

Forging the European Democracy Shield: Expanding Scope, Deepening Impact, and Maximising Political Leverage

6.12.2024, European Economic and Social Committee

Closing Remarks by Sam van der Staak

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to say a few concluding words.

Today, we have talked about a new EU policy initiative on democracy. But the EU's democracy strengthening agenda, as such, is not new. It has been around for at least 10 years, since the Juncker Commission. But what is interesting, the language has changed: In his 2014 Political Guidelines, President Juncker referred to an "Agenda for Democratic *Change*". In 2019, President VDL came in with a Democracy *Action* Plan. At the end of her term in 2023, she introduced a *Defence* of Democracy Package. Now, we will soon have a Democracy *Shield*.

Now, words matter. The shift from the neutral word 'change' to the more urgent word 'action', to the use of the alarming word 'defense' and ultimately the militaristic 'shield' is no accident. The shift in terminology signals a deeper lying reality. It demonstrates how much the EU's democracy agenda has become part of its security agenda.

What made that logic change is of course the war in Ukraine, and Russia's aggression. That aggression has meanwhile extended far beyond Ukraine. Romania's recent Presidential elections were a case in point.

Now, if the European Democracy Shield is presented through that defence lens, this has consequences. It means that shielding democracy becomes a cornerstone of the EU's action to defend itself.

And if we use a defence lens to look at the Democracy Shield, there are at least four things we should conclude:

First, that like any defence effort, we cannot pick and choose too freely what critical democratic infrastructure to protect and what not to protect. Shielding democracy cannot be done too narrowly. So yes, we have to focus on FIMI and civic resilience. But we need to also focus on the resilience of democratic institutions – elections, parliaments, courts, constitutions – as a bulwark against assaults on democracy.

The blueprint for that is in last year's recommendation on electoral resilience, which accompanied the Defence of Democracy Package. These recommendations presented proposals for more a) inclusive participation, b) election integrity, c) election observation, and d) fighting foreign funding. Let's implement them.

Second conclusion from applying that defence lens, is that we need to focus on defending not just the EU 27, but include the enlargement countries. After all, they are in the waiting room to enter the EU. And yet, they are facing a significant onslaught of foreign attacks on their democracies. Moldova and Ukraine are testament to that threat. Sadly, Georgia has already succumbed to it. We need to prepare the European neighborhood now, lest Russia beats us to it.

But we also stand to learn from frontline states, who have a much longer experience in shielding their democracies from foreign interference. And are sometimes better at it. After all, whereas Russian interference derailed Romania's elections two weeks ago, it did not in neighbouring Moldova just three weeks earlier.

So, the Commission could step up its support to defending the political systems of enlargement countries: by a) fighting cyberattacks in election campaigns, b) combatting disinformation, c) banning foreign funding, and d) strengthening electoral observation. High Representative Kaja Kallas and Commissioner Kos could tailor a defence of democracy package for accession countries.

Thirdly, we should operationalise the Democracy Shield. Not just through the EU but all its 27 member states. One of the mechanisms to do so is the European Cooperation network on Elections, which unites the electoral commissions of all 27 member states in one coordinating body. Can we upgrade that network and

provide it with greater means to learn and act? So that the resilience of each electoral commission, is as strong as that of the 27 electoral commissions combined. And so that the surprise that Romania's electoral commission got two weeks ago, will not happen again.

And lastly, on the consequences of the defence lens to democracy: as we are bringing security into the democracy agenda, we should also do the reverse, and bring democracy into the security agenda. A White Paper on the Future of European Defence is expected for the first 100 days of the new Commission. Can we place democracy at the heart of that defense strategy? Like NATO, whose founding treaty calls to uphold democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law through military means. After all...., if not democracy and freedom, what else would we be fighting for?

Let me close by thanking all the speakers once again for their contributions. As well as the co-organisers for a splendid partnership. A warm thank you to my own colleagues for their tireless efforts: Marilyn, Clara, Chiara, Charles, Alisa. And lastly, on behalf of the organisers, a warm thanks to all of you for participating.