dialogantes con las potencias medias democráticas no occidentales, como Sudáfrica y Brasil.

Résumé: Ce forum propose une réflexion critique sur le programme de soutien à la démocratie et son avenir à la lumière des guerres à Gaza et en Ukraine, du déclin de la domination politique et normative de l'Occident, et de la régression démocratique au niveau mondial. En posant cinq questions topiques à cinq éminents chercheurs du domaine (issus d'Europe de l'Est, d'Amérique latine, du Moyen-Orient, d'Afrique du Nord et d'Asie du Sud-Est), il conclut que ces guerres seraient systémiques au sens où elles accentuent des crises préexistantes de l'ordre mondial. Elles ont mis en évidence une faiblesse structurelle dans l'ordre libéral international (OLI) : le respect et l'application sélectifs de principes clés de cet ordre par l'Occident, qui nuisent de fait à sa propre crédibilité, son influence et sa capacité à maintenir l'OLI et promouvoir la démocratie à l'échelle mondiale. Elles ont également accentué des pratiques de promotion de normes concurrentes au niveau mondial, la promotion de normes de la Russie ayant notamment rencontré quelques succès en Amérique du Sud, en Afrique du Nord et en Asie du Sud-Est. Comme ces évènements interviennent sur fond de multipolarité, les États qui n'appartiennent pas à

l'Occident s'autonomisent sur le plan stratégique, notamment dans leur réponse aux tentatives de promotion de la démocratie. Pris ensemble, ces phénomènes ont permis un renforcement des tendances autocratiques au niveau mondial, des Amériques à l'Asie du Sud-Est, en passant par la Méditerranée et l'Europe. Dans le même temps, la démocratie procède de plus en plus du niveau local et régional, se diversifie, et donc pourrait devenir plus résiliente. Dans ce nouveau monde en herbe, les défenseurs de la démocratie occidentale devront se montrer attentifs aux héritages historiques du colonialisme, à leurs propres problèmes démocratiques et aux incohérences normatives saillantes de leurs politiques—si l'on conserve le même programme. Ils devront respecter les contextes historiques et culturels uniques qui ont façonné les démocraties du monde entier et se montrer plus humbles, inclusifs et ouverts au dialogue avec les puissances intermédiaires démocratiques non occidentales comme l'Afrique du Sud et le Brésil.

Keywords: policy relevant, democracy promotion, world order, North–South relations, Ukraine war, Gaza war, democracy support

Palabras clave: relevante para las políticas, apoyo a la democracia, promoción de la democracia, orden mundial, relaciones Norte-Sur, guerra de Ucrania, guerra de Gaza

Mots clés: pertinent sur le plan politique, soutien à la démocratie, promotion démocratique, ordre mondial, relations Nord-Sud, guerre en Ukraine, guerre à Gaza

Democracy Support and Global Order in View of the Wars in Gaza and Ukraine: An Introduction to the Forum

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Introduction

That world order is in profound crisis is evident in the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. The fierce debate and negotiations in global and regional fora over these wars are having an impact on how we think about the transforming world order more generally. Central to such debates—implicitly or explicitly—is the place that furthering democracy and human rights should occupy.

In International Relations (IR), this debate has been ongoing for some time now. For liberals, democracy and human rights policies remain important, even though a more nuanced and less aggressive approach is needed: after all, they contend, only democracy and human rights, respect for international law, free trade, and multilateralism—the key components of the so-called "international liberal order" (ILO)—can bring long-term peace and prosperity globally (Mazarr 2018). Realists, in contrast, maintain that in an emerging multipolar world order the promotion of democracy must take the backseat. In fact, the ILO "was doomed to

collapse, because the key policies on which it rested [including spreading liberal democracy around the globe] are deeply flawed" as they tend to create resentment (Mearsheimer 2019). In turn, proponents of Global IR would like to see more democratic equality at the international level while emphasizing cultural diversity (including in terms of systems of government) within an emerging multiplex world order (Acharya 2017). They also tend to see the selectivity with which democracy support is deployed as inevitably and fatally undermining the agenda's credibility.

Each set of arguments has been put to the test by the two wars in which the political choices of liberal-democratic and autocratic states are being scrutinized. The wars have also put the spotlight on the "Global South" and its growing normative role in shaping a transforming world order dominated by increasing competition (Ikenberry 2024).[1]

The current moment thus seems opportune to discuss, from a global perspective, the future of the democracy support agenda, up until now driven mainly by Western states. This is even more urgent as democracy is increasingly fragile in many countries across all continents, both in long-standing and more recent democracies. There is relatively wide agreement that democratic backsliding at the global level is currently in its second decade and shows no signs of abating (Diamond 2021; Wiebrecht et al. 2023), even though the exact nature of this backsliding is contested (Ding and Slater 2021). The reasons for the fragility of democracy are multiple (Waldner and Lust 2018), but clear manifestations include a rise of disenchantment and a sense of disenfranchisement which is instrumentalized by populists (Huber and Pisciotta 2022). Democracy is also contested by other models. Russia represents a trinity of nationalism, conservatism, and patriarchy (quite different from the Soviet political ideology with its anticolonial and antiglobal capitalist emphasis outside the USSR) and as such supports far-right and other antisystemic/populist political parties, groupings, and outlets outside its borders, including in Europe and the United States. China poses a different challenge to liberal democracy as a purported global value. Its model's emphasis on economic development has many supporters who are irked by what they see as the West's overemphasis on one set of (liberal) human rights norms over another, which includes socio-economic rights. The picture is further complicated by the growing awareness that democracy and human rights have multiple global roots, historiographies, and understandings. Actors outside of the West are (re)claiming ownership of the democratic idea and practice (Chou and Beausoleil 2015; Kamel 2024), as part of a broader movement of decolonization.

Focalizing the Debate from Multiple Perspectives

What role, then, does and should democracy support play—if any—in such a transforming world order marked by democratic decline? Since the heydays of the ILO, democracy promotion/support has typically been defined as activities by external actors with the stated aim to encourage the development of liberal democracy in a third country. It usually comprises democracy assistance/democracy aid, positive and negative conditionalities, and public pronouncements in support of democratic actors and aims in third countries (Khakee 2022). Should this agenda be maintained and perhaps strengthened? Or rather abandoned? Some of the academic literature indeed increasingly defines democracy support no longer in a unilateral manner, but as an "open-ended, two-way, and dynamic play of norms and values that feed into . . . a potential 'democratic didactic loop'" (Sadiki and Sahel 2021), or as mainly defensive (hence the shift in terminology from "democracy promotion" to

[1]We would like to note that the terminology West/East, Global South/Global North employed in our forum is somewhat essentializing, as it neither reflects today's migration societies, nor important diverse historical trajectories within such geographical denominations. However, all authors also move beyond and unpack such dichotomies: indeed that is a main aim of the forum.

"democracy support" and even "democracy protection." But can such changes rescue the agenda?

To delve deeper into this problematique, this forum brings together five leading scholars in the field, from Eastern Europe, South America, the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. The intention, however, has been to bring together various perspectives, not cases. Thus, although the major world regions are represented, some authors have found it particularly useful to examine in greater detail countries that are experiencing an episode of autocratization after some years of democratization (Tunisia, Turkey). Other contributors see noteworthy patterns across their respective regions. Our conversation aims to enrich the IR debate sketched out above with a view from beyond US/European academia which has traditionally dominated the democracy promotion scholarship. The contributors reflect on four broad questions, bringing scholarship—including from/on the respective region—to bear on their analysis:

1) With democratic backsliding in the West and alternative models and norms promoted by China, Russia, and other emerging powers, are we witnessing a return to practices of competitive—and selective—norms promotion at the global level? What is the role of democracy support in the wider competition between the global powers, or in a multiplex world? And what does it mean for political systems globally?
2) Taking the debate on the transformation of world order into account, which role can/should democracy support play in such an order, if any?
3) At the same time as democracies are increasingly fragile, mass demonstrations in favor of democracy also take place. Given this, can democracy support become more responsive to needs and concerns in other parts of the world (i.e., beyond the West, Russia, and China)?
4) Alternatively, are thinkers outside of the liberal family right to argue that the wiser option is to concede that global security requires acceptance of global multiculturality, also in terms of political systems and hence abandon the entire agenda?

The Transformation of World Order and "Systemic Wars"

At the outset we were, as noted, particularly intrigued by how the answers to these questions may be evolving in relation to the profound crises in world order, as acutely revealed with the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. Both could be seen as "systemic wars," not in the sense that they happen between great powers (Midlarsky 1990) (even though in both cases great powers are directly or indirectly involved), but rather in that they are a result of the crisis in world order as much as they are further rupturing it, possibly hastening its transformation. The war in Ukraine has accentuated competition between a reconfigured "West" and "East," with countries in the Global South urged to take sides (Haque and Lau 2024). Reactions in various parts of the "Global South" have evidenced that they do not want a repetition of the Cold War when they were forced to take sides and where bipolar rivalries played out violently on their territories. Democracy is also taking a center stage in this conflict, rhetorically, ideologically, and strategically (see, e.g., Snyder 2022). A common reaction in Europe and the United States to the war in Ukraine has been to see it as evidence of the dangers of authoritarianism to international peace and security. The concomitant conclusion has been that "fighting authoritarianism by increasing democracy-support efforts should be a strategic priority" (Youngs and Godfrey 2022).

It also increasingly appeared that the "Western moment" in the world is waning, a tendency which has been further reinforced with the war in Gaza as the legitimacy of the ILO has been gravely undermined by a West that is increasingly seen

as ignoring or even actively violating international law (Robbins et al. 2024). States in the Global South are affirming their own normative agency. As the United Nations Security Council has been blocked from action by the US veto, South Africa has instituted—with broad support from a large majority of states in the Global South (but notably from neither the EU, China, nor Russia)—proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice concerning Israel's violation of the Genocide Convention in Gaza (ICJ 2024). However, it is not only or primarily states that have insisted on respect for and promotion of basic human rights and the laws of war. Rather, transnational civil society networks and global institutions have led the charge.

It thus seemed to be an important moment to reflect on the democracy support agenda, its past, where it stands at present, and where it might be headed. And it seemed crucial to do so from a global perspective, examining an agenda that has been appropriated and fashioned by the West from perspectives emanating from outside the West.

Overall Findings

Our findings can be summarized as follows: the West's selective adherence to and application of key principles of the ILO effectively undermines Western credibility, influence, and its capacity to maintain that order and to promote democracy globally. The two wars have also intensified practices of competitive norms promotion at the global level, with Russian norms promotion in particular scoring some successes in South America, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. This is taking place to the backdrop of multipolarity, which has led to greater strategic autonomy for states outside the West, including in their responses to democracy promotion attempts. Taken together, these phenomena have allowed autocratic tendencies to gain strength globally, from the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia to Europe and the Americas. At the same time, democracy is also becoming more locally and regionally driven and diverse and might thus possibly become more resilient.

