

# Democracy under Threat – Conference Input Paper

## Introduction

Democracy is under threat worldwide! Not only as a consequence of actions of anti-democratic and autocratic regimes, but also due to the rise of anti-democratic populist movements and parties in democratic states. Creating and defending democratic structures is primarily a task for government actors as law-makers and the ones responsible for their enforcement, but since many of them are not adequately committed to or up to that task, civil society organizations, companies and other actors in society must also step in, addressing problems and challenges in established democracies, countries in transition and autocracies.

This input paper presents the reflections of the organizers of the Conference “Democracy under Threat” (The Hague, 10 November 2022), and informs the key recommendations (see below) that we have titled the “Democracy Manifesto – Our Call for Action!”. Changes and improvements can be discussed at the conference. The two documents form our contribution to the Dutch government preparation for the Second Summit for Democracy, that will take place in Spring 2023. We, civil society organizations and organizers of the conference, are committed ourselves as well to make on the recommendations listed in the Democracy Manifesto – Our Call for Action!

## Democracy must be a top priority

1. We call upon authorities – local, national and supranational – to actively respect and defend the rights of citizens and civil society organizations. Freedom of expression, assembly and association must be guaranteed and actively promoted by creating spaces for participation in policy-making, so that all democracy defenders, peace activists, human rights defenders, anti-corruption activists, professional media and other independent organizations can contribute to the functioning and strengthening of democracy.  
We ask for a joint commitment by government and civil society organizations to develop a long-term strategy for democracy support. Reasons why we need democracy have to be made explicit again, especially for younger generations and groups of citizens who are disappointed in the performance of the state and the perceived lack of influence and may turn to groups and people providing non-democratic ‘solutions’.
2. The Dutch government and the European Union must make democracy a top priority. We recommend the creation of a Special Envoy for Democracy at the national level, and a dedicated European Commissioner for Democracy at the EU-level. This official, supported by a staff department, must commit to strengthening democracy abroad and step up efforts to defend and improve our own democracy, and coordinate inter-departmental cooperation.
3. The universal values that form the basis of democracy should not be subordinated to other interests and must take center stage in a coherent foreign policy agenda. Democratic countries must restore and strengthen their credibility as promoters of democracy and human security by not sacrificing democratic principles to economic interests or approaches stemming from (geo)political considerations, such as counter-terrorism.  
Democratic ambitions and principles deserve a central role in peacebuilding, development aid, policies to promote the SDG’s, the climate agenda, and reconstruction. That implies more attention for and financing of projects jointly developed and implemented by national or local government bodies and civil society organizations, integrating strong anti-corruption principles.
4. The European Commission and EU member states should in all cases stick to the EU’s foundational values and use the full toolbox to protect these, including but not limited to the rule

of law conditionality mechanism. EU funds should not become available to governments who engage in anti-democratic policies and practices or undermine checks and balances and the overall rule of law architecture. The EU can and should be more to support democratization, human rights and anti-corruption.

### **We need more democracy!**

5. In many countries, democratic values and structures are under threat. People in representative democracies are frustrated due to the lack of influence they experience. Yet if there is a problem with democracy, the solution is more democracy! We call upon government and civil society organizations to engage together in the creation of better, more representative and more democratic models of governing. Our connection through the internet and digital tools allow democracies to be more inclusive and direct than ever before. Numerous are the positive examples of participatory and direct democracy, including citizens' panels, citizens' assemblies and citizens' initiatives. Strengthening of democracy can and should also take place at the level of organizations, institutions and companies. Models of consultation, co-creation and joint decision-making should be practiced throughout society and politics. The adagio "Nothing about us without us" should become standard practice. By embracing an intersectional approach, policy makers should be in close consultation with the groups that are affected by those policies and include their perspectives in the process. This is particularly important for those people that are often underrepresented in politics: women, youth and people with a practical education with diverse backgrounds.
6. We call upon the Dutch government to develop and implement a national anti-corruption program, to fight corruption both in the Netherlands and worldwide. In this program, special attention must be paid to the way in which Dutch laws and Dutch companies are facilitating international corruption and therewith creating obstacles for democratization.

