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INTERESTS

- CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE
- TOOLS OF AUTOCRATIZATION
- DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE

REGIMES

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WHY DEMOCRACIES MUST LEARN FROM AUTOCRACIES TO WIN

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The real danger for democracies today is not based on autocracies becoming stronger, but from their reactive posture, slow consensus-building, and failure to communicate clearly and timely with their citizens. Autocracies exploit these weaknesses by shaping narratives and spreading their influence, creating an appearance of greater strength and unity. Yet the core issue is not that autocratic regimes are inherently more powerful or superior, but that democracies often underestimate their adversaries' resolve, misinterpret their intentions, and fail to fully leverage their own strengths to counter them effectively. This article examines the tools available, necessary reforms, policy shifts, and mindset changes Europe must adopt to confront these challenges.

Crisis of Democracy?

As Sir Winston Churchill once said in an address to the House of Commons in 1947, "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."¹ Today it is almost impossible to imagine any average democratic state without regular elections at all levels, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, or any of the core features of a modern democratic state. Yet the more developed democracies become, the more easily they tend to take democracy for granted, and forget the origins of the democracy they are enjoying today. A democracy is built on a solid

foundation of rights and institutions. But no matter how solid the foundation is, at some point it needs renovation, upkeep, and renewal.

Is democracy in crisis? Yes, but not because the system is inherently flawed. For decades, conferences, think tanks and academia have been warning about a 'democratic backsliding',² 'rise of authoritarianism' or 'democracy's decline',³ yet no-one has not come any closer to implementing any of the suggested ideas. The diversity of ideas and beliefs is, obviously, one of the main benefits of democracy, but without the ability to act decisively, this portrays democracy as too cautious, consensus-driven, and constrained by electoral cycles that reward short-term promises over long-term strategy.

1 Churchill, W. (1947, November 11). *Commons Debate on Parliament Bill*, vol. 444, cc. 206–207. Hansard, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill>

2 Gilliard, A., Democracy in the shadow of the global rise in authoritarian populism. Carr-Ryan Commentary. Harvard Kennedy School. 6.02.2025, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/carr-ryan/our-work/carr-ryan-commentary/democracy-shadow-global-rise-authoritarian-populism>

3 Brands, H., *Global democracy is failing and Trump may kill it*. Bloomberg Opinion. 28.09.2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/features/2025-09-28/global-democracy-is-failing-and-trump-may-kill-it>

Democracy is often framed as primarily a values-based system – grounded in freedom, human rights, and the rule of law.⁴ However, it is frequently overlooked that these values emerged as consequences of deeper, more fundamental needs: security, stability, and a predictable international environment.



Is democracy in crisis? Yes, but not because the system is inherently flawed

But democracy is not a moral-based, but a power-based project, and there are many examples of this in history. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States provided a large amount of support for Europe through the Marshall Plan, not purely out of a desire to spread democracy, or solely to aid European reconstruction, but with the strategic aim of securing a stable bloc capable of resisting Soviet expansionism. Similarly, in the post 9/11 era, although the promotion of democracy was used as a justification for US involvement in the Middle East, the primary focus was on counterterrorism, and maintaining regional stability, to prevent threats to US security.

Earlier examples can be found in times of decolonisation, and the British Empire's transition into the Commonwealth, where

the building of institutions, and using democratic mechanisms were essential for establishing secure and stable post-colonial governments, aligned with overall Commonwealth interests. Finally, the whole European Union project is founded on the desire to be surrounded by predictable and reliable partners, rather than constant rivals. Democratic tools, such as strong institutions, and freedom of goods, services, people, and capital, form the core foundations of the EU today, serving both normative and pragmatic goals.