In more detail, the authors in this forum find that these wars do not fundamentally change their analysis of democracy promotion. Instead, the wars substantially reinforce patterns that had emerged already before. Thus, what appears in virtually all contributions as the single most problematic issue—effectively undermining both the West's credibility, standing, and influence in the world and its capacity to maintain a normative order and support democracy—is the West's inconsistent adherence to and application of principles of this order. As noted by one of the contributors, "the West cannot critique how democracy is merely rhetorical" outside of the West "when Western democracy promotion itself is also largely rhetorical" (Moch Faisal Karim in this forum). Particularly seen from the Arab World and South America—both regions having experienced Western support of autocratic regimes combined with inconsistent support for democracy movements, Western-driven regime change, and/or Western (tacit or overt) support for coups, as well as Western violations of international law—this hypocrisy is perceived as a form of Western supremacy, or imperialism in disguise, echoing colonial encounters (cf. also Khakee 2022b). The West's divergent response to the wars in Gaza and Ukraine has now become an exemplar of sorts, clearly epitomizing this problematique. Thus, this hypocrisy appears as a *structural* weakness of the West and the normative order it has built and promoted outside its borders.

This weakness, in turn, has been systematically used by autocratizing regimes—for example, in Turkey and in Southeast Asia—to bolster their own power and it has been aptly exploited by Russia, including through social media. Indeed, Russia—not China—appears as the main active antagonist to the West in virtually all forum contributions. In Southeast Asia, for example, "Russia, despite its economic challenges, has emerged as a symbol of nationalism, providing a counterpoint to the

liberal democratic order and resonating with popular opinion" (Moch Faisal Karim in this forum). China, in contrast, features mainly as a socio-economic alternative more than a player in this "great game," notably in Southeast Asia. This normative competition is greatly aided by the emergence of multipolarity, which offers more strategic autonomy to countries in all regions covered in this forum. Multipolarity has been accompanied by an increase in transactional politics globally, including, as noted by Senem Aydın-Düzgit in this forum on the part of the European Union (not least in its approach to migration).

As a result of these complex developments, many countries have become increasingly less attached to democracy and norm-based cooperation. At the same time, contributors also point to the emergence of a subtler but at the same time more radically transformative phenomenon, as self-organizing orders are emerging below the state centered on sovereign peoplehood, but also above the state on a regional level. In South America a "pink model" has emerged which prioritizes tackling poverty—often of the indigenous and Black population—and re-asserting control of strategic sectors of the economy (Silvia Ferabolli in this forum). In contrast to the transactional contestation of the ILO by autocratic powers, these local and regional phenomena might represent a more fundamental challenge to the ILO precisely as they come with their own "democratic legitimacy." Indeed, democracy might actually strengthen in the sense that it will feature more locality, more hybridity, and more multiplexity. To make the point with a metaphor: a forest full of pine trees (i.e., liberal market democracies) can easily catch fire. A mixed woodland (of liberal market democracies, "pink" poverty-tackling democracies, local community-led democracy, etc.), in contrast, might be more resilient.

Where does this leave the democracy support agenda? Silvia Ferabolli and Elena Korosteleva hope that the decentralized order currently in the making—where diverse systems co-exist—will also be more democratic in the sense that countries are on a more equal footing and different ideas of democracy can co-exist. This is also evident in Youssef Cherif's contribution that argues explicitly for an increased role for Brazil in the international community and in democracy support specifically, given its credibility and standing in the Arab world. The contributor also emphasizes that support should include local civic activism outside the typical "likeness-of-the-West" spectrum and include actors who are prodemocratic but not necessarily pro-Western. Moch Faisal Karim proposes a shift from a prescriptive approach to one that is more inclusive, dialogic, and respectful of different democratic trajectories, and unique historical and cultural contexts. Senem Aydın-Düzgit too echoes this, arguing for an approach that prioritizes the local level, makes civil society and media resilient against autocratic onslaughts, and strengthens local capacities to govern. This ties in with the argument of Elena Korosteleva that human agency "driven by the visions and vernacular understandings. . . of "the good life," for and by the people" should be central to future thinking about how democracy should be nurtured. Finally, Silvia Ferabolli points out that more democracy should also flow through the "international society" and be thought of from a perspective of tackling racialized poverty. Heeding this type of criticism and this range of suggestions will take considerable courage for "traditional" democracy supporters. It will mean looking inwards (at their own fragile democracies), and then outwards, first at their historic legacies, then at their foreign policies more broadly, and finally at their democracy support policies. For possible new democracy supporters, such as Brazil or South Africa, it would likewise mean looking inwards (at similar fragilities in terms of democracy) and formulating a democracy support policy that fits their historical experience, their normative outlook, as well as their relationship with other countries in the Global South, thus constituting another counterpoint in a more pluriversal and multiplex world. Looking beyond state-led policies in such a world requires communities globally to recapture democracy and democratic meanings,

in the same way that manifold popular movements and colonial liberation movements rallied around the concepts of participation and rights and were instrumental in the spread of democracy globally over the past century and a half.

Southeast Asia's Silent Stance: Democratic Backsliding, the Russo–Ukrainian War, and the Decline of Democracy Promotion Agenda

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Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia underscored and intensified preexisting global tensions, further complicating the global agenda of democratic support. The effects are even sharper in the Global South, where the articulation of democratic agendas has become even more problematic due to shifting geopolitical dynamics (Alden 2023; Nkuna 2023). The ongoing war has not only exacerbated the competition between Western and non-Western factions, but it has also drawn attention to the waning influence of the West, namely in its inconsistent adherence to principles of human rights and the rights of self (Acharya 2022; Haque and Lau 2023). A stark example of this inconsistency is the Western response to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which stands in sharp contrast to its approach to human rights in other situations, such as the Russo–Ukrainian war (MacFarquhar 2023). These inconsistencies have led to a rigorous scrutiny of the West's credibility in promoting democratic principles globally. Consequently, the reaction of countries in the Global South to the Russo–Ukrainian war, while not overtly supporting Russia, reflects a growing skepticism toward Western powers. The criticism arises from the notion that the Western nations' involvement in global events is characterized by selectivity and is frequently affected by their strategic interests, particularly in situations where these interests have fewer immediate implications.

In Southeast Asia, the response to the Russo–Ukrainian War, though varied, generally indicates a subtle bias towards Russia. In 2022, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued a statement that refrained from demanding Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine, instead calling for a cessation of hostilities and peace dialogues (Lin and Chong 2023). The individual ASEAN member states have shown diverse responses, ranging from mild concern to silence, and in some cases, like Singapore, explicit condemnation of Russia's aggression (Singarimbun 2022).

This diplomatic approach is paralleled by a trend of democratic backsliding within Southeast Asia. The region has witnessed significant erosions in democratic norms. Some regression has manifested both abruptly, as in Thailand and Myanmar, and more gradually, as observed in the Philippines and Indonesia. The democratic backsliding within the region may be influencing its foreign policy stances, leading to a more cautious or even sympathetic approach toward Russia. Additionally, the region's response to the conflict, juxtaposed with the West's perceived double standards—especially in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—might be contributing to a reevaluation of alliances and global alignments. Southeast Asian countries, facing their own democratic challenges, might find Western rhetoric on democracy and human rights increasingly incongruent with their experiences and perceptions, particularly when contrasted with the West's approach to other international issues.

This analysis aims to dissect the complex interplay between geopolitical strife and Southeast Asia's disillusionment with the liberal world order. By scrutinizing the Southeast Asian experience, I intend to illustrate the relations between the region's tepid response to Russia's blatant transgression against Ukrainian sovereignty—a principle Southeast Asia traditionally upholds—and the observable democratic backsliding within its own borders. This exploration necessitates a deeper understanding of democracy promotion through the prism of the Global South, recognizing that domestic democratic regressions may find their justification in the rise of authoritarian powers exemplified by the ascendancy of strongman politics.

I argue that two interrelated dimensions shape Southeast Asia's response. First, the internalization of democratic norms in the region is not simply an adoption of liberal democratic norms. Rather, it is a selective adaptation process in which liberal democratic norms have been modified to align with Southeast Asia's unique regional identity that emphasizes social cohesion and noninterference. Second, the region's reaction to Russian aggression in Ukraine reflects its own democratic regression and an urge to find a new balance against Western dominance in the global order.

In this context, both Russia and China represent alternatives to the West. Although Russia is economically weaker, it serves more as a symbolic counter toward the liberal international order. This is evident in how Russia has been praised by many in Southeast Asia, where President Putin is admired as a macho and strong leader—qualities deeply respected in the region (Muhammad Kamil and Sudirman 2025). Russia is also perceived as a noble anti-Western power challenging the hegemony of a hypocritical West. On the other hand, China, while also representing a form of authoritarianism that challenges Western hegemony, particularly in economic realms, has its limitations due to its geographical proximity and perceived aggressiveness. This proximity makes China's influence more palpable and at times threatening, unlike Russia's, whose distance allows its geopolitical aggressiveness to be perceived more indirectly. Thus, Russia becomes a safer symbolic alternative for expressing opposition to Western influence in Southeast Asia, whereas China's role is more complex due to its direct impact on the region's political and economic landscape.

Different Paths of Democratic Norm Institutionalization

Democratic identity has been emerging in Southeast Asia since the early 2000s, culminating in the incorporation of democratic principles into the ASEAN Charter in 2007. This development reflects the region's aspiration to align more closely with global democratic norms, which are largely shaped by the Western liberal agenda. The incorporation of these principles might shift the debate about how Southeast Asia incorporates the concept of democracy organically into its regional mechanisms and, hopefully, at the domestic level in each member country. Although countries in Southeast Asia are eager to democratize, this process involves a process of adopting democratic norms and the existing ideals, which may sometimes contrast with Western democratic norms. As a result, democratization in Southeast Asia should be viewed as a process of simultaneously adopting universal democratic principles while also resisting certain Western liberal ideas that may clash with existing norms. However, this resistance should not be seen simply as a rejection of foreign concepts. Instead, it represents a nuanced effort to modify and adapt these ideas to create a democratic framework that better aligns with the region's unique beliefs and traditions.

The phenomenon of democratization in Southeast Asia can be interpreted as a simultaneous adoption of democratic principles and a form of opposition against the Western liberal framework. The resistance found within this particular setting can be viewed as extending beyond a simple refusal of alien concepts. Instead, it

exemplifies a nuanced effort to modify and adjust these notions in order to construct a democratic structure that better corresponds with the region's distinct beliefs and traditions. This strategic approach exemplifies a dedication to positioning Southeast Asia as an equitable participant within the prevailing liberal global order, rather than as a subservient adherent, through the emphasis placed on its distinctive contributions and perspectives.

One of the key contestation sites for Southeast Asia to incorporate democratic norms is its strong presence of a distinct form of regional corporatism that prioritizes consensus and noninterference over more interventionist that are required to promote democratic principles (Rüland 2021). Widely known as the ASEAN Way, this regional corporatism has been perceived by some as an established norm within ASEAN that poses considerable obstacles to the Association's progress toward a more inclusive framework based on Western democratic ideals. ASEAN's inclination to prioritize sovereignty and stability over embracing external democratic models is seen as a foundational principle allowing its democratization process to occur at the regional level. Hence, while the ASEAN Charter entertains the idea of democracy and respect for human rights, ASEAN possesses limited power to address violations of democratic and human rights norms in the region.

Others would suggest that ASEAN's limitations in internalizing Western-style democratic norms stem from the fact that the region's adoption of liberal agendas is primarily motivated by strategic interests (Katsumata 2009; Karim 2023). These strategic considerations aim to create a perception of Southeast Asia as getting more "advanced." The focus of this endeavor is primarily centered on the prestige and status associated with conforming to Western standards of modernity, rather than on the intrinsic merits of democratic principles. This approach allows Southeast Asian countries to gain benefits, especially in terms of their international standing. This logic also underpins Indonesia's democracy promotion agenda. Such logic creates a dualistic approach to Indonesia's democracy promotion agenda. On one hand, it aims to lead in promoting democratic norms in the region. On the other, it grapples with a lack of domestic acceptance of these norms while aspiring to play international roles as a promoter of democracy (Rosyidin and Kusumawardhana 2024). This dilemma often dilutes the impact of Indonesia's democracy promotion agenda.

