

REPORT

Main outcomes of the Citizens' Forum & Innovation
Lab:

“Innovative practices in the fight against
autocratisation in the European Neighbourhood”

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Report on main outcomes of the Citizens' Forum & Innovation Lab: Innovative practices in the fight against autocratisation in the European Neighbourhood, held at the IEE-ULB on 6 February 2024

As part of the Horizon Europe 'Respond to Emerging Dissensus: SuPranational Instruments and Norms of European Liberal democracy' (RED-SPINEL) Project, the Institute for European Studies (IEE-ULB) hosted a Citizens' Forum on the 6th of February 2024, to discuss the European Union's (EU) practices in the fight against autocratisation in the EU neighbourhood.



Organised by **Prof. Luca Tomini** and **Dr. Claudia Bădulescu**, the Forum attracted a range of esteemed speakers and participants from various European, national, and civil society organizations.

These included **Sarah Leah Whitson** (Democracy for the Arab World Now - (DAWN)), **Antoaneta Dimitrova** (Leiden University), **Nisida Gjoksi** (DG-NEAR, European Commission), **Gergana Noutcheva** (Maastricht University), **Kurt Bassuener** (Democratization Policy Council - DPC), **Vergonika K. Kucherchuk** (Endowment for Democracy - EED), **Senada Šelo Šabić** (Institute for Development and International Relations – IRMO, Croatia), **Régis Dandoy** (Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Ecuador), **Ragnar Weilandt** (Norwegian University of Science and Technology - NTNU), **Marta Matrakova** (Cevipol-ULB), and various researchers and academics from ULB. Each speaker and participant brought unique perspectives and expert knowledge, enriching the dialogue and understanding of the topics discussed.



Following the plenary session on ‘Democracy and Autocracy in the European Neighbourhood: What role for the EU?’, the Forum conducted its deliberations in the following four parallel sessions: (1) Support to Civil Society; (2) Electoral Monitoring and Assistance; (3) Anti-corruption drives & institutional capacity building; and (4) Defence of Judicial Independence.

The Forum focused on understanding the complex relationship between the EU’s strategies, policies, and instruments, and autocratic governance within the EU’s neighbourhood, including countries from the Western Balkans, and the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. The day-long Forum was filled with lively conversations, thought-provoking insights, and a shared commitment to comprehending the EU’s role in resisting autocratisation and supporting democracy within its neighbourhood.



During the interactions and deliberations, the following main critical areas were highlighted:

- **The EU's Role in the democratisation of its neighbourhood:** Participants grappled with the EU's dual position of supporting democracy, while facing criticisms of collaborating – and thus enabling – authoritarian regimes. Emphasis was put on the need for more robust conflict of interest laws, regulation of post-public employment of senior EU and national civil servants, as well as on improved regulation of arms sales to illiberal governments.
- **Supporting Civil Society:** Speakers argued that the EU needs to rebuild its credibility in supporting democracy, and adhere to its own standards and values when collaborating with domestic actors. For this to happen, the EU should consider adopting long-term planning, understanding the local context before intervening at the domestic level, and increasing its support for independent media and investigative journalism. Participants also argued that there should be increased transparency and better regulation of the EU's engagements with illiberal governments.
- **Electoral Monitoring and Assistance:** Participants considered that the EU needs more flexibility in its election monitoring missions, and that international support should focus on policy responses to electoral violations, rather than solely on technical improvements.
- **Combating Corruption and Building Institutional Capacity:** There was wide agreement on the fact that the complex fight against corruption must be pursued through political engagement at the highest level. At the same time, the EU should pursue anti-corruption policies also through bottom-up approaches that would enable an active involvement of civil society in resisting bribery and corruption at all levels of society. Last but not least, there should be a stronger focus on dismantling patronage networks through increased transparency and accountability in the use of EU funds.
- **Judicial independence:** Although an integral part of its identity, the EU faces difficulties in maintaining judicial independence within and beyond its boundaries. This hinders the EU from implementing effective, fair, and firm measures to support judicial independence in neighbouring countries.

The key takeaway from the Forum was for the EU to lead more by example rather than direct intervention, and by showcasing a deep commitment within the EU to democratic values, transparency, integrity, and respect for the rule of law. Such commitment should be showcased both at the supranational and national levels, as well as through the EU's actions with third countries.

Looking ahead, the Forum has set the stage for ongoing dialogue and potential collaborative efforts. The discussions initiated are merely the beginning of a deeper exploration into the nuances of the EU's policies and their impact on the global stage. Among future research steps are the following:

- A report on the state of autocratisation in the EU's neighbourhood;
- A paper on the EU's responses to autocratisation in the EU neighbourhood; and
- A special issue analysing the EU actors and instruments addressing the autocratisation challenge in the EU's dissensus-stricken neighbourhood.