



Is there a case for rekindled democracy assistance in Central and Eastern Europe?

International IDEA 25th Anniversary Europe Webinar

Thursday 19 November, 11h00-13h00

Background

In the two decades following the fall of the Berlin Wall, European and US governments undertook considerable efforts to support reforms for strengthening democratic governance in Central Europe. This support included efforts to foster multi-party politics and institutionalization of political parties, reforming public administration bodies, strengthening parliaments and judicial bodies, supporting independent media and civil society organizations – all vital pillars for a well-functioning democracy.

After the Central and Eastern European countries joined the European Union, much of the international democracy assistance ended too, as western donors considered the region to have accomplished the necessary milestones in its democratic transformation and having passed the point of democratic no-return. Democracy's checks-and-balances, they argued, had made a reversal toward non-democracy practically impossible.

Throughout the last decade, this assumption of democratic irreversibility has come under increasing pressure. In 2019, the Global State of Democracy Indices measured that democracy in Central Europe had declined for the fourth consecutive year. In its 2020 report, Freedom House classified Hungary as a hybrid regime, having declined further from its earlier status of a semi-consolidated democracy, and thus breaking the standard of democratic conformity within the European Union, a multilateral body that itself aims to be a supporter of democracy worldwide.

Civil society organizations, and more broadly civic space – which are conventionally considered key factors in building societal and institutional resilience against democratic backsliding – have become increasingly targeted.

In the face of these threats, global and regional democratic actors are building coalitions across borders to strengthen their voices, constituencies, and capacities. At the European level, calls for more effective monitoring of fundamental principles of rule of law, independence of judiciary and shrinking civic space have been gaining support. Large networks of European civil society organization have called upon the European Commission to allocate sufficient funding for enabling citizen engagement and monitoring governments in the region.

However, some governments in the region are understandably averse to the notion of outside support to the functioning of their systems of governance. Moreover, democracy actors

themselves emphasize that international assistance in the region should reflect their level of democratic development and take into account domestically existing capacities on issues of democracy. Moreover, international democracy support organizations also face technical difficulties, such as international commitments against using donor funding, branded as Official Development Assistance, for supporting democracy in middle and high-income countries.

This webinar will discuss the future of democracy assistance in Central and Eastern Europe and consider whether and how to rekindle efforts for international democracy assistance in the region. More specifically, it will discuss the following questions:

1. Is there a case for renewed democracy assistance in Central and Eastern Europe?
2. If so, what shape should this renewed democracy assistance efforts take?
3. How can it build on the lessons of the past democracy support successes and failures within the countries of the region? what lessons from elsewhere can be relevant?
4. What role for the European Union?

Agenda

- 11:00 – 11:10: Welcome by **Dr Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary-General, International IDEA**
- 11:10 – 11:25: Presentation of the Global State of Democracy 2020 for Central-Eastern Europe, **Sam van der Staak, Head of Europe Programme, International IDEA**
- 11: 25 – 12:55: Panel discussion: *Is there a case for rekindled democracy support in Central and Eastern Europe?*

Proposed Speakers

The panel debate will start with brief presentations (approx. 10 mins) by each speaker, followed by a moderated discussion, as well as a Q&A with the online audience.

- **Katarina Barley, Vice-President, European Parliament**

Katarina Barley is a Member of the European Parliament for the German Social Democratic Party. She has been Federal Minister in Germany three times, including as Minister for Labour and Social Affairs and for Justice and Consumer Protection. As Vice-President of the European Parliament, Katarina Barley has been shadow rapporteur of the report on the establishment of an EU Mechanism on Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights. Barley systematically raises issues related to human rights violations, gender equality and democratic backsliding in Europe.

- **Ivan Krastev, Chairman, the Centre for Liberal Strategies, Bulgaria**

In his 2019 book, 'The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy', Ivan Krastev, together with Stephen Holmes, analyses how in the early 1990s, hopes for the eastward spread of liberal democracy were high. Krastev, however, explains that the transformation of Eastern European countries gave rise to resentment at the post-1989 imperative to become Westernized and a bitter repudiation of liberalism itself.

- **Adam Bodnar, Commissioner for Human Rights of Poland**

As Commissioner for Human Rights of Poland, Adam Bodnar represents what is probably the most prominent and one of the few standing state institutions upholding democracy and the rule of law in Poland. At important moments, international actors have come out in support of his work, which Bodnar has termed critical for his efforts. Such international solidarity has been a bulwark against the weakening and delegitimization of democratic checks and balances.

- **Thomas Carothers, Senior Fellow, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**

Thomas Carothers has been an astute observer of international democracy assistance since the fall of communism in the 1990s, and has continued to be a leading author on the topic for nearly three decades. As far back as 1996, Carothers published one of the earliest analyses on democracy assistance, 'Assessing Democracy Assistance: The Case of Romania'. He has followed the trajectory of international democracy assistance intimately, has published profusely on the topic, and continues to be one of the field's most respected analysts.

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an inter-governmental organization, working to support democracy world-wide. The Institute develops comparative knowledge in the areas of electoral processes, constitution-building, and political participation and representation. The Institute has 33 member states and is governed by the Council of Member States. In Eastern Europe, International IDEA works closely with the OSCE, Council of Europe, and leading national and international NGOs supporting democratic reform. Full information about the Institute is available at www.idea.int.