The above discussion shows clearly that the region's involvement in the global democracy promotion agenda does not necessarily indicate a robust internalization of democratic norms. Southeast Asia's approach to democratization is marked by its pragmatic engagement, strategic calculations, and a desire to reconcile existing nondemocratic values with external norms (Rosyidin 2020). Doing this allows Southeast Asia to redefine that agenda to align with its own conceptions of democracy. For instance, in the case of Indonesia, its own understanding of democracy was framed within its long-lasting notion of *musyawarah mufakat* (consensus) which shaped the way decision-making process at the national and local levels were made and continue to somehow contradict the individual and liberal understanding of democracy. Similarly, Singapore emphasizes meritocracy and racial harmony over electoral competition. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, democracy has been heavily racialized with the incorporation of strong affirmative action to favor the ethnic majority. Arguably, the struggle over democracy in the region may not only be about localizing democratic ideals but also reflect an internal contestation over whether especially the liberal one is even viable for the region. Emulating a democratic promotion agenda, albeit with its own understanding, can sometimes shield the region from Western pressures to conform.

Given this backdrop, Southeast Asia's response to the Russo–Ukrainian War becomes a pivotal illustration of the region's nuanced approach to democracy. Despite

the observable incorporation of democratic principles, Southeast Asia's stance during the war has not uniformly aligned with that of Western democracies, which often frame the conflict as a clear dichotomy between democratic ideals and authoritarian aggression (Storey and Choong 2022). This divergence is telling: it suggests that Southeast Asia's engagement with democracy transcends mere adherence to Western models and involves a critical engagement with the concept itself. Such insights shape Southeast Asia's distinctive approach to international crises, demonstrating that its pragmatic engagement with the global democracy agenda informs its varied responses to such conflicts.

Southeast Asia's Populism and Foreign Policy Shifts

While the democratic ideal has been adapted to meet the needs of Southeast Asia, the region has also experienced democratic backsliding, reflecting an apparent disregard for the democracy promotion agenda. Such backsliding is not an isolated incident but a global phenomenon. To understand such backsliding, it is crucial to closely examine the rise of populism. One might argue that in many countries, this is manifested in the populace's preference for strongman leadership over adherence to democratic accountability processes (Pepinsky 2017). This urge bears significant similarities to the current landscape in Europe, where Russia, under the strongman leadership of Vladimir Putin for decades, is seen as a bastion of nationalism, conservatism, and patriarchy. Consequently, Russia resonates quite well with public opinion in the region (Bukh 2016). Beyond the aspiration for strong leadership, the evolving international environment, as Senem Aydın-Düzgit rightly points out, has increasingly enabled the rise of authoritarianism, particularly with the shift toward a multipolar world since the early twenty-first century. The emergence of a multipolar, post-Western order has provided many countries with greater strategic autonomy, allowing them to distance themselves from Western democratic models. For much of the past two decades, democracy was closely associated with the unchallenged dominance of the United States during the unipolar moment. However, following the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of multipolarity has given states more freedom to pursue independent political paths, often embracing forms of governance that challenge Western liberal democracy.

Of course, as Mietzner (2018, 20) highlights populism is not uniform across Southeast Asia; there are nuanced characteristics of populism in the region. He categorizes populism into distinct leadership styles, where populist leaders with authoritarian inclinations engage with the populace. These can range from Duterte's "authoritarian populism," Joko Widodo's "neoliberal populism," to Prabowo Subianto's "oligarchic populism." The diverse expressions of populism, while unique in their respective contexts, demonstrate a common feature: challenging established liberal norms and democratic principles that are perceived as hindering developmental progress and the sovereignty of the country.

In Southeast Asia, the influence of populism on foreign policy is less direct than in regions like Europe. Populist leaders politicize foreign policy in order to gain domestic support for the populist anti-elitist and antipluralist rhetoric that demonizes foreign entities and the "West" in general (Brubaker 2017). This trend involves a repoliticization of areas formerly treated as nonpolitical, as well as by politicization of public grievances toward a particular issue. Populist framing of foreign policy in "anti-establishment" terms may dramatically change the direction taken by a country's foreign policy, even though how long these changes will last is open to questioning (Magcamit and Arugay 2024). In the Philippines, this dynamic is best embodied by the populist government of Duterte. Similar to other populists, his administration has been contemptuous of the West, admiring Russia and China. Significant

here is that Duterte's foreign policy is undergirded by the populist precepts of independence from big powers that break from previous administrations' approaches (Arugay 2018).

While in some countries public opinion might be insufficient to drive foreign policy, populist leaders do take a central role in mobilizing such sentiments in influencing state behavior regarding policy on the global stage (Grzywacz and Gawrycki 2021; Wicaksana 2022). Such a dynamic can be witnessed in Indonesia and Malaysia. In these two countries, although the government officially remains neutral, there is noticeable public opinion on social media that represents anti-American and anti-Western sentiments with pro-Russian sympathies (Loh and Mustaffa 2022). Populist leaders in these countries exploit these sentiments, viewing Russia and China as viable alternatives to Western influence. They offer partnerships that are not contingent on democratic reforms or adherence to human rights standards. This is particularly evident in Indonesia, where there is strong resistance to the binary framing of geopolitical conflicts as a struggle between authoritarianism and democracy—a narrative prominently advanced by the United States under Biden's administration. This resistance reflects a broader skepticism towards the oversimplified democracy-autocracy dichotomy, especially in the context of the Russo–Ukrainian war (Wardhani and Dharmaputra 2024). The binary view is commonly criticized for its oversimplification and limited efficacy in promoting the progress of democracy at a global level. In this context, Russia is often viewed more as a symbolic counter-example.

Whereas Russia can be seen as more of a symbolic counter-example to Western hegemony, China offers an alternative model that surpasses the liberal democratic norm—a form of democracy combined with a developmental state. This approach reflects a long-standing practice in Southeast Asia, where many countries have prioritized economic development over political contestation since the 1970s. Even with the rise of democratic identities in the 2000s, democracy in these countries has often been framed as secondary to development. Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has developed its own version of democratic principles. In this model, democracy is accepted as a mechanism for popular sovereignty and political participation, but without embracing traditional political competition. The CCP accepts popular sovereignty and political participation but refuses conventional political contestation. From the Chinese viewpoint, democracy is not about electoral competition but about ensuring government accountability, in terms of socio-economic performance (Hu 2018).

Furthermore, China's model uniquely combines features of an authoritarian regime with economic development, while also rhetorically redefining democracy to underscore the effectiveness of good governance and rule of law instead of political participation (Ambrosio 012). This model is also in line with the notion that Asian cultures are fundamentally incompatible with liberal democracy, a perspective prominently advocated by Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in the 1990s. Lee initiated an international debate on "Asian values," which challenged the suitability of Western democratic norms for Asia and was critiqued as offering ideological support for authoritarian rule (Ortmann and Thompson 2018). While China's rise has reignited the "Asian values" debate, which had faded in the early 2000s, political elites in Southeast Asia remain hesitant to openly embrace China as a direct model for development. Instead, they prefer to frame their developmental successes as distinctly Southeast Asian. This reluctance stems from a dual perception of China—as both a key economic partner and a potential geopolitical threat to the region (Karim et al. 2025).

This case of Southeast Asia's response to the Russo–Ukraine War underscores the urgent need for a critical reevaluation of the Western approach to advancing democracy. Previously, there was some belief in the substantive nature of democ-

racy promotion in Southeast Asia, bolstered by initiatives like Indonesia's active role through the Bali Democracy Forum and the incorporation of democratic values into the ASEAN Charter. However, despite these initiatives appearing largely rhetorical, there remains an active effort by ASEAN countries to engage in the democratic discourse. Yet, this effort seems futile when Western countries themselves display double standards, particularly evident during the Russia–Ukraine conflict and the West's handling of the situation in Gaza. These incidents have exacerbated the perception that the West cannot critique how democracy is merely rhetorical in Southeast Asia when Western democracy promotion itself is also largely rhetorical, considering the double standards exhibited by the United States and other Western nations.

Conclusion

In Southeast Asia, the democracy promotion agenda is reframed to allow non-Western countries to engage with and reshape the concept of democracy in a way that is more compatible with regional values, which often contrast with liberal democratic principles. This approach allows Southeast Asian nations to selectively adapt democratic concepts, making them more acceptable within the region. Hence, adopting a democratic identity requires a careful balance between aligning with Western expectations and maintaining regional identity. However, the success of such a democratic agenda is fragile and depends on the domestic elites' acceptance of this agenda. The current reaction of Southeast Asia to the Russo–Ukrainian war, alongside the democratic regression occurring in the region, signals a growing disillusionment with the Western liberal order. Russia's emergence as a symbol of nationalism, countering the liberal democratic narrative, resonates in Southeast Asia. This is also coupled with growing skepticism towards the West's commitment to the democratic ideals it champions, a skepticism that is intensified by the perceived double standards in Western foreign policy, especially in its selective engagement with international issues.

To address the introduction's question on whether the democracy promotion agenda should be maintained, strengthened, abandoned, or redefined, this contribution argues for a new understanding of the democracy promotion agenda. Western countries should recognize the diversity of democratic values and paths around the world, beyond the conventional democratic agenda built upon the Western model. Imposing a single model of democracy, often confused with idealistic conceptions of the West, might lead to increased resistance toward democracy in general. In light of the changing global order, the dichotomous rhetoric that frames conflicts as battles between Western-style democracy and authoritarianism could be dangerous, as it oversimplifies complex geopolitical realities and risks alienating nations on their journeys toward democracy.

Furthermore, the apparent display of Western double standards in applying the democratic agenda, particularly amid geopolitical tensions, might jeopardize the global democracy promotion agenda. Western active engagement in the Russo–Ukrainian war—framing the narrative as an attack on liberal principles, while simultaneously remaining silent towards the humanitarian crisis caused by Israel's actions in Gaza—reflects a core double standard. This suggests that democratic norms are secondary to geopolitical interests. Such double standards regarding democratic principles weaken the credibility of the West's commitment to democracy.

Democracy Support and Authoritarianism in a Post-Western Order. Lessons from Turkey and beyond

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Introduction

Most observers agree that we are witnessing a move towards multipolarity in the international system, which raises questions about the future of international democracy support in a post-Western global context marked by competition between multiple global power centers. The Turkish case is exemplary in showing how the shift towards multipolarity can undermine democracy support traditionally undertaken by Western powers and in turn play a crucial role in the downturn of democracy in a country that has suffered from democratic deficiencies in much of its modern history. It also demonstrates how recent geopolitical conflicts, such as the Russia–Ukraine war, can further accentuate democratic backsliding by enabling autocracy support in areas beyond the traditional spheres of influence of rival powers, with implications for the future of democracy support in the region and beyond.