But why are the autocracies on the rise? According to the 2024 V-Dem report, the global trend towards increased authoritarianism is deeply concerning.⁵ While the specific causes vary, at its core this shift stems from fundamental human needs for stability and security. Many democracies today struggle with economic challenges and widespread frustration over their governments' inability to effectively address pressing issues such as migration, corruption, and institutional instability. In contrast, autocratic regimes often present quick and simple solutions to these complex problems, which can appear highly appealing to populations seeking immediate relief. They amplify this appeal through emotionally charged, easy-to-digest messaging, widespread propaganda, and disinformation campaigns — all designed to undermine democratic values and erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions.⁶

4 Kajsa Ollongren, *Keynote speech at Brussels International Democracy Day Conference*, European External Action Service, 18.09.2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/key-note-speech-brussels-international-democracy-day-conference_en; *Remarks by President Biden on democracy and freedom — Normandy, France*, The White House, 7.06.2024, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/06/07/remarks-by-president-biden-on-democracy-and-freedom-normandy-france/>; Heilbrunn, J., *Merkel makes first major speech as Germany's chancellor*. The New York Times, 30.11.2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/30/international/europe/merkel-makes-first-major-speech-as-germanys-chancellor.html>

5 Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. I., *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* V-Dem Institute, 2025, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

6 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, p. 14, 18.12.2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

To overcome the current crisis, democracies must learn from autocracies' effective powers of communication by clearly linking core democratic values — such as freedom, transparency, and accountability — to tangible benefits people experience on a daily basis. For instance, freedom means personal autonomy and the ability to express dissent without fear of imprisonment, unlike in Belarus or other autocratic states, where people are imprisoned just for speaking up. Transparency translates into a better infrastructure, government accountability, and real opportunities to change leadership when citizens are dissatisfied. By connecting these values to people's concrete well-being — security from arbitrary power, reliable services, and meaningful participation — democracies can counter the simplistic, emotionally charged messages autocracies use to offer 'quick fixes', and thus can regain public trust.



To overcome the current crisis, democracies must learn from autocracies' effective powers of communication by clearly linking core democratic values

Democracies should embrace creativity and use out-of-the-box thinking when it comes to shaping narratives and reaching out to their audiences. Very few are interested in official statements or reactions to any event within two days: people expect to have clear and quick reactions. They also expect the government to speak their language and in simple terms, which is the consequence of the social media predilection for doomscrolling which also leads to a short-

term attention span. A good example of effective communication is the current White House strategy, which breaks the mould of conventional official messaging. While its contents may provoke mixed reactions, it achieves a crucial goal: that of engaging a broad and diverse audience, sparking conversation, and ensuring the message is noticed and shared.⁷

Reaching the audience means going where they are already to be found. Today's youth, for instance, spend significant amounts of time on platforms like TikTok, X, Threads, and Instagram. Democracies must adopt these channels actively, producing contents tailored to their unique formats and cultures. Simply criticising or dismissing these platforms as useless cedes the ground to adversaries who exploit them without restraint.

Information as a Tool of Warfare

We are living in times when those who control the narratives also influence policies and people. Media and social media platforms now control people's views and moods, they are able to influence what people think and how they vote. Shaping narratives is one of the most important aspects of today's politics. It seems like it is also one of the factors most underestimated by democratic states, and in this environment, autocratic regimes have thrived.

Social media today appeals strongly to emotions and makes it easier to manipulate public opinion, spread misinformation, and deepen divisions. There are many examples in recent history of how social media has largely influenced public opinion and affected policies and decisions. Take the

⁷ Disclaimer: It is important to state that the author of the article discusses here not the contents of any social media posts or videos, but the communication strategy as a whole, the use of viral trends and popular news and events to deliver the message to their audience.

case of rail sabotage in Poland in November 2025: soon after the incident, several media voices amplified the narrative, claiming that “42% of analysed online comments blamed Ukrainians for sabotage”⁸, thereby fuelling anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Poland. Later analysis showed why this claim is likely inaccurate: it did not account for bot activity, did not follow any methodical survey, and, in fact, there was no survey at all.⁹ However, in today’s fast-paced information environment, people are more likely to remember the simple, emotional accusation than the carefully checked and nuanced facts.



