The EU's Partnership Policy in Transition

Adapting to a Geopolitically Turbulent World

Dr Olaf Wientzek – is Director of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Multinational Development Policy Dialogue based in Brussels.

Sven Nicolay – is Programme Manager for Democracy and Governance at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Multinational Development Policy Dialogue based in Brussels.

IN SHORT

/ The EU is seeking closer cooperation with partner countries and regions around the world in response to both an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment and the positioning of China and the United States.

/ To that end, over recent years, the EU has adapted its policy in the areas of trade, development, foreign relations, and security in order to strengthen its capacity to build effective partnerships. At the same time, public debate has shifted towards a partnership policy that places greater emphasis on the EU's own strategic interests.

/ The requirement for unanimity, the lack of consensus on key foreign policy issues, and the frequent prioritisation of short-term national interests continue to constrain the EU's ability to act, which in turn limits its capacity to develop a flexible yet dense and resilient network of partnerships.

/ Many aspects of the EU's reorientation of its partnership policy are steps in the right direction. At the same time, the EU should continue to uphold its values-based approach.

/ At the beginning of her second term in office, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen set out the ambition for the new Commission to strengthen the EU's global partnerships – understood here as the EU's relations with countries outside Europe – with the aim of pursuing its strategic interests more resolutely in a far more challenging geopolitical environment and in the face of a direct threat to its own territory. Russia's continuing aggression, China's increasingly confrontational posture, and growing uncertainty surrounding the transatlantic partnership have all added considerable urgency to turning these ambitions into concrete action. In order to achieve this, the EU must strengthen and strategically expand its relationships with partners beyond Europe, not least with the regions and countries that Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney described in his 2026 speech at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos as "middle powers".[1] Carney himself did not define the term in greater detail. In 2024, however, the WEF described middle powers as states that rank below the major powers but that nevertheless "exert influence over global politics – they are states with extensive diplomatic, economic, multilateral, and sometimes military, clout".[2] Accordingly, this article pays particular attention to the EU's relations with these countries.

Ursula von der Leyen at a press conference following a European Council meeting in Brussels, in June 2026. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

EU partnership policy as a reflection of strategic reorientation

The EU's policy towards its international partners is shaped through a range of policy areas, each of which is governed by different decision-making procedures.

Foreign, security, and defence policy remain intergovernmental and are therefore subject to the principle of unanimity. Development policy is a parallel competence between the EU and its member states, whereas trade policy has been an exclusive EU competence since 2009. In its international engagement, the EU has consistently presented itself as a committed supporter of the multilateral order, traditionally providing both political and financial backing for international organisations and rules-based frameworks such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The first signs of a shift in the EU's approach towards key international partners were visible as early as during the first von der Leyen Commission (2019–2024). At that time, the Commission President outlined her vision of a "geopolitical Commission".[3] Another important signal was the renaming of the influential Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) as the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (INTPA). Many observers interpreted this as a move away from the EU's traditional development policy role. The integration of the EU's principal external financing instruments into the regular EU budget through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI–GE) under the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework likewise demonstrated the EU's intention to pursue a more holistic approach to foreign policy. Overall, however, the first von der Leyen Commission still operated under considerably more optimistic assumptions than those prevailing today. On the one hand, there remained a belief in Brussels that the EU was capable of exercising leadership on a wide range of important global issues, while at the same time, there was also continued confidence in the EU's normative and regulatory influence as well as in the global attractiveness of its single market.

A succession of crises and conflicts – including the wars in Europe and the Middle East – as well as the acceleration of longer-term structural developments have fundamentally undermined these assumptions in recent years.

1. The most profound shock was Russia's renewed war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in the spring of 2022. Beyond its direct consequences for European security, the war also required the concentration of foreign policy resources, which – according to some critics – came at the expense of the EU's engagement in other parts of the world.

2. Among decision-makers in Brussels, there has been a growing recognition that the EU is increasingly facing competition worldwide in terms of normative influence, economic strength, and its ability to shape the international order. Economically dynamic autocracies such as the Gulf states and China are increasingly competing with the EU, in some cases overtaking it as the preferred partner for countries around the world.

