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Launch of the FDFA Guidelines on Democracy 2025-2028

Summary of Discussions

This document provides a **summary of the internal launch of the *FDFA Guidelines on Democracy 2025–2028***, held in hybrid format on 7 May 2025. It is intended for all FDFA staff as a recap of the discussions that took place during the event. Beyond serving as a factual record, it is also meant to prompt **internal reflection**: why democracy matters to Swiss foreign policy, and why it deserves sustained attention.

The event took place at a time of growing international concern about **democratic backsliding**. In many regions of the world, including in long-established democracies, institutions are being weakened from within, public trust is declining, and elected leaders are undermining the very systems that brought them to power. Growing polarisation, shrinking civic space, and digital disinformation are testing the resilience of democratic systems worldwide. The launch of the *Guidelines on Democracy* provided an opportunity to discuss the **necessary strategic shifts** with internal and external experts and to consider their implications for Swiss diplomacy and cooperation.

The *Guidelines on Democracy* mark a reorientation in Switzerland's work in democracy support: rather than focusing on promoting transitions, **reinforcing democratic resilience in fragile and contested environments is what matters now**. With democracy now a core thematic priority in both the Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–2027 and the International Cooperation Strategy 2025–2028, the Guidelines offer an umbrella for a more coherent, focused, and political approach to supporting democratic governance abroad.

In his opening remarks, **State Secretary Alexandre Fasel** outlined **three key shifts**: from focusing on transitions to focusing on resilience, from working mainly in technical assistance to providing political engagement, and from the promotion of Western templates to advocating for more inclusive, globally anchored partnerships. Democracy, he underlined, must be defended, even where it appears consolidated.

A **high-level panel discussion** with international democracy experts highlighted the severity of current global trends. Democratic erosion is increasingly driven by elected leaders who dismantle checks and balances from within. This development is often reinforced by polarisation and digital disinformation, and calls for more politically attuned, context-sensitive, and coordinated approaches to democracy support. The panellists stressed that **Switzerland, with its democratic track record and expertise, is well positioned to convene inclusive platforms for dialogue**, particularly in the Global South.

In her closing remarks, **Director General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) Patricia Danzi** echoed many of these insights and offered additional reflections for implementation. She called for better listening to **diverse perspectives on democracy**, especially in partner countries where Western models may be viewed with scepticism. **Making democracy “attractive” in a transactional world**, she argued, means highlighting its practical value. Danzi also underscored the importance of decentralised democratic practice, as well as Switzerland's unique experience in **asset restitution** as a contribution to democratic accountability.

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1. Overview of the Guidelines on Democracy 2025–2028

The [Guidelines on Democracy 2025-2028](#) define Switzerland's approach to strengthening its work on democracy support abroad. As one of the four thematic priorities of the Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–2027, democracy promotion is now firmly embedded in Swiss foreign policy.

As an **overarching goal**, the guidelines focus on **strengthening democratic resilience**: the intention is to strengthen and protect democratic processes and institutions where they already exist (at least to some extent) but are at risk. In addition, Switzerland acts as a partner in supporting positive democratic developments. As a cross-cutting measure, Switzerland will strive to counteract the widespread negative discourse surrounding democracy and bolster a more positive, meaningful approach. For more information [watch this video](#).

Two pillars serve as main lines of action towards the realization of this goal:

- **Diplomacy for Democracy**: advancing democratic principles through political dialogue, multilateral engagement, strategic use of Switzerland's good offices, and context-sensitive responses to democratic openings or backsliding.
- **Institutional and Societal Framework Conditions**: reinforcing key components of democratic systems, including inclusive elections, decentralisation, civic education, anti-corruption, freedom of expression, and innovative models of democratic deliberation.

Implementation is coordinated by the FDFA's Peace and Human Rights Division in collaboration with the SDC, Swiss representations abroad and the Interdepartmental Working Group on Democracy.