Turkey today constitutes a typical case of a competitive authoritarian regime under President Erdoğan, where the opposition continues to participate in national and local elections, but the playing field is highly skewed in favor of the incumbent thanks to its capture of state institutions, uneven access to resources, and control over the media landscape (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016). Yet, the heyday of international democracy support brought about by the end of the Cold War also set the path towards the consolidation of Turkish democracy in the late 1990s, largely thanks to the EU's enlargement policy and its democratic conditionality. After being declared a candidate state to join the EU in 1999, Turkey made significant strides towards fulfilling the EU's Copenhagen political criteria which led to the EU's decision to open accession negotiations in 2005. The EU's external democracy support in the form of financial and technical assistance through the accession track interlocked with Turkey's domestic dynamics where Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), a splinter party of the political Islamist movement, needed the democratization process to protect itself against Turkey's secularist establishment embodied in the military and the judiciary. Yet the EU's commitment to Turkey's accession was equivocal at best, which led to the gradual weakening of the credibility of the accession prospect (Cebeci 2016) and coupled with domestic factors, such as the strengthening of AKP with the 2007 and 2011 general elections, and its gradual capture of the state institutions, decreased the cost of Turkey's turn towards an illiberal agenda for Turkish policy-makers. With the rise of multipolarity in the 2010s, Turkey's foreign policy options became more diversified, where it felt even less constrained by the democratic and the economic conditionality of Western institutions such as the EU, as well as the IMF and the World Bank (Kutlay and Öniş 2021).

Multipolarity, Geopolitical Conflicts, and the Authoritarian Turn in Turkey

Turkey's turn towards competitive authoritarianism cannot be understood without reference to the rise of geopolitics and multipolarity since the second decade of the twenty-first century, and how they undermined democracy support in the Turk-

ish context. Turkey has sought to take advantage of the evolving multipolar post-Western order through a quest for "strategic autonomy" (Kutlay and Öniş 2021). This goal implies establishing selective partnerships based on national interests, with a view to strengthening Turkey's self-reliance, and as displayed in Turkey's involvement in Northern Syria, Northern Iraq, and Libya, through military interventionism and coercive diplomacy where necessary (Kutlay and Öniş 2021). In practice, the pursuit of strategic autonomy is mainly geared toward enhancing regime security and hence is purely transactional and interest-driven (Aydın-Düzgit 2023). The rise of multipolarity and the increase of geopolitical conflicts have enabled Turkey's transactional engagement with a multitude of actors including the EU, which not only helped it to evade a democracy support agenda but also turn to autocracy support in times of need. Furthermore, the Western response to geopolitical conflicts has enabled at home the anti-Western mobilization of domestic public opinion around the hypocrisy of the West and its international democracy agenda.

Concerning the EU, its already weakened democratic conditionality with the de facto freezing of accession talks took a final blow with the 2016 EU–Turkey migration deal, which marked a turn towards a purely transactional agenda in the EU–Turkey relationship, devoid of democratic values. The migration deal was largely driven by the failure of the EU to reach an intra-bloc agreement based on solidarity in the distribution of refugee flows following the onset of the Syrian civil war, exacerbated by the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments across the EU member states. The Turkish government has used the migration deal to extract concessions from the EU such as financial compensation, but more importantly, its quiet acquiescence to the government's steps towards authoritarianism (Saatçioğlu 2020). For instance, German Chancellor Merkel visited Erdoğan in Istanbul 2 weeks before the Turkish national elections of November 2015 to discuss the migration deal, boosting his legitimacy at a time when he was facing severe domestic and international criticism for the dismal state of Turkey's human rights record (Lowen 2015). During the same visit, Merkel unexpectedly declared her readiness to support the launch of accession talks with Turkey on two chapters of the EU *acquis*, despite Turkey's persistent noncompliance with the political Copenhagen criteria, contradicting the very essence of EU conditionality linking the advancement of EU candidates' accession processes and stronger institutional ties with the Union to their pre-existing democratic compliance (Schimmelfennig et al. 2003). A week after the visit, the EU deliberately postponed the publication of the European Commission's annual Progress Report on Turkey which contained severe criticisms of Turkish democracy, to the aftermath of the Turkish national elections of November 2015 so as to not hurt the governing party's electoral prospects (Barker and Wagstyl 2015). The EU's increased prioritization of security (including migration) over democracy continued to reflect on its relations with Turkey in the following years. EU imposed sanctions on Turkey in 2020 for its gas drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean but took no action in relation to the country's further democratic backsliding. By 2022, Turkey even ranked as the top recipient of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) loans despite the bank's official mandate "to only carry out programs in recipient countries committed to and applying democratic principles" (Youngs et al. 2023).

While the EU's leverage on Turkish democracy was waning, Turkey was also developing closer ties with authoritarian states, most notably Russia. The pursuit of strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy is premised on the assumption that Western hegemony is over, and that Turkey should develop flexible partnerships with countries like Russia and China while also retaining its place in Western institutions such as NATO (Kutlay and Öniş 2021, 1088). Given Russia's traditional focus on the post-Soviet region in autocracy support (Tolstrup 2015), Turkey constitutes an unusual case for Russian involvement in regime dynamics. Yet the Rus-

sian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has "turned upside down the relationship between Putin and Erdoğan," by increasing Turkey's leverage in both political and economic terms as a NATO member state facing a militarily struggling Russia sanctioned by the West (Cheterian 2023, 1283). After the start of the war, Turkey refused to adopt the Western sanctions towards Russia, vetoed Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO, and boosted economic relations and energy cooperation with Russia (Cheterian 2023, 1283–4). Faced with the prospect of a pro-Western opposition victory in Turkey's May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, Russia actively supported Erdoğan and his party's election bid by postponing Turkey's gas payments, injecting capital inflows into the Turkish economy, boosting Erdoğan's image and Turkey's global status-seeking efforts through the public launch of a Russian owned and operated nuclear power plant in Turkey as well as agreeing to the extension of the grain deal during the campaign period and facilitating Turkey's reconciliation efforts towards Syria for the return of Syrian refugees (Kara 2024). Alongside Russia, Erdogan has also deepened Turkey's relationships with other authoritarian countries such as Qatar and the UAE, providing his government additional economic breathing room while avoiding Western conditionality in the run-up to the 2023 elections (Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay, and Keyman 2023, 88–9).

Finally, Western responses to geopolitical conflicts have enabled the Turkish government to claim the moral high ground in boosting an anti-Western form of authoritarianism at home. Most recently, the divided European reactions to the Gaza crisis of 2023 and the United States' unqualified support to Israeli attacks on Gaza were picked up by Erdogan, who held a major pro-Palestine rally in Istanbul where he gathered a million people and declared the West as the "perpetrator of the massacre in Gaza" and a "hypocritical" actor which "shed crocodile tears for the civilians slaughtered in the Russia–Ukraine War yesterday, now watching silently the death of thousands of innocent children in Gaza today. . . while hiding their full support to child killers under the guise of democracy, human rights and justice" (Erdogan 2023). Erdoğan's efforts to draw domestic and global attention to the weak moral standing of the West to discredit Western claims to support democracy is not a novel phenomenon. He has frequently in the past drawn attention to how the EU fails to impartially uphold the moral duties it preaches concerning democracy and human rights in its dealings with post-coup Egypt, or through its increasingly restrictive migration policies after the Syrian civil war (Aydın-Düzgit 2023). Yet, the contrast between the predominant Western reaction to the Gaza crisis which largely overlooks the Palestinian casualties, and the Western appeal to democracy and human rights in the effort to broaden international support to Ukraine's war efforts has provided the perfect opportunity to argue for the contingent adherence of the West to democracy and human rights in an already polarized global context where anti-Western sentiments are on the rise.

Global Implications

It needs to be acknowledged that this international environment that hinders democracy support and increasingly enables authoritarianism is also available to aspiring autocrats elsewhere, such as in the emerging powers of India, Mexico, Indonesia, and South Africa, all of which have been experiencing democratic backsliding in the twenty-first century. In a post-Western order, "Western linkage and leverage lost much of their force" (Levitsky and Way 2020, 53). Furthermore, the traditional prodemocracy actors of the West, namely the United States and the EU, no longer have the same willingness to support democracy abroad where the existing international political competition is based less on ideology and more on material factors (Samuels 2023) and where Western democracies themselves are suffering from democratic setbacks. This makes it easier for aspiring autocrats to pursue a transactional approach to foreign policy aimed primarily at regime sur-

vival. Thanks to this context, Erdogan has managed to position Turkey as a mediator between Russia and the West, the gatekeeper of migration at the EU's borders, the moral compass of the non-West, and an economic and financial hub safe for today's autocrats—all in the service of regime security.

It is thus not a matter of coincidence that similar to Turkey, other emerging powers are also drafting their own doctrines of strategic autonomy. A rapidly autocratizing India also interprets strategic autonomy as a way of distancing itself from major powers, emphasizing selective and transactional partnerships, with very little reference to norms-based cooperation and multilateralism in its foreign policy discourse (Monsonis 2010). It has been argued that governing elites in Southeast Asia have instrumentalized the Russia–Ukraine War in legitimizing their domestic attacks on democracy (Moch Faisal Karim in this forum) and that the juxtaposition of the Western reactions to the Russia–Ukraine war and the Gaza crisis is widely instrumentalized at the behest of democracy by autocrats in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA; Youssef Cherif in this forum). The Russia–Ukraine War has also played a key role in consolidating voter support behind Hungary's Orban who, similar to Erdogan, positioned himself as the "balancer" between Russia and the EU in the run-up to the country's critical parliamentary elections in April 2022 and banked on Russian support (Scheppele 2022). EU democracy support in the Western Balkans is actively undermined by Russia fostering close links with the Serbian President Vucic who, similar to Turkey, hedges between Russia and the EU in service of regime security (Bechev 2023). The new wave of migration into the EU after the Russian invasion of Ukraine has contributed to placing migration in the highest echelons of the political agenda in most EU member states, which are now incentivized to not only sustain the migration deal with Turkey but also to sign similar deals with other nondemocratic third countries such as Tunisia to externalize migration management.

What Next for Democracy Support?

What is the future of democracy support in this conflict-ridden global context which increasingly enables authoritarianism? This question hinges on various macropolitical factors such as the future of China's economy or the outcome of the Russia–Ukraine War. Yet there are still certain ways in which prodemocracy forces can take action in individual states while fully acknowledging the relationship between the changes in the international order and the global recession of democracy. For instance, the Turkish case suggests that in the current global context, international democracy support that is tailored to the individual regime dynamics of these states would have to be developed before authoritarianism takes hold. This goal implies that democracy support has to prioritize the local level, particularly targeting the strengthening of local governments controlled by prodemocratic forces, civil society, and the media, which are stifled by populist authoritarian governments (Carothers 2020, 119). Local oppositional forces should not be underestimated, as even in the current context, clear majorities of people in democratic backsliders such as India, South Africa, and Turkey prefer their country to be more closely aligned with the West on human rights and liberties (Ash, Krastev, and Leonard 2023). Other measures could include strengthening prodemocratic political parties' capacity to govern, especially in cases where they have control over local governments. This is particularly pertinent when one considers that the declining support for democracy across the globe is closely related to the belief that democracies do not deliver especially in terms of economic performance, fairness, and equality (Pew Research Centre 2021).