### **Democratic countries must ensure adequate and long-term support for pro-democracy forces and individuals**

7. In autocratically-led countries, strengthening power of articulation of the citizen and supporting resilience of citizens' initiatives and independent groups have proven to contribute to prevention of tyranny, corruption and violence. We call upon governments, donors and civil society organizations to intensify support for these critical voices in autocracies, especially those most vulnerable and those facing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination. Support and protection must also be organized for dissidents in diaspora.
8. The creation of better conditions for a democratic social contract is paramount, by facilitating dialogue and cooperation between politicians and citizens. We must inform the next generation of active citizens, through more formal and non-formal civic education, and empower the next generation of politicians and civil society actors through enhanced training. The inclusion of underrepresented groups deserves specific attention, including women, youth, minorities, LGBTI+ people and those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.
9. National state actors in countries in transition often lack political willingness to support democracy, anti-corruption, human rights and rule of law, and for a number of years political elites in established democracies have not been sufficiently vocal and persistent in their support for and defense of democracy. To strengthen public demands for fundamental changes bottom-up, we need a shift of resources from the national to local and subnational levels. More resources must be made available for long-term support for and (core) financing of actors (civil

society and/or local governments) organizing activities at local and subnational levels. That is also in line with the local ownership priority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

10. As logical and useful as sanctions against certain states and individuals may be, we must avoid total or long-term isolation of ordinary citizens in autocratic countries (such as Russia). Total isolation allows people in power to maintain full or maximum control over their population. That largely resembles the Cold War logic. We must prevent that we end up getting stuck in a new Cold War. It is paramount to maintain open channels to citizens, in particular independent initiatives and critical voices.

### **Improvement of the EU's support of democracy, rule of law and human rights**

11. The Netherlands, as a member state of the European Union and Council of Europe, must actively promote that democracy, human rights and rule of law are at the top of the EU and CoE policy and that more resources to that end are invested in member states, in countries aspiring to join the EU, as well as vis-à-vis repressive regimes:
  - a. The war in Ukraine should not be used as a pretext to weaken the EU's internal rule of law mechanism. No Member State should get away with serious rule of law violations. We should not set aside concerns about rule of law and respect for fundamental rights in EU Member States. Unblocking funds if concerns remain as serious as ever, would be detrimental and betrayal to the cause many Ukrainians are fighting for.
  - b. The EU enlargement strategy is fundamentally flawed. Technocratic transactionalism fails to bring results in candidate countries that are still governed by ethno-nationalist elites, (cf. the Western Balkans). Instead of funding these central governments, the European Union should channel more support directly to local authorities and civil society, especially democracy and human rights defenders, anti-corruption organizations and initiatives promoting and practicing citizenship.
  - c. The EU must invest in peace and participation and scale up coordinated EU support to nonviolent movements in autocracies, starting with developing a conceptual framework that recognizes their potential to mitigate risks of violent conflict and the potential to promote democracy and rule of law.
  - d. EU Member States should implement the recommendations of the European Commission's Rule of Law Reports. Although not legally binding, any country will benefit from implementation. This also applies to countries with overall well-functioning democracies, including The Netherlands.
  - e. Instruments of the Council of Europe that ensure the progress of democracy, the protection of fundamental rights and the respect for the rule of law - such as the Venice Commission - deserve continued support and should be applied both beyond and inside Europe.

### **Supporting democracy in Ukraine and Eastern Europe**

12. In reaction to the war in Ukraine, many countries have raised their defense budgets. But if Ukraine is now the battlefield between democracy and autocracy, we also need to invest more in democracy, human rights and anti-corruption. At best, military support can help bring about a situation in which democracy can continue to develop in Ukraine, within internationally recognized borders. We call upon governments and donors to make more resources available in support of democratization in Ukraine. Reconstruction programs for Ukraine should be citizen-centered, bottom-up and inclusive. The so-called Lugano Principles mention the importance of transparency, accountability, democratic participation and multi-stakeholder engagement, but the

National Recovery Plan of Ukraine so far does not speak of (continued) decentralization, (continued) anti-corruption or partnership with civil society organizations. Donors and governments must insist on honoring the Lugano Principles in reconstruction projects. In anticipation of return to their place of origin, we must work with and protect displaced communities, in Ukraine and local governments and their representatives in exile on how to incorporate principles of democracy and inclusivity in processes of return and reconstruction.