2. Opening Remarks by Alexandre Fasel

In his opening address, **State Secretary Alexandre Fasel** presented the *Guidelines on Democracy* as a timely and necessary response to a rapidly deteriorating global context for democratic governance. He emphasised that the guidelines do not mark a new policy area but rather provide a strategic umbrella to make Switzerland's existing work in democracy support more effective and responsive. With its inclusion as a thematic priority in both the **Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–2027** and the **International Cooperation Strategy 2025–2028**, democracy complements Switzerland's established profile in promoting peace, international law and human rights, as well as advocating good governance.

State Secretary Fasel outlined three key shifts that the guidelines reflect:

1. **From transition to resilience**: Democracy is no longer seen as a natural endpoint, but as a system that must be actively defended, even in established democracies.
2. **From technical assistance to political engagement**: Switzerland must increasingly use diplomatic tools, not just technical cooperation (election support, decentralization, and anti-corruption measures), to respond to backsliding and support democratic openings.
3. **From Western models to inclusive partnerships**: Effective democracy support depends on legitimacy. This requires moving beyond a donor-recipient logic and building broad, globally anchored alliances between like-minded democracies.

Finally, State Secretary Fasel called on FDFA staff to ensure that the guidelines are not treated as an endpoint but as a starting point for practical implementation.

3. Panel Discussion

Building on the themes evoked, **Tim Enderlin, Head of the Peace and Human Rights Division** moderated a panel discussion which featured three internationally renowned democracy experts:

- **Thomas Carothers**: Director of the [Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), with decades of experience in international democracy support.
- **Erica Frantz**: Associate Professor of Political Science at Michigan State University and expert on authoritarian regimes and democratic backsliding.
- **Kevin Casas-Zamora**: Secretary-General of [International IDEA](#) and Senior Fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue, specializing in democratic performance and global trends.

Global State of Democracy

All three panelists underscored the **severity of the current democratic crisis**. Referencing International IDEA's [Report on the Global State of Democracy 2024](#) Casas-Zamora warned that the world is facing the **most serious wave of democratic backsliding in over 50 years**, with deterioration across both established and emerging democracies. In particular, he highlighted that **support for democracy is increasingly being deprioritized** by key actors like the United States and the European Union, due to geopolitical and fiscal pressures. He noted that “the decimation brought upon the community of democracy support organizations by the collapse of USAID is massive”. Thus, Switzerland's continued engagement is considered all the more crucial.

Frantz and Carothers echoed this diagnosis, emphasizing that democracy is no longer expanding but retreating. Support for democracy is also more frequently **perceived as a Western imposition**, particularly in the Global South. This narrative must be countered by engaging non-Western actors and creating inclusive platforms for democratic exchange.

Mechanisms of Backsliding

Frantz provided a detailed analysis of the **current mechanics of democratic erosion**. Unlike in the past, when coups were the primary threat to democracy, today the dismantling often comes from elected leaders who gradually weaken checks and balances: **Incumbent takeovers dominate the ways in which democracies are falling apart**. Elected leaders leverage their access to power to dismantle democratic institutions. Often, they come to power backed by parties that they themselves created. There is a **strong linkage between this party personalism and democratic backsliding**. Once these leaders take office and begin to erode checks and balances, it shifts how their supporters conceive of democracy and the sorts of behaviors they perceive as normal. This often **intensifies polarization** and splits societies into opposing camps, an outcome that is intentional on the part of the leadership.

A major enabler of this phenomenon is the **new media landscape**, which **allows charismatic figures to bypass traditional party structures and rapidly build loyal followings**. This also distorts public understanding of democratic norms, as supporters are socialized into accepting anti-democratic behavior as legitimate. The case of El Salvador's Nayib Bukele and parallels in Hungary, Turkey, and the United States were cited as illustrative examples.

Operational Consequences for Democracy Support

Carothers urged the democracy support community to adapt to “this world where the wind is in its face.” First, he argued that **efforts to strengthen democracy must be more politically attuned and responsive** to actual power dynamics. Second, he called for **better coordination** among donors, NGOs, and multilateral actors, stressing that the fragmented democracy support landscape is not fit for today's challenges.

