



## **Report from the first meeting of the ECFR democracy and human rights advisory committee, Brussels, 12 March 2010**

This meeting launched ECFR's project on assessing EU support for democracy and human rights in its external relations. The event, held under the Chatham House rule, aimed to help define the scope and objectives of the project, by exploring the challenges that Europe faces and possible ways of overcoming them. ECFR's project is conceived as a pan-European discussion bringing together officials, practitioners and experts involved in all aspects of EU external policy on democracy and human rights. The intention is to provide a space for reflection and discussion that goes beyond day-to-day policy horizons, and brings together different constituencies that do not have a regular forum for engagement.

An initial sketch of some of the challenges to the EU was given in an ECFR discussion paper that helped set the framework for the meeting. Beyond the undoubted success of enlargement, the paper suggested, there has been at most limited success in establishing democracy and human rights in countries in the European neighbourhood. Further abroad, there remain difficult questions about how successfully democracy and human rights are integrated with EU policies on aid, trade and other questions. The shift of global power away from the West provides alternative models of development and alternative sources of funding that is detached from any normative agenda. China and Russia, significant powers that do not subscribe to principles of human rights and democracy, pose a difficult challenge to the EU's commitment to put values at the centre of its foreign policy.

Participants in the meeting divided between those who emphasized the challenges that the EU faced and those who focused on the opportunities it enjoyed. As far as challenges, it was suggested that the EU's approach of leading by example might be less viable in the present international context when it faced strong ideological competitors. Others suggested that there was an additional discursive challenge linked to the poor performance of many young democracies—the model of authoritarian development had not proved superior, but the argument that democracy is linked to prosperity and stability would no longer meet with automatic agreement. Since democracy was not taking root easily in the Eastern Neighbourhood, for instance, the EU needed to take a more pragmatic approach rather than assuming that democracy was an “easy sell”.

But other participants emphasized the advantages that the EU continued to enjoy: its power of attraction as a zone of stability and peace; its growing experience of external support for democracy and human rights (both on the part of member state and through EU institutions); its diverse levers of power, including the European Neighbourhood Policy, development cooperation, ESDP and trade; the new institutional architecture around the High Representative/Vice President and the External Action Service, and the Council Conclusions on democracy from November 2009, both of which offer the chance of greater coherence in EU policy; and the EU's ability to influence the development of global norms through the United Nations and relations with regional organizations. It was pointed out that the structure of the African Union is closely modelled on the EU, including the formal emphasis it gives to human

rights and democracy—an indication that the EU’s power of attraction continues at least on a normative level. By contrast, the Chinese model might seem less attractive as internal tensions become increasingly apparent.

The discussion that followed revolved around the question of how the EU could achieve greater impact. It was generally agreed that the EU needed more coherence and clout in its policies on human rights and democracy; one participant said the tools were the right ones but their use needed to be “revolutionized”. Others argued that the EU had a vision of how it wanted to operate in this area but needed to work out how to get from here to there.

The following were among the central points that emerged in the discussion:

1. The Council conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU’s External Relations from November 2009 form the obvious starting point for efforts to increase European effectiveness and impact in the field of democracy. The key elements of the conclusions—including the need to adopt a country-specific approach, the importance of dialogue and partnership, the commitment to seek more coherence in EU policy, and the inextricable connection between democracy and human rights – set the framework for future development of EU action. The one-year report back called for in the conclusions and the commitment to select pilot countries also provide a timeline for the EU’s next steps. It would be helpful to promote greater visibility for the conclusions and the agenda that is attached to them. ECFR’s project will be most valuable if it is complementary to the conclusions and the process they launched.
2. There was strong opposition to any further effort to define democracy as understood by the EU. But others felt it would be valuable to try to give more substance to the norms endorsed in the conclusions, working to define how they should be interpreted in specific contexts. In addition, if the EU is inconsistent in the priority it attached to democracy in particular areas (for instance, emphasizing it more in the Eastern Partnership than in the Union for the Mediterranean) it needs a better narrative of why it is doing this. It is reasonable to set different objectives in different situations, bearing in mind the multiplicity of different goals that the EU is pursuing, but it should not allow this to be defined as an example of double standards.
3. It was agreed that the notion of a country-specific approach is of central importance, but requires further elaboration. There is a need for more stock-taking about what has worked and not worked in specific contexts: what influence does the EU have in practice and what are the lessons about how it has been used? It is important to recognize that different approaches will be appropriate for developing and developed countries. In each case, the EU should work to identify relevant issue and stakeholders; awareness of internal struggles or areas of disagreement within countries may add to the leverage that the EU can bring into play.
4. Participants agreed that democracy must be seen to deliver, and that it was necessary to seek entry points that would establish its appeal within particular societies. Democracy in its fullest sense, it was said, was more than merely a set of political rights, but should be seen as also describing a series of processes, procedures and relationships. This would have most

