



Unión Europea, América Latina y el Caribe: Un futuro de valores compartidos

Documento 1: Democracia y el Estado de
Derecho como valores compartidos



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The EU-Latin America Summit 2023:

Shared Democratic Challenges

Background Reflection Paper

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Preparations are underway for an EU-Latin American summit to be organized under the Spanish presidency in 2023. The EU is motivated by both economic and geopolitical factors to deepen its relations with Latin America (LA). The agenda for the summit and for EU-LA relations more broadly will be wide ranging and cover many issues. This background paper examines just one of these issues: the agenda of what is generally referred to ‘shared values’ based on democracy and human rights.

The paper aims to provide food for thought in terms of how democracy related issues might be included in the 2023 EU-LA summit; the author was asked for practical and positive ideas rather than an assessment or critique of past relations. The report examines the case for focusing more systemically on democracy support, how this agenda relates to current political trends in the two regions and what considerations emerge related to the Ukraine invasion. Support for democracy is understood in this paper in its broadest sense to include rule of law, equality of rights, citizen participation, and peaceful and inclusive processes of resolving differences.

It cautions that giving substance to this political agenda looks extremely difficult given recent developments in both Europe and Latin America and in light of the geopolitical fallout from the Ukraine invasion. The paper distinguishes different levels of ambition and sensitivity that apply to the place of democratic shared values at the summit. It concludes by proposing ten very concrete ideas for upgrading EU-LA support for democracy and human rights.

Democracy as shared challenge

In the run up to such summits and dialogue forums, it is ritually asserted that citizens and most governments in the EU and Latin America share a conviction in democratic values. However, increasingly, this agenda of ‘shared values’ is also about shared challenges. Most reports and recommendations talk of EU-LA shared values as if these were self-evident; they tend not to dwell on the way these values are increasingly challenged from within both regions.

It will be extremely difficult to ensure democracy and human rights a tangible place on the EU-LA summit agenda. Democracy is under assault, in different ways in different places across the world. Not all trends in democracy are negative, but many are. Annual democracy indices report that democracy scores have been worsening on both regions. In the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) index for 2021, Latin American democracy scores worsened more than those of any other region and registered their biggest fall since 2006. The same index defines only seven EU states as ‘full democracies.’ The [Varieties of Democracies](#) 2021 report suggests half a dozen EU states are ‘autocratizing’. A record 33 countries autocratized in 2021 and this group included many in Europe and Latin America. The top ten autocratizers include states in the two regions: Brazil, Poland, Hungary, El Salvador.

Authoritarian governance persists or has put down new roots in both regions. In many democracies in both Europe and Latin America, the quality of political pluralism and accountability are worsening. Many citizens in both these regions have been drawn to illiberal leaders and political parties. Levels of citizen frustration and dissatisfaction with democracy are rising in both regions, even in countries where democratic process appear strong and resilient.

This situation makes pro-democracy support more necessary and, in many ways, more difficult to design. These trends mean a focus on defending democracy will be especially important for and within both regions. They also raise the difficulties of pursuing such democracy efforts. Democracy needs to be buttressed within European and Latin American nations. If the two regions broadly share the basic values of democracy and human rights, these values need reviving.

These democracy problems go well beyond the two or three states in each region that are best-known and most widely cited as examples of clearly authoritarian drift. Limited or electoral democracy is now a common regime type in both regions. The most heavily declining indicators over the decade have been restrictions on civil society and media censorship. More human rights defenders are killed each year in Latin America than in any other region. The hard-right has more presence and involvement in government in Europe than in any other region. The Commission’s rule of law report notes that a majority of member states now suffer deficiencies with regards judicial independence. In both regions, there is increasing contestation over democracy is defined and conceived as a divergence has opened between, one the one hand, its liberal-constitutional elements and, on the other hand its radical-popular or illiberal-populist dimensions.

On top of these domestic-level challenges, the risks facing democracy have become more severe at the international or inter-state level. The overarching rationale for a stronger focus on defending democratic values flows from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Russia’s invasion is not only a brutal and illegal attack on Ukraine’s democracy but also represents a heightened risk more widely to democratic values. The invasion has made authoritarianism appear a more real and tangible threat. It has brought to the surface the geopolitical costs of democratic powers having failed to act together to buttress democracy during the 2010s. President Zelensky

constantly insists that the war is not simply a war between two states but between two political visions.

More broadly, authoritarian states have doubled down on cooperation in a way that reinforces a growing divide with democratic nations. China-Russia cooperation since the invasion began represents a turning point in their cooperation against democratic self-determination. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has taken on a new lease of life, including by China agreeing to lift its veto on admitting Iran to make the SCO a stronger alliance against the democratic West.

Many European leaders and analysts have framed the invasion's wider ramifications in terms of a battle between authoritarianism and democracy as systemic alternatives. They insist that upgraded and more effective international coordination is urgently needed between democratic states due to the geopolitical fallout from the Ukraine invasion. In her 2022 state of the union speech, Commission President Ursula Von de Leyen stated of the invasion: 'This is about autocracy against democracy... This watershed moment in global politics calls for a rethink of our foreign policy agenda. This is the time to invest in the power of democracies. This work begins with the core group of our like-minded partners: our friends in every single democratic nation on this globe.'

To give this sentiment substance, LA would seem a natural partner for the EU in deepening cooperation on democratic values. Recent polling suggests that the LA population [wants](#) the EU to focus more on political rights as the distinctive offer it can make over other partners like China. Yet, a number of governments in both the EU and LA appear ambivalent about such commitment to democratic coordination. Most LA leaders have not chosen to frame the Ukraine conflict in these terms. EU states have stressed the strategic risks of deepening authoritarian coordination, LA governments much less so. From an LA perspective internal issue like inequality are the most severe and immediate threat to democracy rather than the fraught geopolitical context. A crucial question is whether, against the backdrop, the EU-LA summit has any scope to play its part in advancing democracy-protecting coordination.