He also noted the necessity of **redefining leadership** in democracy support. With the U.S. potentially “becoming a force for autocracy rather than democracy”, the old paradigm of U.S.-led global democracy promotion no longer applies. **Leadership will have to be modular**, regionally or thematically distributed.

He further emphasized that democracy support often lacks short-term visible impact, which poses a challenge for traditional aid accountability frameworks. This makes it essential to manage expectations and **reaffirm the long-term nature of democracy promotion**. Finally, Carothers noted that the very concept of democracy is now contested in many places. Instead of assuming a shared definition, democracy promotion efforts must help **foster genuine local debate and re-engagement with democratic principles**.

The Role of Switzerland and Future Leadership

The panel discussed what **diplomacy for democracy** (first pillar of the *Guidelines on Democracy*) could look like in this context. Casas-Zamora and Carothers both emphasized the need for other actors to step up, particularly those with credible democratic credentials, but less geopolitical baggage.

Casas-Zamora pointed out that **Switzerland** with its neutrality, expertise, and democratic legitimacy, is **well-placed to convene inclusive platforms for democratic exchange**, particularly among countries

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in the Global South. He stressed that efforts which allow equal participation and mutual learning are more likely to be perceived as legitimate.

Frantz added that **strengthening institutional resilience**, especially through support for media literacy and information ecosystems, will be key. Disinformation and media fragmentation not only enable anti-democratic leaders but also erode public consensus about democratic values. Additionally, she recommended countering personalist party dynamics and working with parties to render them more robust.

Hopeful Trends

Despite the bleak global picture, all three panelists pointed to signs of hope. Frantz highlighted **democratic rebounds** in countries like Poland and Brazil, while Carothers noted that many established democracies continue to function relatively well. He also pointed to **rising civic activism** worldwide as a sign of enduring democratic aspirations.

Casas-Zamora observed that **societal tolerance for corruption is declining**, and political finance is receiving more scrutiny. He concluded that while there is no silver bullet, there is a **growing awareness of democracy's fragility** and a renewed urgency to protect it.

4. Closing Remarks by Patricia Danzi

In her concluding remarks, **SDC Director General Patricia Danzi** reflected on several key insights from the launch. Firstly, she stressed the importance of critically examining political leadership beyond appearances and campaign promises. Too often, both Switzerland and its partners assume democracy is self-sustaining, without scrutinising the deeper political dynamics at play.

A second core point addressed the recurring issue of democracy being perceived as a Western model. SDC Director General Danzi cautioned against “preaching to the choir” and called for **greater inclusion of voices that perceive democracy differently**. Especially in partner countries, she argued, we must actively engage with actors outside the traditional pro-democracy camp, broaden our understanding of what democracy can mean in different contexts, and listen more attentively.

Making democracy “attractive” in a transactional world, she said, must be pursued by showing its **practical values**. As envisioned by SDG 16, strong institutions foster investment, job creation, and stability. These concrete benefits can serve as entry points to change the narrative around democracies.

SDC Director General Danzi also emphasised the **importance of decentralisation**. In many countries, engaging only with national governments fails to capture the lived experience of democracy. Local democratic practice, though different in form, is often more grounded and legitimate because it is closer to the people.

Finally, she touched on Switzerland’s long-standing engagement in **asset restitution**. More than just the return of funds, it is the often contentious process that brings about institutional and thereby democratic progress. Similarly, governance benchmarks for graduating from LDC status or joining the EU, can be used as levers for democratic progress.

SDC Director General Danzi concluded by urging participants to continue reflecting on how to make democracy more inclusive, relevant, and resonant across diverse contexts and to keep listening, especially to those whose voices are not always heard.

5. Further Information and Links

[Guidelines on Democracy 2025-2028](#) (available in EN, FR, DE, IT)

Guidelines on Democracy - [Content and Communication Toolkit](#)

[FDFA Democracy Website](#)

International IDEA’s [Report on the Global State of Democracy 2024](#)

Paper by Thomas Carothers and McKenzie Carrier (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) on [Democratic Recovery After Significant Backsliding: Emergent Lessons](#)

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