Finally, democratic governments in the West should refrain from resorting to an increasingly contingent and frequently inconsistent liberal foreign policy agenda where they frequently fail to practice what they preach. Every instance in which they

fail to do so plays into the hands of populist authoritarian actors who do not just contest liberal democracy through their domestic policies but also through their discourses at home and abroad, aimed towards discrediting the legitimacy of support for international democracy. This puts the EU especially in a vulnerable position, as it has for long positioned itself as the vanguard of the liberal order and has resorted to liberal intrusiveness of various degrees and forms to promote democracy in enlargement and neighborhood countries. Aiming for more consistency in foreign policy rhetoric and action is necessary but not sufficient for the EU to gain the moral ground for international democracy. The EU and its member states would first have to tackle democratic backsliding within their own borders, by developing effective economic and governance-related measures to counter the rise of illiberalism at home. They would also have to reform and revitalize the EU's enlargement policy in a way that enables advanced convergence with the norms and standards of EU governance for candidate countries together with their meaningful involvement in policy processes without losing sight of membership prospects, to avoid losing countries to authoritarianism on the long road to accession.

Democracy Support, Not Democracy Promotion: The Case of the MENA

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Introduction

Democracy promotion, and democracy in general, are widely discredited concepts in the Arab MENA region. In Tunisia, for instance, the term "democracy folks" is used to mock democracy and human rights activists and single out their actions. The unraveling is not new, and its root causes are shared between history—i.e., the colonial past of today's democracy promoters—and local politics—with the nationalist and authoritarian policies of the regimes at the receiving end—as well as foreign intervention—epitomized by the Iraq War and the Libyan Civil War (Grovogui 2011). The Ukraine and Gaza wars are only the latest episodes in the dismantling of the project of Western democracy promotion in the region. However, this contribution argues, democracy continues to have a role to play, and supporting it is necessary. But supporting democracy with the same old tools will backfire; democracy support requires an urgent reform. Can Western double standards on democracy and human rights be restrained? Can new players in democracy promotion help do that? And can anti-Western activists contribute to pushing the democratic envelope?

A Responsibility of the Global North . . .

To start with, there are historical grievances that are hard to circumvent. Important segments of the Arab elite see Western democracy promotion as a continuation of the colonial Mission Civilisatrice (Burrows 1986; Sierp 2020), by which Europeans claimed to civilize the underdeveloped indigenous nations, applying at the same time divide-and-rule policies, whereby colonial rulers accentuated differences between the colonized ethnicities (Lange, Jeong, and Amasyali 2021). Hence, when German or US nongovernmental organizations help the poor citizens of Tunisia or Morocco, building water management projects, schools, and hospitals, coordinating their work with Berlin or Washington, they resemble Western missionaries

of previous centuries who collaborated with their imperial chancelleries to simultaneously help the suffering nations and control their wealth. Or, when European embassies launch programs to defend minorities in the MENA region, such as the Amazigh in North Africa or the Kurds in the Middle East, they also mirror their forefathers' actions two centuries ago. Historical comparisons have their limits, but from a macro perspective, the trend is similar, and democracy promotion may look like a form of neocolonialism.

As for the general public, democratization is synonymous with the Iraq War, the Libyan Civil War, and their consequences (Arab Barometer for BBC News 2022). Promoting democracy consequently equals, in the minds of many Arab citizens, regime change and its chaotic aftermath as witnessed in Iraq and Libya. Unsurprisingly, when the Arab Uprisings started, and when Western governments began to laud the young protestors in the streets of Tunis and Cairo (Adams 2011), many intellectuals, especially the conspiracy theories aficionados, raised red flags (Kadih 2011). In the Conspiracy Theory geste, these movements were yet another plot by the old and new colonial powers to divide the region and better control it (Haddad 2011). The historic place of Mohamed Bouazizi is a case in point. Bouazizi, the street seller who triggered the Arab Uprisings by his self-immolation in a small Tunisian town after protesting his condition in 2010, became a fixture in the speeches of Western politicians evoking the region (Buzek 2011). But in Tunisia, he is a divisive figure, especially among former regime sympathizers and those who suffered the economic and security consequences of the Uprisings; few would dare mentioning him positively today. The more the country's troubles pile up, the more its revolutionary icons are blamed (Ghorbal 2016). So, when Westerners continue to praise the transition and call for increased democratic participation, the country's suspicious minds link their words to the nefarious projects they are supposedly concocting. This is evidenced by the scores of negative comments received on the Facebook pages of the US or EU diplomatic missions in Tunisia whenever they post about this topic. And this thinking has become mainstream in the proregime media outlets (Ajroudi 2024).

The West's championing of democracy is also a harbinger of double language: when Hamas or Hezbollah wins elections in Palestine or Lebanon, Western capitals are cautious (Pace 2010). But when westernized parties are elected, the same capitals welcome the results. Or, whereas Westerners portray the Ukraine Crisis as a battle for global democracy, they count among their allies many brutal Arab autocrats. Then came the Gaza War, the straw that broke the camel's back. For more than a year, Western politicians and diplomats have been telling their MENA interlocutors that the Ukraine war is not merely a geopolitical contest against Russia, but the defense of global democracy against global authoritarianism (Werner 2023), the safeguarding of civilians against barbarian cruelty (Hook, Foy, and Olearchyk 2023), and the application of International Law and International Humanitarian Law. Yet, when the Israeli army bombed civilian quarters in its war against Hamas, when tens of thousands died and hundreds of thousands got displaced, when occupation and population transfers became the norm, most Western governments not only turned the blind eye but even supported Israel.

The West, with its past and present imperialisms, is therefore partly to blame for the antidemocratic sentiment that plagues the MENA region. But there is more to it than meets the eye.

. . .that Does Not Absolve the Global South

Arab regimes and a myriad of political groups—from leftist pan-Arabists to right-wing nationalists—spent decades disseminating anti-Western and, by extension, antidemocratic propaganda among their populations (Newashi 2012). This happened under anti-imperialist regimes such as Syria's, as well as under pro-Western ones,

like Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. The mainstream Western reaction to the Gaza Crisis, which overlooked the Palestinian casualties and focused on supporting Israel, gave these regimes a unique opportunity to prove their decades-old propaganda right. Now, they can claim that it was never about democracy and human rights, but all about imperialism and Western supremacy (on similar political dynamics, see the contribution by Senem Senem Aydın-Düzgit in this forum).

This is explained by the colonial history and the elites' perceptions of the West mentioned above, and the authoritarian tendencies of these regimes, which abhor criticism, especially when it is foreign. To implement an authoritarian system, internal dissent should be limited. But too much exactions lead to increased pressures and even sanctions from Western democracies, which act both as the old civilisateurs of past centuries and as bullies using the democracy and human rights card to improve their negotiating position on any file, from art and business to security and migration (Durac 2009).

Then there is Russia, one among many elephants in the room. With its disinformation machine and the alliances it has been able to forge with authoritarian groups, it has tarnished the idea of democracy among a gullible Arab public (Oweidat 2022). Be it through Russia Today Arabic, which is getting even more traction since the Gaza Crisis (Arab News 2023), or the multiple social media ops its online armies conducted, Russia has impacted the already negative perception that Arabs have on democracy and democracy promotion. Part of the narrative heard in the MENA region comes from Moscow or has been perfected there. The way many Arabs see the Arab Uprisings, for instance, resembles the negative image of Color Revolutions that Russia sowed all around the former Soviet space (Ezzedine 2021).

The events in Ukraine and Gaza have exposed these entanglements and deepened the misunderstandings between the West and the rest.

Democracy Continues to Be Worth, and in Need of, Supporting

Nonetheless, this should not lead to discarding democracy support or the universality of democratic norms. No culture is inherently authoritarian or democratic. Theories of authoritarian resilience in the MENA region were legion until 2011 (see, e.g., Bellin 2004), when the Arab Uprisings spread. Then, for a few months, these theories were shamed and others emerged, centering on the ability of Arab nations to embrace democracy (example: Stepan 2012). These new theories were in turn tarnished from 2013 on, after the success of counter-revolution in the MENA region and the swinging of the double-edged sword of migration and terrorism; security became once again prevalent and Arabs were, again, portrayed as unfit for democracy (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015).

Yet even today, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, there are manifestations of democratic revival, and no dictator seems immune to criticism. In surveys conducted in the MENA region, while a strongman is preferred to a parliamentary system, individuals keep aiming for a democratic system rather than an authoritarian one (Arab Barometer for BBC News 2022). Because a majority of Arabs are young and more and more connected to the Internet, and state apparatuses are getting weaker and poorer, it will be hard for any classical tyrant to maintain power the way the CCP or the twentieth-century Arab regimes did.

In Egypt, the country where a counter-revolution uprooted political participation and sealed free speech in 2013, civic activism is still alive and continues to be innovative. When the Abdulfatah al-Sisi regime wanted to cede two islands on the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia, protests spread and social media campaigns lashed against him (Brooks-Pollock 2016). When the government wanted to redesign Cairo by destroying old quarters and parks, a social media uproar exploded and some tried to take it to the streets (Osman 2023). And, after Israel started striking Gaza in 2023, some demonstrators joined the state-sponsored protests to direct their slogans against

both Israel and the Sisi regime (Human Rights Watch 2023). These actions rarely led to anything substantial—the regime remains strong and in place—but they have proven that a certain spirit of democracy is still alive.

In Tunisia, considered a model democracy between 2011 and 2021 by international—mostly Western—standards, a system of competitive authoritarianism is being put in place by the country's populist strongman Kais Saied (Levitsky and Way 2010). Parties are barely able to exist and many opposition leaders are in jail. Nonetheless, small groups of politically motivated individuals continue to demonstrate regularly (L'Orient Today 2023; AFP 2024). Activists keep focusing their anger on the government and the authorities, through local actions and claims (Le Monde 2022). When the war on Gaza started, an outburst of anger invaded the streets; it was not taken against the government—which rather encouraged the demonstrators—but it showed, nonetheless, the vitality of a public that was thought to be dormant after 2021.

But the most striking illustration of resilient activism is manifest in Syria. Following over a decade of civil war and foreign intervention, the regime of Bashar al-Assad appeared to have prevailed, regaining control over the country. This outcome was met with approval by the region's authoritarian powers, and the prevailing sentiment in Damascus held that state-led authoritarianism had the upper hand over disparate protest groups (Alam 2019). However, the regime's perception of stability and its ability to withstand external pressures was swiftly challenged by the resurgence of rebel groups, leading to widespread popular mobilization and a subsequent shift in the perception of the regime's strength. It was revealed that the regime's facade of triumph was not as solid as initially perceived, and by the early months of 2025, Syrian civil society demonstrated a remarkable level of dynamism, comparable to the vibrant societal movements witnessed in Egypt and Tunisia during the early years of the Arab Uprising (France 24 2025). Activists in Syria articulated their demands for a democratic state and an open society, signifying a growing demand for political and social reform. The eventual success or failure of these activists remains to be seen, but their liveliness after a decade and a half of devastation is a remarkable occurrence.

Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia are cases of a democratic spirit surviving amid contrary currents, "communities of relations," as the contribution of Elena Korosteleva terms it. Similar stories can be collected in most MENA countries. But democracy cannot blossom without extra help, usually from beyond the borders, where constraints cannot be applied. This can be people-to-people linkages via social media, parliament-to-parliament support from European parliamentarians, international media coverage of the work of local democracy activists, conditioning security aid to the respect of human rights, etc.

However, democracy promotion faces a dilemma. It is needed, but it is also discredited in the MENA region. Western democracy promoters are accused of double language because they collaborate with violent authoritarian regimes when it serves their interests. Moreover, the quasi-unanimous support provided to Israel continues to be a thorn in the side. Furthermore, democracy promotion is often portrayed as a form of neocolonialism and a threat to sovereignty.