Contrary to some rhetoric, the discourse on 'shared democratic values' is not something that is unique to EU-LA relations, as the EU also stresses 'shared values' in its summits with Asian and African countries – and indeed polls suggest support for democratic values has held up rather better in other regions – while also struggling to form concrete democracy policies there.

From trade to geopolitics

Of course, other issues are likely to be of higher priority at the EU-LA summit. Much has been said and written about the two regions' neglect of each other in recent years, and charting that neglect lies beyond this paper's remit. Of relevance to this particular paper, it suffices to note that democracy related issues have been especially low-key in the relationship in recent years.

Most recent and current effort to redress the neglect has been in the area of trade policy. In this area of policy, the stated aim to revive EU-LA relations does not start from a blank slate. For the EU, the trade agenda has been mainly prompted by concern over China and its growing presence in Latin America. In recent years, the EU has begun to deepen and extend its commercial focus on Latin America and some Latin American states have begun to rediscover an interest in partnership with the EU.

This policy focus in recent years has been mainly on trade and also to some extent on the climate agenda. As is well known, a priority focus in the lead up to the summit will be on whether currently stalled trade agreements can be either completed or moved towards full implementation. In particular, movement is awaited on the EU side with respect to free trade agreements already negotiated with Mexico, Chile and Mercosur. Newly ‘modernised’ agreements with Chile and Mexico are set to be ratified by the European Parliament and then presented to member states for ratification; Brussels’ ratification of the agreement with Mercosur signed in 2019 is still outstanding.

The trade agenda is often presented as if it were an integral part of a values-based partnership. But there are tensions between commercial and values-based aims. The EU has promised in many of its policy documents to ensure that its trade and investment relations do not empower non-democratic actors; but it is clear that they are doing just this in several LA autocracies – some European energy companies have developed creative processes to get access to energy supplies from authoritarian states, for instance. European trade and investment have continued to flow to non-democratic countries in LA, in contrast to more critical policy responses towards autocracy in some other regions. If trade is to be the priority for an EU-LA reset, then governments may be tempted to sacrifice any focus on democracy and human rights.

In recent years, while the trade agenda has progressed, democracy and human rights have lost presence in EU-LA relations. Environmental issues have become a much more prominent point of leverage relative to political rights. In the EU-Mercosur stand-off the focus has been on environmental issues, not democracy or human rights; the EU has shown itself increasingly willing to use climate-related conditionality but much less so democracy-related conditionality. The EU has for many years pursued a policy of engagement and cooperation with non-democratic regimes in LA without success in opening these up to political reform.

The EU has allocated 3 billion euros for the social effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Global Europe budget line allocates 3.4 billion euros to Latin America for 2021-7. The EU has been running development programmes on social equality and inclusion for many years. Democracy and human rights are certainly included in EU national indicative development programmes with LA states and the EU funds many important projects on human rights defenders, women’s empowerment and the like. But the levels of such funding have not been as high as in most other regions. The two regions have done little to coordinate on major global-level threats to democracy; indeed, divisions between them have grown on such political issues (as divisions have widened *within* each region too).

In 2022, the EU's focus has moved from trade to geopolitics. It has begun to reach out to Latin America in order to build support for what is happening with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the broader surge of authoritarian power internationally. To some extent, this geopolitical focus opens the door to a stronger focus on democratic values, as outlined above. However, the relationship between democracy and geopolitical interests is less than clearcut. Much has been written about Latin American democracies' apparent reluctance to sacrifice relations with Russia and even less so with China. At the same time, the EU's own declared aim to become a more 'geopolitical power' seems to entail a great deal of realpolitik that sits uneasily with support for democratic values.

Levels of Ambition

These trends suggest that there is heightened need for EU and Latin American states to upgrade the focus on democracy and human rights in their inter-regional coordination, but also that this agenda faces severe obstacles. Relations between the two regions are traditionally infused with rather ritualistic references to 'shared values.' Yet, democracy issues are increasingly a point of contention within both regions and in relations between them. There is undoubtedly scope for positive cooperation on such issues that governments in both regions will see as strategically beneficial. However, not all elements of the democracy agenda will be subject to easy agreement and convergence between the two regions – or indeed between states within each of the two regions.

Raising the profile of 'shared values' in the 2023 summit will invite attention on these more sensitive questions. If governments and EU institutions are to address democracy related questions seriously it will not be possible to avoid these contentious issues. It will be relatively easy to fill the summit with rhetorical references to shared democratic values and for the final communique to promise general cooperation and coordination on these issues. If any tangible contribution is to be made to reversing democratic erosion in both regions, however, governments would need to grasp some thorny issues.

The experience of the OAS summit in June 2022 serves as a cautionary tale in this regard. The US was keen to foreground democracy concerns and to harness the summit to gain wider democratic support and coordination in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion. Of course, its decision not to invite non-democratic governments to the summit ended up backfiring; it drove more of a wedge between democratic nations rather than tightening unity between them.

Some might feel that the summit could be a venue for negotiating modest steps away from authoritarianism in Cuba, Nicaragua or Cuba; the balance between pressure and engagement in these cases had been endlessly debated and the summit may not offer the best venue for reassessing such country-specific challenges if it is to be an inclusive event. Many in LA might anyway ask what the summit would then contribute to tackling cases of autocracy inside the EU itself. In this sense, more thematically generic approaches will be more likely to gain traction at the summit itself.

There will be difficult circle to square in this sense. An exclusionary approach could be deeply counterproductive. An approach that privileges harmonious summit atmospherics above all else will risk sidelining democracy issues at the behest of non-democratic governments in both regions. This would be a missed opportunity, damaging to the EU's own geopolitical needs and a betrayal of those suffering from authoritarian repression in both Europe and Latin America. If a handful of governments from both the EU and LA are unsupportive of a focus on democracy and human rights, it may be that *civil society networks* need to take a lead in such a 'shared values' agenda. Spain's secretary of state for the European Union has already highlighted the lead role that [civil society](#) cooperation should be given in a future EU-LA agenda.