13. We call upon the Dutch government, in light of the war in Ukraine, to intensify its support, verbally and financially, for democracy, human rights, anti-corruption and rule of law in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Western Balkans. We recommend as first steps to immediately make a minimum of 5 Million Euro available for MATRA-NFRP grants in 2023; and prepare structural increase of the budget for the years that follow. Strategies of 'building back better' imply long-term commitment, patience and perseverance.

### **An independent Dutch fund for democracy, human rights, rule of law and anti-corruption!**

14. The Dutch government widely distributes subsidies for projects ranging from innovation in business to diversity in culture. However, there is not enough funding for the civil society organizations that are an essential part of the checks and balances in a democracy. These organizations therefore often lack the resources to effectively guard all aspects of our democracy, including human rights, digital rights, resilience against foreign interference, a free and pluralistic media, anti-corruption and the rule of law. We therefore call on the Dutch government to make funds available to this end. In order to safeguard efficiency and independence, the funds must be easy accessible and could be distributed by an entity separate from and independent of the government.
15. To ensure sustainability and overcome intergenerational conflict, it is critically important that societies take into account the benefits of decisions for future generations, i.e. those who are not yet born. The interests of future generations in all their diversity must be accounted for in actual, present-day democratic decision-making.
16. While democracies can use technologies that help innovate, defend and strengthen democracy, they should be pro-active in defending us from technological threats to democracy and security. We urge democracies to wake up to the existential threat of information ecosystems being distorted by a Big Tech business model fixated on harvesting people's data and attention, while it undermines serious journalism and polarises our societies. We, the people, demand technology that serves humanity, instead of putting us, our communities and our democracies at risk. We call for an end to Big Tech's destructive business model which has turned our own data into weapons against us. We demand a better internet, where citizens are able to access vital infrastructure and information, and thrive off connection and participation, without being reduced to products in an insidious surveillance economy. We call for a world in which no billionaire can tweak algorithms and change the fate of billions without democratic oversight and accountability. We call for technologies that cannot be weaponised by foreign and domestic adversaries of democracy and security.

# Democracy under Threat – Call to Action!

## General recommendations for at home and abroad

1. Develop, in a joint commitment between government and civil society organizations, an integrated long-term strategy for democracy support and promotion
2. Establish a new position at Dutch government level and at EU-level for a Special Envoy for Democracy
3. Make democracy central in foreign policy, climate agenda, peacebuilding, development aid and reconstruction, not subordinated to economic or (geo)political interests
4. Defend and apply the EU Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism
5. Create better, more direct democratic models of governing, such as citizens panels, assemblies and initiatives following the “nothing about us without us” principle
6. Design a national anti-corruption program, correcting (Dutch) laws facilitating international corruption
7. Support more critical voices in autocracies and dissidents in diaspora
8. Empower the next generation of active citizens through civic education, and empower the next generation politicians and civic activists through training, specifically underrepresented groups
9. Shift more resources to pro-democracy actors at local and subnational levels

## Democracy in Europe

10. Support sanctions but no total isolation of ordinary citizens - no new Cold War
11. Put democracy, rule of law and human rights at the top of EU and CoE policy
12. Include displaced communities and exiled professionals in a citizen-centered, bottom-up and inclusive reconstruction of Ukraine
13. Increase the MATRA-NFRP grants for democracy in the European neighborhood
14. Set up an independent Dutch fund for democracy, human rights, rule of law and anti-corruption.
15. Include the interests of future generations in all their diversity in decision-making processes
16. Fight technological threats to democracy and security, and use technologies that innovate, defend and strengthen democracy.