Therefore, democracy promotion needs to go through a total revamping. Democracy promoters need to look at what went wrong and attempt to reform their policies. The perceived paternalism and direct meddling that come with promoting democracy need to be addressed. The focus on minorities because they know how to fill applications or because they fit with the orientalist image often given to the democratizing subject needs to be reviewed. The attempted imposition of a Western-backed model should also be reversed, so that democracy promotion responds to the local specificities of each country, not to the demands of European or American citizens. Finally, this endeavor may also need new players to step in, such as Brazil, and new strategies to be put in place, such as embracing the "radical" youths.

A Tropical Democracy Supporter

In the Arab MENA region, there is a sense of wonder about the BRICS and many Arab states aspire to join the group (Urooba 2023). Brazil, which commands respect and popularity among Arabs, could become a champion or a model of democracy in that grouping, especially if it takes a larger geopolitical role. The BRICS expansion of 2023 made it look like a club of dictatorships, especially with India's democratic backsliding in recent years. Therefore, for democracy enthusiasts, Brazil stands out like a beacon of hope in the group. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is a frequent traveler who aspires at playing an international role, but he and his country are often ridiculed. After Brasilia criticized Israel for a previous Gaza escalation, in 2014, an Israeli spokesperson called Brazil a geopolitical dwarf (Taylor 2014). And, when Lula attempted to play a role in the Ukraine–Russia conflict in 2023, he was pushed aside by North Americans and Europeans. As war rages in Gaza, Lula is at it again. He took an openly pro-Palestinian stance, distancing himself from his European and North American peers, but he stopped short from following South Africa in suing Israel in the International Court of Justice. Brazil is campaigning at the UN to impose a cease-fire, often against the United States, but it is not cutting ties with Israel or its Western backers.

For many Arabs, Brazil is credible and popular. The Arab community in Brazil is rich and influential. For Israel and the United States, it remains a partner. Brasilia proved in the past that it can be a global democracy promoter (Abdenur and Neto 2013), and it has the potential of impacting others, as an advocate for democracy. It could pressure its junior partners in the BRICS such as Egypt or the United Arab Emirates for the advancement of democracy, be it as a start to free political prisoners or restrain hegemonic behaviors.

Moreover, if Brazil plays a larger international role, it would boost Lula's position globally, regionally now that Argentina swung to right-wing populism, and locally, against the remnants of former president Jair Bolsonaro and other radical right and left-wing tendencies. A stronger Lula in a stronger Brazil would consolidate an important base for democracy in the Global South. But for this to happen, the country needs to be given a seat in international fora (Heine and Rodrigues 2023), such as a mediator in the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, respected and seconded by Western democracies without being cornered or paternalized.

And Radical Even Unruly Democrats

When it comes to the MENA region, there is a class of educated individuals who grew up respectful of democracy while at the same time resentful of Western imperialism. These youths must be empowered since they are best placed to foster change from within. To make it clear, these are not the cannon-fodders of ISIS and al-Qaeda, nor the brainwashed religious fanatics, but the typical Arab men and women who go to school or work every day and have fun on weekends. Until now, Western stakeholders have mostly capitalized on their youths, men, and women who look like them and act like them. This caste of English-speaking and tech-savvy kids are well-trained, they know how to speak in public and network, and many are well-intentioned. But they are not representative of their population, and it is frequent that they emigrate to the West before they reach their 30s. There, they continue to be seen as Middle Eastern activists or experts, but their detachment from their homelands grows by the day. And when they try to defend causes that are legitimate, such as LGBTQ + (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) or the fight against antisemitism and terrorism, they end up doing it à l'occidentale, which usually provokes a backlash.

But there are other youths who may seem too radical for Western diplomats and publics, but who are not less principled or influential. During the recent Gaza war,

for instance, they have been openly supporting the Palestinians—and to an extent Hamas. Yet, when looking at their habitus and daily habits, they are not more radical than their—largely—leftist peers in London or New York. In this instance and in other ones, these young men and women do protest peacefully and organize in similar fashion to their Global North alter egos. Many got degrees from Western universities, have relatives in Europe or America, and work or worked with Western NGOs and companies. Their anger against the West, a region they see as less foreign because of life experience, movies, fashion, and the Internet, should not be viewed as a liability but rather as a constructive critique. When they respond to Western calls for proposals (i.e., from embassies, civil society organizations, foundations. . .), if they are good, then the application reviewers should fund them without political prejudice, and their voice must be heard in European and American corridors of power. The Subalterns speak differently from their former masters, but they speak, and should be listened to (Nelson and Grossberg 1988).

Reform, Do Not Repackage

Western governments should continue expressing concerns and putting pressure over human rights violations in the MENA region and encourage their NGOs and other West-registered entities to do the same. But they need more consistency in doing it; in the age of Artificial Intelligence and widespread information, double language is easily debunked. An allied Arab dictatorship should not get a preferred treatment. Israel should not be given a blank check. There are red lines and they should apply to everyone. The way the West imposed red lines on the issue of terrorism, they can enforce ones for a minimal respect of human rights and dignity. Which Arab regime can openly support an organization aiming to bomb the Capitol or the Elysée? Arab regimes should feel the same pressure when they throw their elites in jail and torture them. And so should Israel before unleashing its killing machine the way it did in Gaza in 2023–24. Sovereign states should be allowed to conduct their internal policies, but they also need to abide by some general ethical norms, and in practice not in rhetoric. Finally, Western powers cannot monopolize democracy promotion; others such as Brazil need to be involved. And the Arab youths who may seem radical should be heart because they represent the majority that will benefit from democracy. Western states need to make some concessions in how they manage democracy promotion. If not, then it is the whole project that risks falling apart.

Democracy Promotion as Seen from Latin America: Power Politics and the Dewesternization of the Global Order

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Introduction

"Today, the structure and division of the world according to western imagination and interests is being disputed." These powerful words, expressed in 2014 by the Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo, a leading theorist of decoloniality, pair with the observation made in 2018 by John Ikenberry, a key thinker of liberal internation-

alism: "Today, th[e] liberal international order is in crisis." These bold statements were made at a time when neither Mignolo nor Ikenberry knew how fierce and deep this structural change was. The onset and development of the Russia–Ukraine and the Israeli–Gaza wars—and the Western responses to them—are bluntly revealing the depth of this contention. The Western practice of double standards regarding international norms, laws, and foreign aid is eroding its credibility and making the maintenance of the liberal international order unsustainable. This loss of authority may be leading the world to a new global order where the hegemony of a single super-power (like the United States), of a supposed superior human civilization (like the West), or a world-dominant ideology (like liberalism) will be replaced by diverse systems and modes of existing in the world—a "pluriverse," as proposed by the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar. This, it will be argued, is translated into the growing significance of the BRICS institutions as an alternative for the waning Western-made liberal, rules-based international order. For Mignolo (2014), "[e]conomic growth brought self-esteem and confidence in the political arena, to "former Third World" and "people of colour," and provided the energy and creativity to overcome racial hierarchies (regions and people) invented and implemented during five hundred years of westernization." In order to sustain the argument that the Global South is being compelled to seek alternatives to an undemocratic international order where its interests are not met, this paper will demonstrate how US actions in Latin America cause many to perceive democracy promotion as a tool for advancing right-wing policies in the region. It will also explain how the idea and practice of democracy in the sub-continent differ from mainstream notions of it. Moreover, it will reveal how economic multilateral institutions neglect towards the Argentinian financial crisis runs in parallel with the generous care the IMF and the World Bank show for the Ukrainian economy. The paper concludes by suggesting that from a current international order of foreign interference in the politics of sovereign states of the Global South and of Western-led economic institutions that disregard the needs of the people of color, a de-Westernized global order might already be in the making—and we still don't know the impact this will have on democracy in the decades to come.

Democratize the Colored South—A Northern White Man's Burden?

As Youssef Cherif aptly demonstrates in his contribution to this forum, Western military interventions in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) corroded the discourse of democracy promotion in the Arab MENA. Starting out with the justifications of disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction and protecting civilians under threat of attack in Libya, these interventions were recast by the West as support for democratic transitions. The decline, if not the complete collapse, of all social, economic, and political indicators of these two countries after the Western "democratic" intervention ended up debasing the prodemocratic voices in the region. In this regard and in terms of eroding the principles underlying the international order, three examples from Latin America demonstrate the broader damaging consequences of the uses and abuses of the democracy support discourse as felt in the Global South.

In 2019, the United States endorsed the removal of the legally elected presidents of Venezuela and Bolivia and these approbations were carried out under the banner of democracy. In January 2019, the United States recognized Juan Guaidó as the new interim president of Venezuela immediately after a failed coup attempt against Nicolás Maduro. The attempted overthrow, conducted by Venezuelan dissidents organized by Jordan Goudreau (a decorated former US Special Forces officer, founder of Silvercorp USA, a Florida-based private security firm) was defined by the

then US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, as necessary "to reestablish democracy in the country" (US Mission Brazil 2019). Undeniably, there were several irregularities in the 2018 presidential election of Nicolas Maduro—which led at least fifty-seven countries (including several Latin American nations) to follow the US move in its recognition of Guaidó. However, accepting the toppling of an elected president by a plot articulated by a US mercenary "green beret turned security contractor" (Borger, Daniels, and MacGreal 2020) expose how the ghosts of plots articulated by the United States to depose Latin American presidents still haunt the region.[2] This may be wrapped as democracy support, but the content of the package suggests otherwise.

Likewise, on November 10, 2019, Bolivian president Evo Morales left his post after the armed forces called for him to step down, following weeks of unrest over disputed election results. The United States promptly urged Bolivia's legislative assembly to gather "sooner rather than later" to formally accept the president's resignation. Donald Trump was expeditious in declaring on November 11, 2019, that "Morales's departure preserves democracy and paves the way for the Bolivian people to have their voices heard" (US Embassy La Paz 2019). Mark Weisbrot, an American economist, co-director with Eileen Appelbaum of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, DC, disagreed with President Trump. According to him, Bolivia "descended into a nightmare of political repression and racist state violence since the democratically elected government of Evo Morales was overthrown by the military" and the Organization of American States (OAE), led by the United States, "had a key role in the destruction of the country's democracy" (2020). For Jonas Wolff (2011) the kind of democratic experiment and transformation Bolivia was undergoing under Morales suggested that "the best external democracy promoters can do under such circumstances is to support processes of inclusive dialogue and constructive conflict resolution." For him, "[i]nstead of focusing on a specific political end point—a given model of democracy—support should push for [. . .] constructing a model appropriate for Bolivia." In contrast, the ousting of Morales was the choice made by those in the United States who allegedly support democracy in Latin America.

It should be recalled that these undertakings against the leftist governments of Maduro and Morales in 2019 were preceded by the one against the Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff in 2016—a member of the largest left-wing party in Latin America. In 2015, President Rousseff suffered relentless rallies and outcries against her government. Mass protests erupted all over the country against alleged crimes of corruption and criminal administrative misconduct committed by her and by members of her party, the Workers' Party (PT). Rousseff was impeached in a lawful process conducted by the democratically elected Brazilian parliament. Be that as it may, her deposition paved the way for the rise to power of the religious-populist radical right movement (see Barbosa and Casarões 2022) termed Bolsonarismo (named after the Brazilian neo-fascist former president Jair Bolsonaro). Today, few deny that what happened to Rousseff was a "parliamentary coup" (Santos and Guarnieri 2016), whose popular support was orchestrated by far-rightist groups, particularly MBL (The Free Brazil Movement), a politically ultra-conservative but economically ultra-liberal Brazilian movement with strong political links with similar counterparts in the United States. Rousseff's vice president, Michel Temer, who was one of the leaders of the impeachment process, "widely criticized for appointing an all-male, all-white cabinet when he took power on an interim basis," gained "support from the United States, which implicitly rejected claims that Rousseff had been removed in a coup" (Watts 2016). According to John Kirby, US State Department spokesman,

[2]On the US involvement "in the darkest periods of Latin American history," particularly regarding its role in coups to depose elected presidents; see Livingstone (2009).