It is understandable and right that the EU seeks Latin American support to defend democratic values internationally in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion. However, this aim must be approached with care. An overly heavy-handed or instrumental approach is likely to backfire. The framing of this democratic coordination must be defined with reciprocal understanding. As LA states stress their desire for a 'partnership of equals' any democracy agenda will need to emerge from LA as much as from EU states.

European diplomats insist they do understand this. A European narrative of 'getting Latin America' onside in a reinforced battle for democracy in the shadow of the Ukraine invasion is not the best way to approach the shared values agenda. The 'shared values' agenda cannot only be defined as Europe helping to shore-up Latin American democracy, but rather framed in terms of addressing democratic threats and erosion in *both* regions.

In terms of thinking through the scope for concrete policy initiatives, it might be useful to separate out three different levels of the 'shared democratic values' agenda. Governments and the EU institutions will need to decide which if these they are interested in and willing to prioritize, and what the balance between the three baskets should be:

1. Generic themes

A first level would involve the EU and LA agreeing to work together on general themes related to democracy at an international level. This would be the 'softest' level of a democracy agenda and the most easily implemented. This tends to be the focus of inter-regional work and would take the form of the two regions selecting certain generic themes on which to design common principles and projects, either within multilateral initiatives or on a stand-alone EU-LA basis.

Examples that tend to be prominent today in summit conclusions include references to the importance of independent media or women's rights or equal social rights or civil society action or youth engagement in politics. Global funds now exist for all these issues and governments can easily reference these in formal texts that formally state the importance of supporting such multilateral cooperation. Another increasingly common trait is reference to the need for joint standards for the democratic management of artificial intelligence through any one of the many international bodies now working on this issue.

These kinds of standard setting and awareness-raising initiatives are useful and important. They have the advantage of being political feasible; most governments have little trouble in signing up such generic commitments, even as their own actions take democratic quality in a negative direction. However, the concrete political impact of such commitments would not be great – and nor would the tangible strategic gain.

2. Directly related to aftermath of Ukraine invasion

A second level would be related more specifically to challenges emerging from the Ukraine invasion. This would require governments to tie the summit's output more tightly to the situation in Ukraine and tailor their new ideas in the field of democracy support to the fallout from Russia's invasion. In this sense, the summit will need to resonate with the need for wider international coordination on democracy, as outlined above. It will need to speak directly to the concerns over democratic order and law-based norms that have become more acute since Russia launched its attack on Ukraine. The situation on the ground in Ukraine is still in flux and much will depend on how well Ukrainian forces succeed in repelling Russian occupying forces. While it is impossible to predict what the situation will look like by the time the EU-LA summit is held in 2023, some early thinking can pave the way for some concrete output to help in the side international dimension of defending democracy.

3. Specific democratic abuses.

A third level would be to address more specific democratic deficiencies and authoritarianism within each region. This would be the most sensitive level of work related to democracy, and the most tangible in its relevance to domestic political trends in the EU and parts of LA. It would appear unsatisfactory if the summit were completely to ignore these challenges and only make generic commitments to democratic norms or themes. Neither region has succeeded in stemming illiberal and authoritarian trends within their own respective ranks. The most difficult order of challenge for the summit to have any kind of impact at this most sensitive level – that is, beyond ritualist assertions of shared democratic values to more meaningful action against autocratic and democratic-illiberalism within the same states present at the summit. It is here that civil society initiatives might be most germane.

Ten ideas

Translating such mid-level guiding principles into more concrete policy ideas will be difficult, as once proposals come down to this level of specificity then governments can easily find objections and one or more states can render ideas unworkable. With this reality in mind, ten concrete policy ideas follow, spanning the three different levels outlined:

EU-LA Defending Democracy Fund.

Governments could set up a new Defending Democracy Fund of 100 million euros. If 40-plus governments attend the summit, then small contributions will be enough to reach this total. This could be linked to and draw from the Commission president's recent announcement of an EU Defence of Democracy package. The fund should be managed by independent non-state actors and projects would not need any approval or authorization from governments. This

would focus attention on the creation of EU-LA civic society networks and empower these to have more leverage over the poor state of democracy in both regions. This work could build on recent initiatives led by EU delegations in Mexico and Colombia to offer more proactive support for human rights activists.

EU-LA initiative on populism and democracy.

The two regions are distinctive in the prominence of populist parties and leaders; Europe and Latin America are the two regions where populism has been most prominent and of most significance politically. Most populism in Europe is rightist, while most in Latin America is leftist, although this division is not absolute and there are examples of each type in both regions. Most of the populists that have gained a role in government insist they are democratic, although their governance styles and positions on some rights often leaves doubts over this claim. Some insist LA's latest wave of leftism appears to be more rooted in notions of local democracy and more pluralist than previous waves.

As this issue is shared between the two regions, more than any other region in the world, it would be an important topic to include in a future democracy agenda. A statement of principles could be drawn up of what populist parties would need to abide by to ensure a fully democratic style of populism. The presence of populist leaders and parties at the summit would of course make this a hotly contested issue. Yet if these two regions could at least begin a process of dialogue with and about populisms' relationship to democracy, this may help in the longer term reconcile at least some softer versions of populism with democratic principles. An group of LA experts might be supported to provide advice on how Europe should deal with its non-democratic populism.

Inclusive management of external funding.

Non-democratic governments in both regions continue to receive large amounts of external funding – with humanitarian aid sharply rising in LA in recent years in authoritarian contexts. The rights and wrongs of this might be debated, but it is a reality that is unlikely to change. Some opposition groups in the most authoritarian contexts in the EU and LA have recognized a need to support such external support and argue that a condition should be that non-state actors get a role in allocating such funds. As a minimum, a new effort should be made for the independent and inclusive monitoring and control over such funding. A civil society initiative to this end could be considered.