appeal if it was seen as part of a country's development, linked to the effective provision of tangible goods; it should be tied to the delivery of economic and social rights. But what place does this leave for traditional political rights like freedom of expression?

5. The EU's development cooperation programme was thought to provide a significant means of supporting the progress of democracy and human rights overseas. In some cases, sanctions have been effective—for instance in invoking the threat of suspension of the Cotonou Agreement in the case of military coups. However greater conditionality of development aid is seen as incompatible with a “cross-pillar” approach and was ruled out in the Council conclusions. Governance profiles developed in the development context are a valuable tool for analysing political reform and should be properly integrated into country strategy papers. Development cooperation has to be seen in a long-term perspective which can be at odds with the political imperative of obtaining quick results. But that leaves the question of what indicators are available to demonstrate positive change.
6. The record of governance reform in the context of cooperation with ACP countries was described as mixed. There is a tendency to focus on projects to the exclusion of more long-term governance reform; engagement must be political as well as technical, and work from the bottom up. Governance assistance was said to be most effective when it takes account of existing processes and movements within the countries involved, and when governance issues are raised consistently in dialogue. Some felt the emphasis on poverty reduction in the Millennium Development Goals limited the ability to focus on questions of democracy and human rights, but others argued that if poverty reduction was interpreted in a multi-dimensional way the MDGs need not be restrictive.
7. A consistent theme was the need to broaden the EU's approach to democracy support so that it was not narrowly focused on elections. Elections have tended to attract attention because they are the most concrete and visible element of democracy, but it is important to extend support through the electoral cycle. Linked to this is the question of the relationship of democracy and human rights. It would be helpful to explore how the cross-fertilisation of democracy and human rights endorsed in the Council conclusions could be taken forward. ECFR's discussion paper suggested that, particularly in more closed societies, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly could be seen as a bridge between the two; by pushing for the opening of political space for discussion in third countries, the EU might encourage the amplification of pro-democratic voices. But others warned that freedom of expression might attract resistance as a Western, liberal value in the development context. Another more focused suggestion was that human rights fact sheets could be extended to cover issues of democracy as well.
8. On coherence, participants again pointed to the need for more knowledge about how development and foreign policy approaches could be brought together. It would also be helpful for the EU to connect with international partners—both in the United States, which is re-evaluating its policies on human rights and democracy, and through inter-regional consultations like those that informed the global consultations on the EU's role in democracy building recently conducted by International IDEA. In addition, the creation of a

Directorate-General for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship offers the possibility of greater connection between internal and external policy in this area.

Finally, the meeting discussed ways in which ECFR's project could contribute to the development of EU policy on democracy and human rights.

Among the suggestions made were:

- Stock-taking of what has been done and lessons learned.
- Bringing together development and foreign policy communities and identifying potential synergies between development and foreign policy approaches.
- Contributing to the further development of the process launched by the Council conclusions, including providing input on the choice of pilot countries and maintaining pressure for the process to be taken forward.
- Identification of practical ways in which democracy and human rights policies can complement each other.
- Contributing to the definition of appropriate thresholds or priorities for the different relationships that the EU has with different parties.
- Raising awareness of the place of human rights and democracy in the EU's new structures and processes.
- Pursuing a complementary approach to the follow-on from the Council conclusions: ECFR's project should be flexible and outcome-oriented, as opposed to the more process-oriented institutional approach of the EU.
- Exploring the specific options available and entry points in particular countries that pose a difficult challenge for the EU, perhaps through the development of hypothetical or role-playing scenarios.
- An audit of the EU's influence on human rights and democracy, through an examination of the levers that the EU has and their impact and potential in different contexts.