"Brazilian democratic institutions have acted within its constitutional framework" (Watts 2016).

Democracy from within: Amefrica Ladina and the Search for Social Justice

It is noteworthy that Dilma Rousseff was the first woman to have held the Brazilian presidency, whereas Evo Morales, a member of the Aymara people, was Bolivia's first president of indigenous descent. Moreover, Nicolás Maduro was the man named by President Hugo Chávez as his political heir, and it was the victory of Hugo Chávez in the Venezuelan presidential elections of 1998 that triggered the so-called "pink tide" in Latin America (see Lievesley and Ludlam 2009). This term describes the "left wing governments brought to power by broad coalitions of peasant, indigenous, urbanite and working-class movements in the early 2000s" (Hawkins 2024). Pink governments in Latin America with their "ambitious social programs, prioritizing the needs of the poor, nationalistic foreign policy, economic nationalism, and asserting control of strategic sectors of the economy" achieved widespread acceptance which "led to the long tenure of many of these governments" (Ellner 2019). Last but foremost for the sake of the argument made here "[i]n terms of their regional and diplomatic policies, pink tide governments attempted to be more assertive in their response to US policy imperatives and that country's historical hegemony in the region" (Lievesley 2009). The pink tide was followed by what some call a "blue tide," the conservative wave triggered by oppositional right-wing political "often supported by powerful foreign actors" (Ellner 2019; see also Livingstone 2009), including democracy supporters.

Although what we discuss in this forum is democracy promotion in terms of liberal representative democracy—which basically means the right to vote and be voted freely and fairly in combination with civil and political rights—it is difficult not to see this concept as excessively focusing on formal procedures and not on the meanings associated with the idea of democracy and the aspirations of the peoples to have their voices heard and their needs met. This is certainly the case in Latin America. The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, considered to be a foundational figure of the decolonial perspective, dedicated a substantial part of his career to investigate how the "coloniality of power" (a system of hierarchies erected by the Western world in which race is used to classify, subjugate and exploit non-Europeans) hinders democracy in Latin America.

The very use of the concept of "Latin America" to designate this part of the world from where I write is fully embedded in the "colonial matrix of power" (see Mignolo 2005) and is profoundly antidemocratic. To name the colored peoples of the sub-continent "Latins" is to conceal the existence of more than 150 million "non-Latins" in a region that comprises circa 550 million people. According to recent data from the Inter-American Development Bank, there are roughly 40 million indigenous peoples living in the region and between 114 and 137 million Afro-descendants (IDB 2023). This means that 30 percent of the overall population of Latin America is not Latin at all. Lastly, "black and indigenous populations are disproportionately among the poorest in contemporary Latin America, almost without exception, and are largely absent among the middle and upper classes" (IADB 2023). To speak of democracy promotion in Latin America perhaps should start with renaming the sub-continent Améfrica Ladina, expression coined by the Afro–Brazilian intellectual Lelia González. "Améfrica Ladina intends to take a step in the same direction as the designation Nuestra América, instead of América Latina, which highlights the Latinity of the region, that is, its links with Europe, and hides or leaves aside the participation of other peoples in this process, such as Amerindians and those of African origin" (LASA 2020). Those concerned with

the democratic deficit in Nuestra América[3] should invest in the improvement of the social indicators of the continent, which consistently demonstrate that the indigenous and black populations can't access the blessings of the modern state—no matter how free they are to elect their representatives. Indeed, as the three examples referred to in this section demonstrate, Latin American elite-white-males are ready to depose those who represent the underclass, the colored, and the women. And they do that within the parameters of the law, the legality of formal procedures, in the name of democracy, and with the support of foreign groups and powers.

Who Gets to Decide Who Deserves Help?

The growing frustration of Latin America with the United States and its European allies in their use of the traditional multilateral economic institutions was further heightened in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war. In March 2023, for example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a new 4-year Extended Fund Facility (EFF) of USD 15.6 billion that is part of a USD 115 billion support package for Ukraine which, according to Reuters sources, would be completed by "$80 billion in pledges for grants and concessional loans from multilateral institutions and other countries, and $20 billion worth of debt relief commitments" (Lawder and Shalal 2023). As for the World Bank, it launched in 2022 the PEACE Project—the Public Expenditures for Administrative Capacity Endurance. Hence, the World Bank is now responsible for guaranteeing the salaries of the Ukrainian civil service. It is paying the benefits of 10 million pensioners, and the salaries of 500,000 education and 145,000 government employees, 56,000 first responders, and around 3 million recipients of financial assistance. As stated in its website, "almost $20 billion has been mobilized through the PEACE Project as of June 22, 2023" (World Bank 2023). Formally, Ukraine is being supported in the name of democracy. There is no contention here. However, had such generosity been granted to Venezuela or Bolivia, their democracies would have stood the chance of becoming more solid and of better quality. Moreover, had even a fraction of the massive financial support President Zelensky received from the West in his defense against Russia been allocated to addressing poverty and economic instability in Venezuela or to supporting efforts to combat racism and improve indigenous rights in Bolivia—despite the mixed record of the Morales government, as seen in cases like the TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure) conflict (see Borger, Daniels, and McGreal 2020; Livingstone 2009)—Western commitments to democracy promotion might carry greater credibility in Latin America. As the editors identify in the Introduction "the rise of disenchantment and populism" are among the many reasons "for the fragility of democracy the world over" (p. x). Disenchantment with malfunctioning political institutions and relentless underdevelopment in Améfrica Ladina could be alleviated with the support of traditional multilateral economic institutions, comparably to what is being done in Ukraine. The case of Argentina is illustrative of this. The Brazilian president Lula da Silva criticized the IMF's stance in the process of Argentina's debt renegotiation and promised the then-Argentinian president that he would try to find alternatives within the BRICS group to alleviate the country's economic crisis (Agência Brasil 2023). On top of that, the Brazilian Minister of Economy met with the US Treasury Secretary to ask for the US help at the IMF to help Argentine out of her financial predicament (Shalal 2023). This pledge was also addressed by President Lula da Silva at the G7 Summit in Japan. Despite all these efforts, the IMF has hardened its stance on Argentina (Reuters 2023) which endures its worst economic crisis in decades.

[3]This term was coined by the Latin American intellectual José Martí (1853–1895), who believed in the construction of an American identity based on the appreciation of the history and culture of indigenous peoples of the continent.

In the wake of the near collapse of its economy, Argentinians elected the ultra-liberal far-right populist Javier Milei. How this will impact Argentinian democracy in the near future is still to be seen. However, what Klaus Dingwerth (2014) has to say about global democracy may resonate with the situation in Argentine. According to him, for democracy to blossom what is required "are not better procedures, but investments that help the weaker members of global society to make effective use of the democracy-relevant institutions that exist in contemporary international politics."

Fairly, the growing awareness of double standards in North–South relations, where some are deemed to be more deserving than others of Western assistance, is leading political leaders from the Global South to raise their voices—and act—against what is perceived as an unfair order. It was in this context that the XV BRICS Summit was launched in 2023 in Johannesburg, under the theme of "inclusive multilateralism," among other things. In Johannesburg, BRICS leaders recognized "the key role of the NDB [New Development Bank] in promoting infrastructure and sustainable development of its member countries" (BRICS 2023). The group also praised the former Marxist guerilla Dilma Rousseff, who was "thrown out of office by the [Brazilian] corruption-tainted senate" (Watts 2016), making her President of the NDB. Whilst Western leaders saw no reason for empowering Rousseff in her quest for controlling the antidemocratic forces in the country (see Costa 2019), BRICS members confided that as the president of the NDB, seen today as an alternative source of funding for the countries of the Global South, she would contribute to the strengthening of the bank "in effectively achieving its mandate" (BRICS 2023).

Conclusion

The discussion proposed in this forum on international democracy promotion within the context not only of the Russia–Ukraine and the Israeli–Gaza wars but also of "the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms" as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) adroitly describe how democracies die, is timely and necessary. This paper's contribution to the forum focused on exposing the reasons behind the quest of the Global South for alternatives to what is perceived as a nondemocratic international order, highlighting Latin American experiences with democracy promotion and the selective politics of international aid of multilateral institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. As this contribution attempted to demonstrate, the ILO is in crisis because Western leaders seem incapable of imagining a world where their biased code of conduct is challenged and where the voices emanating from the Global South have to be heard. An instance of that was the US veto for an UNSC resolution, then under Brazil's presidency, to hinder the slaughtering of Palestinian civilians as a consequence of Israel's merciless response to the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7. The same United States that supports the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in Gaza concurrently condemns Russian violence against the Ukrainian population. This inconsistency in terms of political behavior, perceived by many as hypocrisy, gravely undermines confidence in an already tottery global liberal order and opens the way for the making of alternative world orders. If the BRICS is this alternative—or one among many in a pluriverse where states and other entities have more autonomy even in the context of radical interdependence is still to be seen (see Escobar 2018). What is quite clear at this point in time, however, is that the current paradigm of liberal-representative-democracy is decayed, and it will no longer be easy to propagate it—at least not in the power politics fashion it has been done so far.

Democracy Support in an Age of Complexity: A Central Eurasian Perspective

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Introduction

Responding to the questions posited in the introduction to this forum, this contribution examines why we need to revisit support for democracy, especially when situated in the context of an increasingly VUCA—vulnerable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—world (Burrows and Gnad 2017). Over the past several decades we have tangibly begun experiencing the effects of the Anthropocene with its mounting complex planetary challenges, economic-cum-political contestations, and a rapidly transforming international order, in which the West is losing its hegemonic position, and its key primary institutions—for example, a liberal model of democracy—becoming less relevant or universally applicable (Kurki 2013; Flockhart and Paikin 2022). These changes and challenges *inter alia* have led to the emergence of new actors, political movements, and alliances, as well as a growing number of conflicts since 2010s, with the wars in Ukraine and Gaza being the most emblematic manifestations of the breakdown of the 1990s' unipolar power configuration, and the arrival of the age of complexity (Kavalski 2015).

This entanglement of challenges requires renewed conceptual and practical approaches. In this paper, I suggest focusing ***not*** on governments or institutions in support of democracy, but instead on local voices and practices or what I term "**the community of relations**"—a fundamental premise for nurturing the shoots of democracy, which are often hidden from the surface but enduring, even in the darkest times of war and rising authoritarianism (Kudlenko 2023; Sadiki and Saleh 2024; Korosteleva 2025). I argue that it is precisely the **human agency** that needs to be reclaimed as "the poetic subjectivity," **able** and **willing** to "learn to live finally, and to thrive beyond the catastrophe of our times" (Evans and Reid 2014, 203), driven by the visions and vernacular understandings (Vaughan-Williams 2021) of "the good life," for and by the people or communities, generally known as "democracy."