EU-LA initiative on climate and democracy.

The two regions are suffering the consequences of ecological crisis in increasingly tangible and evident forms. In both regions, this ecological crisis is having an increasingly serious impact on governance patterns. In both regions, many fear that climate change could soon become the most serious risk to democracy and prompt trends towards what is often labelled eco-authoritarianism – the idea that only government unencumbered by democratic accountability can effectively deal with the ecological crisis. A new initiative could work a set of guidelines for democratic climate action, together with concrete commitments from governments to support a positive increase in climate-related citizen engagement.

Pre-empting attacks on democratic space.

There would be great benefit to be gained from joint EU-LA early warning coordination on government attacks against civil society and democratic activists. The two regions share unfortunate records in being amongst the worst places in the world for so-called closing civic space. Even the most democratic governments in each region are guilty of having restricted civil society organizations and narrowed the space for democratic activism. A joint early warning mechanism would help pre-empt such democratic erosion. Governments could support the creation of an independently managed early warning structure. This would bring together actors already working on publicizing such government abuses in the two regions and give additional momentum and weight to their respective efforts in the two regions. If governments refuse to do so, an initiative led by civil society organizations from the two regions could be considered.

EU-LA joint ideas for future of Summit for Democracy process.

The two regions could jointly promise to take over a co-leadership role in this process, as the United States signals a desire to step back after hosting a second democracy summit in spring 2023. One European and one Latin American state could undertake to host the next two summits in 2024 and 2025 respectively. The two regions could work together to fashion an enduring process as follow-up to the way in which the US has led and largely controlled the summit process so far. They could suggest and co-manage new ‘cohorts’ that currently group together certain thematic issues under the summit process.

Regional mechanisms.

The EU and LA share a notable feature: they have more developed and formalized regional mechanisms for defending democracy than those that exist in other regions. If anything, LA mechanisms have proven themselves somewhat more effective than EU democracy clauses. Yet, these regional mechanisms have failed in both regions to hold at bay a general decline in democratic quality. An extremely important contribution would be for the two regions to oversee an initiative on improving regional democracy-defence mechanisms. The two regions should be learning a lot more from each other on this issue. Of course, those states likely to be the subject of such mechanisms are hardly likely to be supportive of more effective regional monitoring and responses. This could be another issue on which civil society could take the lead together with a small subset of EU and LA states.

Democratic innovations: a joint programme of mutual learning.

Democracy needs rethinking and qualitatively different types of democratic practice in both regions. The two regions have been at the forefront of experiments in new types of democratic participation and citizen engagement. These may not have been fully successful so far, but there is a wealth of lessons to be learned from these innovations. Latin America started earlier than Europe on these experiments and has moved through several iterations of direct citizen engagement. Interest is growing in Europe of how to draw best-practice lessons on new forms of participative democracy. As these are the two regions with the most extensive experience in this dynamic new agenda, a common programme of lesson learning in democratic innovations

could be prepared, drawing from both regions equally. Governments could undertake to support a concrete implementation of these lessons.

Post-Ukraine stresses on democracy.

An initiative to better understand each region's major concerns about how Russia's invasion of Ukraine places additional strains on democratic structures. The idea here would be to avoid the framing of European governments insisting that Latin American governments sign up to a more supportive position on Ukraine. Rather, the aim would be to gain European help for Latin American concerns, as well as the reverse. It might be possible to work through some kind of acknowledgement that, while differences exist over how to deal with Russia, the two regions share concerns over attacks on democratic norms – and that they commit to not letting differences over tactics towards Russia prevent wider coordination on upholding democracy globally.

Trade, investment and the EU Global Gateway

Trade is likely to dominate the summit. And whether for good or bad, the EU is unlikely to attach much democratic conditionality to trade and investment relations. This means that more indirect ways need to be found to ensure that the economic dimension of EU-LA relations works in a more democratic fashion rather than undercutting democracy. Pressure and leverage could be used to insist on independent civil society scrutiny of new trade agreements' impact on basic rights. Funding could be linked to the trade agreements to upgrade support to civil society working on rights issues.

The EU-LA summit could propose a more specific and political sub-strand of the EU Global Gateway programme. The EU presents this as a democratic alternative to Chinese funds and trade, although it remains unclear for now precisely how EU funding of infrastructure is supposed to further democracy, as promised. The summit could help develop an initiative that offers more specific counter approaches to the anti-democratic effects of Chinese investment – in both regions. In parallel, EU and LA governments could use their pending trade agreements to get small entrepreneurs involved along with emergent green businesses that tend to support values agendas. Support for economic exchanges to provide digital access for marginalized communities could also have a democracy-enhancing function.

Both regions are going through a reassessment of economic policy in the aftermath of Covid-19. In both the EU and LA there is now more focus on building up state capacities and public investment; analysts talk about the post-neoliberal era. These changes could be harnessed to underpin democracy support. This is not a simple matter and the relationship between economic policy and democracy is complex. More effort is needed to connect the economic paradigm shift to direct forms of democratic engagement. A large number of policy documents and meetings have stressed the importance of the EU fund focusing on reducing social inequalities in the region; this is indeed important and is nearly always stated to be a priority in EU-LA summits, but it does not in itself amount to a democracy strategy (and indeed, the same could be said for debt relief, which may be justified but does not always work to democracy's advantage and in some cases can empower illiberal or non-democratic regimes).

New and creative ways need to be found to ensure enhanced state economic powers go hand in hand with deeper forms of accountability and citizen participation in the management of these new policies.