Democracies invest heavily in media literacy workshops, fact-checking, and ‘information hygiene.’ These efforts matter, but remain largely reactive

Similarly, Russian troll farms influenced the Brexit vote by spreading misinformation and hate speech towards religious minorities, migrants, and in general about all the supposedly negative aspects of EU membership for the UK.¹⁰ In 2025, Russia also tried to influence elections in Moldova, by spreading propaganda and intimidating voters with the possibility of war if they voted for the pro-European president and party.¹¹ In Georgia, unable to achieve full military conquest, Moscow shifted focus to

politically destabilising the country through disinformation. After realising that it is unable to achieve its goals through military means, Russia has also been developing and implementing its plan to influence the Ukrainian people through information campaigns. It is not only targeting Ukrainians to destabilise situation inside the country, but is also spreading such disinformation among Ukraine’s partners, trying to weaken support for the country.

Democracies invest heavily in media literacy workshops, fact-checking, and ‘information hygiene.’ These efforts matter, but remain largely reactive. Meanwhile, autocracies make use of emotions, with short, memorable messages that spread faster than any fact-check. Simply debunking falsehoods or funding counter-propaganda cannot match the autocracies that pour billions into influence operations, treating information as a strategic weapon.

Democracies must move beyond merely reacting to circumstances, and start shaping their own compelling narratives. Effective communication is not just about accuracy — it is about emotional resonance. Autocracies succeed because they craft simple, powerful stories that connect quickly with the populace. Democracies must learn to speak clearly, respond swiftly, and adapt to the age of short attention spans. For example, when a Russian official account on X tried to romanticise the Soviet past and justify the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine did not

8 Polityka w Sieci [@Polityka_wSieci], 3.06.2025; Incydent uszkodzone torowisko w rejonie miejscowości Życzyn, 17.11.2025, https://x.com/Polityka_wSieci/status/1990324227090559282

9 Pifer, S., *Analysis: Rail sabotage reveals how hybrid pressure on Poland is mounting*, Kyiv Post, 19.11.2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/64498>

10 Booth, R., Weaver, M., Hern, A., Smith, S., & Walker, S., *Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows*, The Guardian, 14.11.2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets>

11 Sydorenko, S., *From paid voters to Romania-lovers: who’s helping the Kremlin hack Moldova’s elections?* European Pravda, 23.09.2025, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2025/09/23/7220846/>; Krychkovska, U., *Moldova uncovers Russian voter bribery scheme via app*, European Pravda, 4.08.2025, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2025/08/4/7217265/>; Secieru, S., *Moldova warns Russia will try to influence voters across Europe*, European Pravda, 4.08.2025, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2025/08/4/7217245/>

respond with a long legal explanation. Instead, its official account replied with just three words: “Toxic ex here.”¹² This short, relatable message instantly exposed the attempts at manipulation and made the propaganda look absurd — showing that sometimes the most effective response is not to shift the entire narrative, but to deliver a sharp, concise message which people immediately understand.

More broadly, democracies should invest in developing compelling narratives that unite rather than divide, emphasise shared values and aspirations, and counter falsehoods with both truth and emotional appeal. They must train public officials and spokespersons to communicate authentically and responsively, recognising the fact that in today’s media environment, silence or dullness cedes influence to louder, more aggressive voices.

Strategic Foresight, Political Will, and Reducing Dependence

Autocracies enjoy the luxury of being unconstrained by electoral cycles, a freedom that democratic states simply cannot afford. This allows authoritarian regimes to plan confidently over decades, knowing their strategies will remain consistent, regardless of political changes. China’s Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies this multi-decade strategic vision, with a gradual reshaping of global trade and influence. Similarly, Russia did not decide to invade Ukraine overnight; its plans were years in the making, coupled with contingency strategies to destabilise Ukraine politically and socially, if military conquest proved elusive. Democracies must learn three key lessons from these realities.

First, prioritise long-term planning.

While election cycles will always influence democratic governance, certain priorities — such as national security, defence, and fundamental resilience — must transcend the brevity of political seasons. No matter how prosperous or content a country is, all of that becomes irrelevant if it faces military aggression. Democracies need to institutionalise strategic planning mechanisms which guarantee that core interests are continuously protected, regardless of electoral outcomes. Although democracies often have grand strategies and long-term plans, their effectiveness is frequently undermined by short-term political considerations, and insufficient readiness in defence and security. In contrast, autocracies benefit from the ability to plan far ahead and act decisively — a critical advantage that democratic states should learn from when facing persistent and evolving threats.