This contribution explains why the shift towards a relational and complexity-thinking approach is imperative, and what it helps to rediscover about democracy support, if pivoted to communities and their capabilities. Living in times of deep uncertainty and conflict, which Central Eurasia[4] epitomizes today, it is **the people(s),** as it should be, and not the institutions, governments, or global "democracy-promoters," that make a real difference, through their social dreaming, self-organization, and political will, defined here as "resilience,"[5] to remedy their governments' wrong-doings, and to stay the course, fighting for "the life worth living" (Sen 1985). I argue that the region has now morphed into a constellation of self-organizing orders with a growing sense of sovereign peoples, to chart the new ways for designing and practicing democracy—as a **vernacular approach** moving away from "how people are *spoken for*" (Vaughan-Williams 2021, 11) towards instead, how they should be *listened to* and *acted on,* representing the hitherto marginalized, and reclaiming their agency, cognition and affect (Sadiki and Saleh 2024). The

[4]By "Central Eurasia" I mean a geography spanning Belarus and Ukraine in the West, Azerbaijan in the south, and Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in the East.

[5]I see resilience as rooted in the notion of "the community of relations," making it an autonomous, agential, and affective force for change. See Korosteleva and Petrova, and Korosteleva (2025).

paper, therefore, aligns with the Global IR perspective on democracy support, recognizing democratic equality and cultural diversity, as outlined in the Introduction, but taking it further by unpacking democracy support processes as rooted in communities, hidden, but agential in their autonomy and self-organization.

Democracy and Democracy Support Today: Why Is Revision Necessary?

Despite its *longue durée*, democracy today is more contested than ever before. The prevalent narratives tell us that globally democracy seems to develop in waves, with democratization reaching its peak in Latin America and Central Eurasia in the 1980–90s and going in reverse to (populist) authoritarianism or "democratic backsliding" in recent decades. These perspectives use the democracy/autocracy dichotomy as a basic conceptual lens. Largely focusing on populism and the malign influence of autocratic states, these mainstream explanations of the failure of "democracy" and "democracy promotion" tend to conceal the more substantive issues at stake. I argue that while these approaches are dominant, they are also problematic on multiple levels. *Conceptually*, they presuppose a linear progression towards *telos*—i.e., essentially a western-style liberal democracy, or a regressive movement backward ("backsliding")—thus failing to explain or foresee sudden democratic eruptions, or account for the often invisible signs of change on the community levels, which with time are certain to disrupt the status-quo and dislodge dictators. These processes speak of the emerging agency of "**the missing people**" (Sadiki and Saleh 2024) as a collective (political) force, with their cognition and affect, which conventional theories struggle to explain, or understand its concatenating effect, attested to by, e.g., the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine (2004; 2014), or civil uprisings in Belarus (2020+), Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (2022), Armenia (2018; 2023), and Georgia (2024), or their "colour predecessors" in the early 2000s (Hutcheson and Korosteleva 2005). On a *practical level*, democracy has never been a clear-cut exercise, including in the so-called "advanced democracies," which, for example, gave rise to the Trump phenomenon, the Iraq war, or Brexit propelled by a UK government manipulating a largely uninformed public. Furthermore, we are witnessing features of emergent authoritarianism and disengagement of both people and political elites in some EU democracies, with profound implications for democracy not just in Europe, but globally (Wilkinson 2021). Not only does this lead to a deep democratic deficit in the West; but it also compromises the legitimacy of democracy as a model for promotion, as argued by both Youssef Cherif and Moch Faisal Karim, pointing to a perceived hypocrisy of Western governments set in a pursuit of their own interests.

In other work (Korosteleva and Flockhart 2020; Korosteleva and Petrova 2022; Korosteleva 2025) I argue for the urgency to review democracy support, especially in the context of the VUCA-world. Notably, I insist on adopting complexity-thinking, to avoid oversimplified or solutionist approaches to democracy promotion; and on understanding (hidden) processes of change through the lens of community and its agential (inherent) resilience. More specifically, democracy promotion must not be (just) about identifying root causes for autocracies and prescribing a modular "seemingly unambiguous response that should lead to a clear end" (Lehmann 2011, 27). I argue that democracy as a social phenomenon exists within an open and complex system, unpredictable, and uncertain in its nature, and hence difficult to control. A complex system always entails *emergence* (often hidden under the surface), *processuality* (spatial and temporal), and *relationality* with the human agency placed center stage, as the key principles for nurturing democracy.

I contend that in order to support democracy today, we must be aware of the complexity and uncertainty of its *starting condition, contingency*, and *local sensitivity*, as well as a *large number* and *heterogeneity* of *actors* involved and connected into a *network of constant relations*, which, while opaque, are changing the very fabric and

density of society, creating new infrastructures, cognition, and affective networks. What emerges as a result is a **community of relations** (Chandler 2022), spatial and temporal, with a new vision and a collective sense of self-worth, which at certain tipping points may turn into a political force or "peoplehood" (Sadiki and Saleh 2024; Korosteleva 2025), to bring a new structure and authority in place.

Democracy Promotion in Central Eurasia in the Age of Complexity

As noted in the introduction and above, Western democracy support has had a problematic record, often being instrumentalized, and suffering from double standards (e.g., pressure on Belarus, but not Azerbaijan with a similar democracy track record) thus leading to some catastrophic consequences. These failings, however, give space to exploring new approaches to democracy in the emerging multi-order world.

With the 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, the 2020 (unfinished) "Revolution of Indignation" in Belarus (Kudlenko 2022), and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 especially, the political landscape of Central Eurasia has changed dramatically. Despite the persistence of dictatorships there, we see certain signs pointing to the increasing self-organization, solidarity and community support, and agential self-awareness, challenging the status-quo. The latter include disparate/emergent voices of the "missing peoples" (Sadiki and Saleh 2024)—e.g., political protests in Bashkortostan (2024), and Dagestan (2023), in Georgia (2024) against Russia's meddling, and Moldova's electoral processes (2024). Even the seeming "silence" of civil society in Lukashenka's Belarus today does not equate to support for dictatorship: instances of dissentscapes, as Larbi and Saleh (2024) call them, are occurring regularly, demonstrating silent resistance to the regime.

These invisible "communities of relations" emerge as a **force d'etre,** with time forcing their governments to bring about change, and subtly distance themselves away from either Russia or China as another powerful player in the region. The most poignant examples include Uzbek elections in the summer 2023, which for the first time ever resorted to the use of only the English and Uzbek languages in their political communication; and Armenia's refusal to attend the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) meetings since November 2023, evincing their profound discord with Russia's course. What seems to be emerging, under the surface, is a formation of agential peoples across the post-Soviet space, reorienting away from the "Russian world" or Chinese Belt-and-Road initiatives, in search of new pathways, bottom-up, similarly to what Youssef Cherif and Senem Aydın-Düzgit discuss in their contributions to this forum.

As I have argued elsewhere (Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022) we seem to observe manifestations of self-governance, open and hidden, across the entire Central Eurasian space. They are enacted by the *communities resilient* to war/adversity and *capable* not just of adaptation to the insecurities of life, but essentially of transformation to "live beyond the catastrophe of our times" (Evans and Reid 2016). This **transformation**, driven by people's articulated visions of "the good life" (Sadiki and Saleh 2024; Korosteleva 2025), builds on communities' growing self-awareness (cognition and affect) as a collective force triggering the formation of the **human agency** to shape the course. My research indicates (Kudlenko 2023; Korosteleva 2025) that it is a newly obtained sense of self-worth or *hidnast* in the Ukrainian language, and the vision of "the good life" as "home," associated with a safe space for happy and dignified living, that motivates so many to resist, reclaim and rebuild, even when losing everything at the time of war. We also observe that transformations often happen in opposition to the omnipresent oppressive state, nudging the new leaders to emerge (e.g., Alexey Navalny in Russia), and to find the way to give voice to the marginalized, as is in the case of twice-displaced prodemocratic people of Belarus, forced to flee the Lukashenka regime, or those Russians who disagreed with Putin's war in

Ukraine. We also see that social memory and social dreaming, in people's strife for "the good life" often intertwine in the most intricate ways—through philosophies of good neighborliness as expressed in a principle of "*hamsoya*" ("sharing a shadow with the neighbour" in Tajik, Nurulla-Khodzhaeva 2023), or *talaka, supol'nasts or gromada* as a way to collectively support those in need of help in Belarus and Ukraine. Our learning about democracy practices, especially in Central Asia, teaches us that religion (e.g., peaceful Islam) and faith help "the absent peoples" as Sadiki and Saleh (2024) call them, to reclaim their subjectivity through local values, and offer informal support infrastructures which can withstand the challenges of time, and adversity, as living experiences of people in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan attest to.

Democracy thus implies **human agential resilience**—a capability to self-organize and sustain dignified living, through the invisible networks of human relations, "bottom-up and around" (Kavalski 2015). COVID-19 serves as a poignant example, which shows the power of self-organization enabling the under-resourced or simply forgotten communities across Central Eurasia to seek self-help, and support themselves and the most vulnerable around them, by procuring food, medication, and protective equipment (Gerry and Neumann 2023), instead of awaiting government resources and instructions to act on.

We increasingly observe a mobilized sense of peoplehood, manifest through the people's ability to stand up to and challenge the state (e.g., in Kazakhstan in 2022; see Kudaibergenova 2024), and their emerging "local" identity, which allows communities even in the most remote villages to protect their way of life from insecurities. This is what we term "vernacular resilience," indigenous and local, premised on a powerful sense of belonging and home, a desire to do good for the community and a capability to act, to take on even the state if necessary, in fight for the "good life." These vernacular resilient communities are, in my understanding, the best examples of democracy-enhancing processes in action, sensitive to local conditions, protective of their social memory, and open to feedback loops and collective worlding. Yet, even then this human agency still requires careful intuitive nurturing, and support rather than "democracy promotion," as argued by Youssef Cherif in this forum. These ongoing processes of creative learning and negotiation of their own space vs democracy promotion often insensitive to local conditions, testify to the urgent need to rethink democracy support? as a practice, to avoid the dichotomous/solutionist approach mentioned on the onset of this paper, as is often practiced by the collective west. What needs to happen instead is the embrace and acceptance of the "world where many worlds fit" (Escobar 2018), with a growing surge for *diversity-governance* (Flockhart and Paikin 2022).

By Way of Conclusion

This contribution aimed to reverse the focus back on democracy nurturing practices as self-governance or resilience, inspired by some local processes in Central Eurasia. I argue that the support rendered to democracy as a form of governance, should be profoundly rethought to become a more intuitive, holistic, home-grown, and self-organizing human-agential ecosystem, based on social memory/dreaming and care for the neighbor ("*hamsoya*"). This human "poetic subjectivity," is *the (found) people*, constituting a "community of relations," capable of building resilient and sustainable lives, in the VUCA-world. Looking at the unfolding tragedy in Gaza, Ukraine, Belarus, and elsewhere, this requires more locally sensitive approaches to supporting democracy, driven by the needs of communities on the ground, rather than a programmatic planning or top-down institutional engagement by "global democracy promoters." This means that democracy support must be seen as nurturing, which in an age of complexity can only take an assistive role ***not*** to undermine local initiatives and conditions, but to support them instead. In line with ques-

tion four in the Introduction to this forum, I argue that the actions for democracy support should therefore start at the local level aiming to enhance autonomy and self-awareness of communities, rooted in their inter-generational memories and connected to social imaginaries of the good life. This implies a different approach to democracy promotion from the global players: to support democracy abroad, "democracy promoters" need to undergo profound decolonization of their approaches, policies, and mindset, to adapt a vernacular perspective to democracy nurturing, drawing on the local voices of the hitherto "missing" and now "found" peoples.

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