Conclusion

The author was charged with suggesting positive and practical ideas; the paper proposes the 10 ideas in this spirit but with a clear cautionary note that focusing on political ‘values’ at this moment will be extremely difficult. Expectations will need to be measured over what can be achieved. Highlighting an agenda of presumed ‘shared democratic values’ might invite criticism at a moment when commitment to such norms is in doubt across both the EU and Latin America. Framing this agenda as one of ‘protecting democratic values’ or ‘addressing shared challenges to democracy’ might be more apt.

Of course, some governments on both sides are likely to resist any meaningful or tangible focus on democracy (and indeed it would have been easier to write a critical paper listing democracy and human rights obstacles rather than positive proposals!). Governments might conclude that many of the kinds of ideas proposed here are not feasible. It is likely that there will be relatively non-democratic or illiberal governments at the summit from both regions. The challenge will be to carve out modest areas of work on human rights and democracy in a relatively unfavourable context like this. The ten ideas are proposed in a spirit of the EU needing to look for relatively indirect or creative ways of addressing democracy and human rights issues. There is scope to do so, especially through non-state actors, if expectations are not pitched too high. The need for a focus on human rights and democracy is certainly greater than previously, due both to domestic trends within both regions and because of the wider international situation. While governments may be tempted to limit their focus at an EU-LA summit largely to trade issues, it will increasingly be difficult to hold commercial and political issues separate from each other in the future.

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Authoritarian governance persists or has put down new roots in both regions. In many democracies in both Europe and Latin America, the quality of political pluralism and accountability is worsening. Many citizens in both these regions have been drawn to illiberal leaders and political parties. Levels of citizen frustration and dissatisfaction with democracy are rising in both regions, even in countries where democratic process appears strong and resilient. The outcome of the recent elections in Brazil offers a positive fillip for the defence of democratic norms, although the challenges run deep.

This situation makes pro-democracy support more necessary and, in many ways, more difficult to design. These trends mean a focus on defending democracy will be especially important for and within both regions. They also deepen the difficulties of pursuing such democracy efforts. Contrary to some rhetoric, the discourse on ‘shared democratic values’ is not something that is unique to EU-LA relations, as the EU also stresses ‘shared values’ in its summits with Asian and African countries – and indeed polls suggest support for democratic values has held up rather better in these other regions – while also struggling to form concrete democracy policies there.

These democracy problems go well beyond the two or three states in each region that are most widely cited as examples of clearly authoritarian drift. Limited or electoral democracy is now a common regime type in both regions. The most heavily declining democracy indicators over the decade have been restrictions on civil society and media censorship. More human rights defenders are killed each year in Latin America than in any other region. The hard-right has more presence and involvement in government in Europe than in any other region. The European Commission’s annual rule of law report notes that a majority of member states now suffer deficiencies with regards judicial independence. In both regions, there is increasing contestation over how democracy is defined and conceived, as a divergence has opened between, on the one hand, its liberal-constitutional elements and, on the other hand its radical-popular or illiberal-populist dimensions.

On top of these domestic-level challenges, the risks facing democracy have become more severe at the international or inter-state level. The overarching rationale for a stronger focus on defending democratic values flows from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's invasion is not only a brutal and illegal attack on Ukraine's democracy but also represents a heightened risk more widely to democratic values. The invasion has made authoritarianism appear a more real and tangible threat. It has brought to the surface the geopolitical costs of democratic powers having failed to act together to buttress democracy during the 2010s. President Zelensky constantly insists that the war is not simply a war between two states but between two political visions.

More broadly, authoritarian states have doubled down on cooperation in a way that reinforces a growing divide with democratic nations. China-Russia cooperation since the invasion began represents a turning point in their cooperation against democratic self-determination. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has taken on a new lease of life, including by China agreeing to lift its veto on admitting Iran to make the SCO a stronger alliance against the democratic West.

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To give this sentiment substance, LA would seem a natural partner for the EU in deepening cooperation on democratic values. Recent polling suggests that the LA population [wants](#) the EU to focus more on political rights as the distinctive offer it can make over other partners like China. Yet, a number of governments in both the EU and LA appear ambivalent about such commitment to democratic coordination. Most LA leaders have not chosen to frame the Ukraine conflict in these terms. EU states have stressed the strategic risks of deepening authoritarian coordination, LA governments much less so. From an LA perspective internal issues like inequality are the most severe and immediate threat to democracy rather than the fraught geopolitical context. A crucial question is whether, against this backdrop, the EU-LA summit has any scope to play its part in advancing democracy-protecting coordination.

The victory of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (Lula) in Brazil's election opens new possibilities for EU-LA cooperation on many fronts. The main focus has been on climate change issues, as here Lula is likely to adopt positions that could unfreeze the EU-Mercosur trade agreement. In the field of democracy support, Brazil's change of government could be similarly positive, but

might also involve new challenges. In his first term in office, there were significant differences between Lula and European positions on Venezuela and Cuba. And Lula has made remarks about Ukraine being as much to blame for the current war as Russia that are dramatically out of line with EU readings of the invasion. Lula's commitment to democratic renewal certainly adds new possibilities to the 'shared values' agenda, but by no means removes the difficulties of getting this issue onto the summit agenda.

From trade to geopolitics

Of course, issues other than democracy and human rights are likely to be of higher priority at the EU-LA summit. Much has been said and written about the two regions' neglect of each other in recent years, and charting that neglect lies beyond this paper's remit. Of relevance to this particular paper, it suffices to note that democracy related issues have been especially low-key in the relationship in recent years.

Most recent and current effort to redress the neglect has been in the area of trade policy. In this area of policy, the stated aim to revive EU-LA relations does not start from a blank slate. For the EU, the trade agenda has been mainly prompted by concern over China and its growing presence in Latin America. In recent years, the EU has already begun to deepen and extend its commercial focus on Latin America and some Latin American states have begun to rediscover an interest in partnership with the EU.