Autocracies succeed because they craft simple, powerful stories that connect quickly with the populace

Second, avoid misinterpreting threats.

It is important not to ignore or misinterpret the threat, and to plan accordingly and immediately. In 2008, Russian President Vladimir Putin was very clear about his intentions and plans, when he announced that NATO’s expansion would be perceived as a direct threat to Russia.¹³ Later that year, Russia attacked Georgia. Russia has been

12 Ukraine [@Ukraine], [toxic ex here [Tweet]]. X, 18.06.2020, <https://x.com/Ukraine/status/1275391304181125121>

13 Booth, A. D., *Putin Warns NATO Over Expansion*. The Guardian, 4.04.2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/04/nato.russia>

named as a security threat since 2014-2015,¹⁴ after its attempted annexation of Crimea,¹⁵ and Ukrainian authorities were warning that this was not the end of Russian aggression.¹⁶ Clearly, the reaction of Ukraine's allies was slower and weaker than expected.

Europe's reactive approach to security and defence highlights the dangers of short-termism. The initial shock following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exposed deep vulnerabilities. Even by 2025, Europe continues to struggle with adapting and developing its defense strategy to meet current challenges. This failure to anticipate and prepare reveals a broader democratic weakness: the difficulty of maintaining continuity in strategy amid changing governments and shifting political priorities.

Third, reduce strategic dependence.

Sanctions on Russia were imposed incrementally, giving it time to adapt and restructure its economy, to withstand the harsher measures by 2022. This delayed response allowed Russia to prepare its economy for a prolonged period of conflict and sanctions.¹⁷ Similarly, lifting sanctions on Iran under the JCPOA¹⁸ implementation inadvertently enabled Tehran to expand its military capabilities, including drone and missile technology now used in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Yet, when it comes to democracies, European allies seem to have been shocked when the US in 2025 decided to distance itself from the security and defence policies in place in Europe. It was clearly seen in the mood of the audience during the Munich Security Conference, after US Vice President JD Vance's speech.¹⁹ While the decision may be debated from a US perspective, it unmistakably revealed Europe's lack of readiness to act independently of its traditional major ally.

Democracies — especially in Europe — must pursue greater strategic autonomy, not only in terms of adversaries but also from long-standing partners. Europe's heavy reliance on the United States for its security can hinder timely decision-making and undermine self-reliance. Building stronger autonomous defence capabilities and diversifying alliances will boost resilience, reducing vulnerability to external pressure and unexpected geopolitical shifts.

Conclusion

Today democracy is in crisis and faces critical threats. It is challenged not only by external threats but also by its own internal vulnerabilities. Autocracies are on the rise, particularly, because they see a lack of decisiveness and proactivity from democracies. While democratic values of

14 *Obama White House National Security Strategy*, The White House, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

15 *UN General Assembly — Resolution 68/262* (Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Ukraine), United Nations General Assembly, 27.03.2014, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/68/262>

16 *Ukraine Statement to the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly*, Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the UN, 2016, https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71_ua_en_24.pdf

17 Bergmann, M. *Out of Stock: The Global Security Implications of Critical Resource Shortages*, CSIS Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April, 2023, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-04/230414_Bergmann_Out_Stock.pdf?VersionId=6jfHCP0c13bbmh9bw4Yy2wbpjNnfeji8

18 U.S. State Department, *Iran: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)*, 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/>

19 Munich Security Conference, *Selected Key Speeches, Volume II, 2025*, https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2025/Selected_Key_Speeches_Vol_II/MS_C_Speeches_2025_Vol2-Ansicht_gekürzt.pdf

freedom, transparency, and accountability remain essential, they must be clearly connected to the tangible benefits that people in democracies experience daily, but do not appreciate sufficiently. Democracies must also recognise that information is not merely a marketplace of ideas but a battlefield where narratives shape power.

Learning from autocratic adversaries does not mean abandoning democratic values. Rather, it means adopting their strategic rigour, investing in effective communication, and planning with foresight and resilience. If democracies fail to adapt, the spectre

of autocratic strength will become reality — not because autocracies are invincible, but because democracies have allowed hesitation and division to undermine their own foundations. The time to act decisively is now.

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