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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
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Delegations will find attached Council Conclusions on Democracy adopted by the Council at its 3720. meeting held on 14 October 2019.

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Council Conclusions on Democracy

1. Today we are living in a world where democracy is being challenged and put into question. While democracy stands strong in many countries, in others there is a growing trend towards authoritarianism. The challenges are multi-fold and we need to counter them urgently and comprehensively. The more democratic a system of government, the more inclusive and equal a society will be. It is 10 years since the Council adopted Conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations. Renewing the EU's commitment is, therefore, timely.

2. One of the aims of the European Union's external action is to advance democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as set out in the Article 21 of the Treaty. In addition the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 21 that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government […] expressed in periodic and genuine elections".

3. The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, as set out in Article 2 of the Treaty. These values are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. It remains highly important to ensure the coherence of the EU's internal and external policies. As underpinned by the EU Global Strategy, supporting democracy, human rights and the rule of law externally is also in the Union's strategic interest, contributing to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy including by:

  - strengthening the rules-based, effective, transparent and accountable multilateral system that the EU and its like-minded partners seek to foster,

  - enabling and accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular goal 16 on accountable institutions and inclusive and participatory decision-making and goal 10 on reducing inequalities,

- creating the conditions for sustainable peace and security and preventing violent conflicts through participation and accountability, responsiveness to grievances and the political mediation of disagreements,

- building inclusive and resilient democratic societies capable of creating opportunities for their populations also enabling the promotion of a rights based approach to migration, addressing forced displacement and reducing push factors for irregular migration.

4. The Council reaffirms the principles of its 2009 Conclusions on Democracy Support and recalls the 2012 EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy and subsequent Action Plans on Human Rights and Democracy, as well as the lessons learnt from the EU's experience over the last decade of working to support democracy, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law across the world. The Council also notes the relevance of its 2019 Conclusions on securing free and fair elections in Europe and of its 2017 Conclusions on EU engagement with civil society in external relations, and their follow-up. It welcomes the efforts to prepare a new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2020-2024. These Council Conclusions will inform the Action Plan, as appropriate.

5. Across the world, people continue to demonstrate the strength and power of their desire for a stronger voice and inclusion in decision-making processes. On all continents, democracy time and again proves its resilience. New and growing challenges to democracy have however emerged.

    These challenges include, inter alia:

    i) **undermining of democratic processes and institutions** including through keeping the appearance of democracy to legitimise autocratic regimes, extension of constitutional term limits, interference with judiciaries, reducing media pluralism, limiting the legal and political space for opposition parties and reduced transparency by some actors in the democratic process, in the financing of political and issue-based campaigning;

ii) **low levels of trust** in institutions and politicians due to growing social and economic inequalities, corruption and a lack of inclusivity;

iii) **a shrinking democratic space for civil society**, including human rights defenders and democracy activists as well as free and independent media online and offline through violence, persecution and intimidation, restrictive legislation, limits on registration and financing, and reprisals;

iv) **increased violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms;**

v) **manipulation using online technologies** including disinformation campaigns, state-sponsored restrictions and shut downs, hate speech, unlawful micro-targeting of messages to citizens in violation of rights to privacy and data protection, and the avoidance of effective scrutiny over the financing of political messaging. The internet has been a positive force for democratisation, however the economic model of digital platforms has also contributed to these challenges.

6. The Council therefore agrees to further develop a common and practical response based on a close cooperation between the EU institutions and Member States to these challenges. Taking into account that democracy building processes take place in a variety of contexts, the EU institutions and Member States will promote positive trends and counter negative ones with an emphasis on the following:

a) To use the efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda and notably SDG 10 and 16 to holistically promote and sustain democratic governance, human rights, the rule of law, accountability and participatory, inclusive decision-making and to assure coherence with the EU's efforts to address inequality. Combating inequality is crucial for rebuilding trust in democracy and its institutions.

b) To promote the full participation of all without discrimination and, in this context, to make particular and special efforts to support a greater participation and representation of women and young persons and their interests in public and political life.

c) To strengthen and support the capacities of parliaments and (in a non-partisan manner) political parties, on national and sub-national levels, to play their essential role in democratic societies.

d) To strengthen and support international and local civil society and its enabling environment, as an essential pillar of a pluralist and inclusive democracy. Special attention should be given to supporting human rights defenders and in particular women human rights defenders.

e) To reinforce efforts to support and protect free and independent media, offline and online, including through promoting the safety of journalists and supporting an enabling environment.

f) To support efforts to strengthen the rule of law, democratic integrity and accountability through reinforcing the separation of powers, access to justice and the right to a fair trial for all, fighting impunity and combating corruption.

g) To support and promote civic education and online media literacy, as a necessary medium and long-term contribution to the resilience of today's democracies, and promote the use of online technologies in strengthening democratic participation, accountability and access to information.

h) To support countries in their efforts to ensure that the rules governing elections and democracy offline can be applied effectively online, building on the EU's own efforts in this regard, including the Commission's Electoral Package and the European Cooperation network on elections, the Action Plan against Disinformation, Code of Practice on Disinformation, as well as the Council of Europe's Recommendation on standards for e-voting and the practices developed within the G7's rapid response mechanism.

i) To promote increasing the inclusiveness and credibility of electoral processes through EU election observation, support to domestic electoral observers and through strengthening the collective efforts needed to support and encourage the follow-up of the recommendations of EU and OSCE electoral missions and the addressing of new challenges to electoral observation, also working with the international election observation community.

j) To strengthen the already close co-ordination with multilateral, international and regional organisations, building strong global partnerships for supporting democracy and implementing the targets of SDG 16.

k) To promote greater transparency of democratic processes, particularly of the financing of political and issue-based campaigning by different actors.

l) To be able to act quickly in response to sharp deteriorations or improvements in the democratic situation of countries, both politically and through appropriate allocations of funds.

m) To promote a more flexible, innovative, long term and conflict-sensitive approach to supporting democracy and, in this context, to encourage and support the work of the European Endowment for Democracy and other organisations working in these ways.

n) To strengthen promotion and public communication on the value of democracy as a global and universal public good.

7. The Council looks forward to further debates on the state of democracy across the world and EU activities in this field on a regular basis.

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