As is well known, a priority focus in the lead up to the summit will be on whether currently stalled trade agreements can be either completed or moved towards full implementation. In particular, movement is awaited on the EU side with respect to free trade agreements already negotiated with Mexico, Chile and Mercosur. Newly 'modernised' agreements with Chile and Mexico are set to be ratified by the European Parliament and then presented to member states for ratification; Brussels' ratification of the agreement with Mercosur signed in 2019 is still outstanding.

The trade agenda is often presented as if it were an integral part of a values-based partnership. But there are tensions between commercial and values-based aims. The EU has promised in many of its policy documents to ensure that its trade and investment relations do not empower non-democratic actors; but it is clear that they are doing just this in several LA autocracies – some European energy companies have developed creative processes to get access to energy supplies from authoritarian states, for instance. European trade and investment have continued to flow to non-democratic countries in LA, in contrast to more critical policy responses towards autocracy in some other regions. If trade is to be the priority for an EU-LA reset, then governments may be tempted to sacrifice any focus on democracy and human rights.

In recent years, while the trade agenda has progressed, democracy and human rights have lost presence in EU-LA relations. Environmental issues have become a much more prominent point

of attempted leverage than have political rights. In the EU-Mercosur stand-off the focus has been on environmental issues, not democracy or human rights; the EU has shown itself increasingly willing to use climate-related conditionality but much less so democracy-related conditionality. The EU has for many years pursued a policy of engagement and cooperation with non-democratic regimes in LA without success in opening these up to political reform.

Levels of European funding are not insignificant in the region, but have not centred on democracy as a priority. The EU has allocated 3 billion euros for the social effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Global Europe budget line allocates 3.4 billion euros to Latin America for 2021-7. The EU has been running development programmes on social equality and inclusion for many years. Democracy and human rights are certainly included in EU national indicative development programmes with LA states and the EU funds many important projects on human rights defenders, women's empowerment and the like. But the levels of such funding have not been as high as in most other regions. The two regions have done little to coordinate on major global-level threats to democracy; indeed, divisions between them have grown on such political issues (as divisions have widened *within* each region too).

In 2022, the EU's focus has moved from trade to geopolitics. It has begun to reach out to Latin America in order to build support for what is happening with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the broader surge of authoritarian power internationally. To some extent, this geopolitical focus opens the door to a stronger focus on democratic values, as outlined above. However, the relationship between democracy and geopolitical interests is less than clearcut. Much has been written about Latin American democracies' apparent reluctance to sacrifice relations with Russia and even less so with China. At the same time, the EU's own declared aim to become a more 'geopolitical power' seems to entail a great deal of realpolitik that sits uneasily with support for democratic values.

Levels of Ambition

These trends suggest that there is heightened need for EU and Latin American states to upgrade the focus on democracy and human rights in their inter-regional coordination, but also that this agenda faces severe obstacles. Relations between the two regions are traditionally infused with rather ritualistic references to 'shared values.' Yet, democracy issues are increasingly a point of contention within both regions and in relations between them. There is undoubtedly scope for positive cooperation on such issues that governments in both regions will see as strategically beneficial. However, not all elements of the democracy agenda will be subject to easy agreement and convergence between the two regions – or indeed between states within each of the two regions.

Raising the profile of 'shared values' in the 2023 summit will invite attention on these more sensitive questions. If governments and EU institutions are to address democracy related questions seriously it will not be possible to avoid these contentious issues. It will be relatively

easy to fill the summit with rhetorical references to shared democratic values and for the final communique to promise general cooperation and coordination on these issues. If any tangible contribution is to be made to reversing democratic erosion in both regions, however, governments would need to grasp some thorny issues.

The experience of the OAS (Organisation of American States) summit in June 2022 serves as a cautionary tale in this regard. The US was keen to foreground democracy concerns and to harness the summit to gain wider democratic support and coordination in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion. Its decision not to invite non-democratic governments to the summit ended up backfiring; it drove more of a wedge between democratic nations rather than tightening unity between them.

Some might hope that the EU-LA summit could be a venue for deliberating modest steps away from authoritarianism in Cuba, Nicaragua or Venezuela. Yet, the balance between pressure and engagement in these cases had been endlessly debated and the summit may not offer the best venue for reassessing such country-specific challenges if it is to be an inclusive event. Many in LA might anyway ask what the summit would then contribute to tackling cases of autocracy inside the EU itself. In this sense, more thematically generic approaches will be more likely to gain traction at and beyond the summit.

There will be a difficult circle to square in this sense. While an exclusionary approach could be deeply counterproductive, an approach that privileges harmonious summit atmospherics above all else will risk sidelining democracy issues at the behest of non-democratic governments in both regions. Many pro-democratic reformers will see this a betrayal of those suffering from authoritarian repression in both Europe and Latin America. If a handful of governments from both the EU and LA are unsupportive of a focus on democracy and human rights, it may be that *civil society networks* need to take a lead in the ‘shared values’ agenda. Spain’s secretary of state for the European Union has already highlighted the lead role that [civil society](#) cooperation should be given in a future EU-LA agenda.

It is understandable and right that the EU seeks Latin American support to defend democratic values internationally in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion. However, this aim must be approached with care. An overly heavy-handed or instrumental approach is likely to backfire. The framing of this democratic coordination must be defined with reciprocal understanding. As LA states stress their desire for a ‘partnership of equals’ any democracy agenda will need to emerge from LA as much as from EU states.

European diplomats insist they do understand this. A European narrative of ‘getting Latin America onside’ in a reinforced battle for democracy after the Ukraine invasion is not the best way to approach this agenda. The ‘shared values’ agenda cannot only be defined as Europe helping to shore-up Latin American democracy, but rather framed in terms of addressing democratic threats and erosion in *both* regions.

In terms of thinking through the scope for concrete policy initiatives, it might be useful to separate out three different levels of the ‘shared democratic values’ agenda. Governments and the EU institutions will need to decide which of these they are interested in and willing to prioritise, and what the balance between the three baskets should be.

1. Generic themes

A first level would involve the EU and LA agreeing to work together on general themes related to democracy at an international level. This would be the ‘softest’ level of a democracy agenda and the most easily implemented. This tends to be the focus of most inter-regional work and would take the form of the two regions selecting certain generic themes on which to design common principles and projects, either within multilateral initiatives or on a stand-alone EU-LA basis.

Examples that tend to be prominent today in summit conclusions include references to the importance of independent media or women’s rights or equal social rights or civil society action or youth engagement in politics. Global funds now exist for all these issues and governments can easily reference these in formal texts that formally state the importance of supporting such multilateral cooperation. Another increasingly common trait is reference to the need for joint standards for the democratic management of artificial intelligence through any one of the many international bodies now working on this issue.

These kinds of standard setting and awareness-raising initiatives are useful and important. They have the advantage of being politically feasible; most governments have little trouble in signing up to such generic commitments, even as their own actions take democratic quality in a negative direction. However, the concrete political impact of such commitments would not be great – and nor would the tangible strategic gain.

2. Directly related to Ukraine invasion

A second level would relate more specifically to challenges emerging from the Ukraine invasion. This would require governments to tie the summit’s output more tightly to the situation in Ukraine and tailor their new ideas in the field of democracy support to the fallout from Russia’s invasion. In this sense, the summit will need to resonate with the need for wider international coordination on democracy, as outlined above. It will need to speak directly to the concerns over democratic order and law-based norms that have become more acute since Russia launched its attack on Ukraine.

The situation on the ground in Ukraine is still in flux and much will depend on how well Ukrainian forces succeed in repelling Russian occupying forces. While it is impossible to predict what the situation will look like by the time the EU-LA summit is held in 2023, some early thinking can pave the way for some concrete output to help in the side international dimension of defending democracy.

3. Specific democratic abuses.

A third level would be to address more specific democratic deficiencies and authoritarianism within each region. This would be the most sensitive level of work related to democracy, and the most tangible in its relevance to domestic political trends in the EU and parts of LA. It would appear unsatisfactory if the summit were completely to ignore these challenges and only make generic commitments to democratic norms or themes.

Neither region has succeeded in stemming illiberal and authoritarian trends within their own respective ranks. The most difficult order of challenge will be for the summit to have any kind of impact at this most sensitive level – that is, beyond ritualist assertions of shared democratic values to more meaningful action against autocratic and democratic-illiberalism within the very states present at the summit. It is here that civil society initiatives might be most germane.

Ten ideas

Translating such mid-level guiding principles into more concrete policy ideas will be difficult, as once proposals come down to this level of specificity then governments can easily find objections and one of more states from either region can render ideas unworkable. With this reality in mind, ten concrete policy ideas follow, spanning the three different levels outlined:

EU-LA Defending Democracy Fund.

Governments could set up a new Defending Democracy Fund of 100 million euros. If 40-plus governments attend the summit, then small contributions will be enough to reach this total. This could be linked to and draw from the European Commission president's recent announcement of an EU Defence of Democracy package. The fund should be managed by independent non-state actors and projects would not need any approval or authorisation from governments. This would focus attention on the creation of EU-LA civil society networks and empower these to have more leverage over the poor state of democracy in both regions. This work could build on recent initiatives led by EU delegations in Mexico and Colombia to offer more proactive support for human rights activists.

EU-LA initiative on populism and democracy.

The two regions are distinctive in the prominence of populist parties and leaders; Europe and Latin America are the two regions where populism has been most widespread and of most significance politically. Most populism in Europe is rightist, while most in Latin America is leftist, although this division is not absolute and there are examples of each type in both regions. Most of the populists that have gained a role in government insist they are democratic, although their governance styles and positions on some rights often leave doubts over this claim. LA's latest wave of leftism appears to be more rooted in notions of local democracy and more pluralist than previous waves.

As this issue is shared between the two regions, more than any other region in the world, it would be an important topic to include in a future democracy agenda. A statement of principles could be drawn up of what populist parties would need to abide by to ensure a fully democratic

style of populism. The presence of populist leaders and parties at the summit would of course make this a hotly contested issue. Yet if these two regions could at least begin a process of dialogue with and about populism's relationship to democracy, this may help in the longer term reconcile at least some softer versions of populism with democratic principles. A group of LA experts might be supported to provide advice on how Europe should deal with its non-democratic populism.

Inclusive management of external funding.

Non-democratic governments in both regions continue to receive large amounts of external funding – with humanitarian aid sharply rising in LA in recent years in authoritarian contexts. The rights and wrongs of this might be debated, but it is a reality that is unlikely to change. Some opposition groups in the most authoritarian contexts in the EU and LA have recognised a need to accept this external support and argue that a condition should be that non-state actors get a role in allocating such funds. As a minimum, a new effort should be made for the independent and inclusive monitoring and control over such funding. A civil society initiative to this end could be considered.

EU-LA initiative on climate and democracy.

The two regions are suffering the consequences of ecological crisis in increasingly tangible and evident forms. In both regions, this ecological crisis is having an increasingly serious impact on governance patterns. In both regions, many fear that climate change could soon become the most serious risk to democracy and prompt trends towards what is often labelled eco-authoritarianism – the idea that only governments unencumbered by democratic accountability can effectively deal with the ecological crisis. A new initiative could work up a set of guidelines for democratic climate action, together with concrete commitments from governments to support a positive increase in climate-related citizen engagement.

Pre-empting attacks on democratic space.

There would be great benefit to be gained from joint EU-LA early warning coordination on government attacks against civil society and democratic activists. The two regions share unfortunate records in being amongst the worst places in the world for the so-called closing civic space. Even the most democratic governments in each region are guilty of having restricted civil society organisations and narrowed the space for democratic activism. A joint early warning mechanism would help pre-empt such democratic erosion. Governments could support the creation of an independently managed early warning structure. This would bring together actors already working on publicising such government abuses in the two regions and give additional momentum and weight to their respective efforts in the two regions. If governments refuse to do so, an initiative led by civil society organisations from the two regions could be considered.

EU-LA joint ideas for future of Summit for Democracy process.

The two regions could jointly promise to take over a co-leadership role in the Summit for Democracy process that the Biden administration launched in 2021. The United States has signaled a desire to step back after hosting a second democracy summit in spring 2023. One

European and one Latin American state could undertake to host the next two summits in 2024 and 2025 respectively. The two regions could work together to fashion an enduring process as follow-up to the way in which the US has led and largely controlled the summit process so far. They could suggest and co-manage new ‘cohorts’ that currently group together certain thematic issues under the summit process.

Regional mechanisms.

The EU and LA share a notable feature: they have more developed and formalised regional mechanisms for defending democracy than those that exist in other regions. If anything, LA mechanisms have proven themselves somewhat more effective than EU democracy clauses. Yet, these regional mechanisms have failed in both regions to hold at bay a general decline in democratic quality. An extremely important contribution would be for the two regions to oversee an initiative on improving regional democracy-defence mechanisms. The two regions should be learning a lot more from each other on this issue. Of course, those states likely to be the subject of such mechanisms are hardly likely to be supportive of more effective regional monitoring and responses. This could be another issue on which civil society could take the lead together with a small subset of EU and LA states.

Democratic innovations: a joint programme of mutual learning.

Democracy needs rethinking and qualitatively different types of democratic practice encouraged in both regions. The two regions have been at the forefront of experiments in new types of democratic participation and citizen engagement. These may not have been fully successful so far, but there is a wealth of lessons to be learned from these innovations. Latin America started earlier than Europe on these experiments and has moved through several iterations of direct citizen engagement. Interest is growing in Europe of how to draw best-practice lessons on new forms of participative democracy. As these are the two regions with the most extensive experience in this dynamic new agenda, a common programme of lesson learning in democratic innovations could be prepared, drawing from both regions equally. Governments could undertake to support a concrete implementation of these lessons.

Post-Ukraine stresses on democracy.

An initiative is needed to better understand each region’s major concerns about how Russia’s invasion of Ukraine places additional strains on democratic structures. The idea here would be to avoid the framing of European governments insisting that Latin American governments sign up to a more supportive position on Ukraine. Rather, the aim would be to gain European help for Latin American concerns, as well as the reverse. It might be possible to work through some kind of acknowledgement that, while differences exist over how to deal with Russia, the two regions share concerns over attacks on democratic norms – and that they commit to not letting differences over tactics towards Russia prevent wider coordination on upholding democracy globally.

Trade, investment and the EU Global Gateway

Trade is likely to dominate the summit. And whether for good or bad, the EU is unlikely to attach much democratic conditionality to trade and investment relations. This means that more

indirect ways need to be found to ensure that the economic dimension of EU-LA relations works in a more democratic fashion rather than undercutting democracy. Pressure and leverage could be used to insist on independent civil society scrutiny of new trade agreements' impact on basic rights. Funding could be linked to trade agreements to upgrade support to civil society working on rights issues.

The EU-LA summit could propose a more specific and political sub-strand of the EU Global Gateway programme. The EU presents this as a democratic alternative to Chinese funds and trade, although it remains unclear precisely how EU funding for infrastructure is supposed to further democracy, as promised. The summit could help develop an initiative that offers more specific counter approaches to the anti-democratic effects of Chinese investment – in both regions. In parallel, EU and LA governments could use their pending trade agreements to get small entrepreneurs involved along with emergent green businesses that tend to support values agendas. Support for economic exchanges to provide digital access for marginalised communities could also have a democracy-enhancing function.

Both regions are going through a reassessment of economic policy in the aftermath of Covid-19. In both the EU and LA there is now more focus on building up state capacities and public investment; analysts talk about the post-neoliberal era. These changes could be harnessed to underpin democracy support. This is not a simple matter and the relationship between economic policy and democracy is complex. More effort is needed to connect the economic paradigm shift to direct forms of democratic engagement. A large number of policy documents and meetings have stressed the importance of the EU focusing on reducing social inequalities in the LA region; this is indeed important and is nearly always stated to be a priority in EU-LA summits, but it does not in itself amount to a democracy strategy (and indeed, the same could be said for debt relief, which may be justified but does not always work to democracy's advantage and in some cases can empower illiberal or non-democratic regimes). New and creative ways need to be found to ensure enhanced state economic powers go hand in hand with deeper forms of accountability and citizen participation in the management of these new policies.

Conclusion

The author was charged with suggesting positive and practical ideas; the paper proposes its 10 ideas in this spirit but with a clear cautionary note that focusing on political values at this moment will be extremely difficult. Expectations will need to be measured over what can be achieved. Highlighting an agenda of presumed 'shared democratic values' might invite criticism at a moment when commitment to such norms is in doubt across both Europe and Latin America. Framing this agenda as one of 'protecting democratic values' or 'addressing shared challenges to democracy' might be more apt.

Of course, some governments on both sides are likely to resist any meaningful or tangible focus on democracy (and indeed it would have been easier to write a critical paper listing democracy and human rights obstacles rather than positive proposals!). Governments might conclude that many of the kinds of ideas proposed here are not feasible. There will be relatively non-democratic or illiberal governments at the summit from both regions. The challenge will be to carve out modest areas of work on human rights and democracy in a relatively unfavourable context like this.

The ten ideas are proposed in a spirit of the EU needing to look for relatively indirect or creative ways of addressing democracy and human rights issues. There is scope to do so, especially through non-state actors, if expectations are not pitched too high. The need for a focus on human rights and democracy is certainly greater than previously, due both to domestic trends within both regions and because of the wider international situation. While governments may be tempted to limit their focus at an EU-LA summit largely to trade issues, it will increasingly be difficult to hold commercial and political issues separate from each other in the future.