3. The EU additionally perceives growing self-confidence among its international partners and a stronger demand for "partnerships of equals".

4. Trade negotiations are losing momentum: The number of successfully concluded trade agreements during the first von der Leyen Commission fell short of expectations, and negotiations with partners such as Australia also stalled.

5. The policies pursued during Donald Trump's second presidency further pushed the EU onto the defensive in both trade and security policy.

6. The changing international environment is weakening multilateral institutions and international norms, while protectionism continues to grow. As a result, the EU's economic and security performance is becoming increasingly crucial in terms of its international influence.

> *Global Gateway has become the EU's principal instrument for implementing its partnership policy.*

7. Moreover, Brussels and other European capitals now expect – more explicitly than in the past – a geopolitical dividend from the EU's longstanding engagement in development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and multilateral institutions.

The EU therefore faces growing pressure to adapt both its partnership policy and its development policy to a changing geopolitical environment. The EU's 2016 Global Strategy introduced the concept of principled pragmatism – an approach that combines values and principles with an interest-driven and pragmatic foreign policy. At the same time, there is growing recognition that the EU can remain a leading international actor only by strengthening its economic competitiveness and enhancing its security and defence capabilities.

This has led to policy changes across several areas, with the EU placing greater emphasis on advancing its own economic and security interests while simultaneously forging new alliances and deepening existing partnerships.[4]

From traditional development policy to Global Gateway

One of the most striking developments has been the gradual transformation of EU development cooperation into a more interest-driven partnership policy. The central instrument of this approach is the EU's Global Gateway (GG) initiative.[5] Launched in 2021, the initiative initially aimed to mobilise up to 300 billion euros between 2021 and 2027 for investment in digital infrastructure, energy, and transport while also strengthening health, education, and research systems in emerging and developing economies around the world. Overall, the initiative signals a shift towards a more transactional and economically oriented approach to EU development cooperation. Under the second von der Leyen Commission and with the new Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jozef Síkela (Czech Republic, independent, nominated by the Mayors and Independents (STAN) party, which belongs to the EPP Group), GG has become the EU's principal instrument for implementing its partnership policy. This emphasis on major infrastructure projects marks a clear departure from the "traditional" model of EU development cooperation, with its strong focus on poverty reduction. The initiative promotes "equal partnerships", improved coordination among the member states through the "Team Europe" approach, and above all, much stronger involvement of the private sector and development banks. This does not mean that the traditional priorities of EU development cooperation have been abandoned altogether; however, these priorities – along with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda – have become less prominent, at least in public discourse.

The implementation of the initiative was initially far from smooth. In some cases, existing programmes were simply rebranded and incorporated into GG, thereby creating the impression – particularly among partner countries – that the initiative amounted to little more than old wine in new wineskins. Even around four years after its launch, background discussions in Brussels continue to reveal ambassadors from partner countries who remain uncertain about GG's objectives, strategy, and opportunities for participation. The involvement of the private sector also remained inadequate for a considerable period.[6] Accordingly, one of former banker Síkela's

Ambitious goals: Kaja Kallas, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, highlighted the geopolitical significance of EU infrastructure projects at the Global Gateway Forum 2025 and announced an increase in the investment target to 400 billion euros by 2027. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

priorities has been to make the initiative more business-oriented, not least through the establishment of a GG Investment Hub, which enables companies to submit project proposals. The EU additionally aims to ensure that more European companies will benefit from GG procurement in the future following repeated occasions on which Chinese (!) companies had secured contracts. While the member states broadly support GG, they differ in the importance they attach to economic and geopolitical considerations when selecting projects. France places particular emphasis on geostrategic objectives, whereas other member states assign equal or even greater weight to economic viability alongside geopolitical considerations.

"Since 2024, the EU has pursued a more pragmatic trade policy.

The GG – launched in December 2021 – is also frequently compared with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched as early as in 2013 and is estimated by various sources to have attracted investment of more than 1 trillion euros, though officials within the EU institutions continue to dispute the validity of such comparisons. The two initiatives differ fundamentally in their conception: While the BRI relies predominantly on loans despite mounting criticism over the debt burdens imposed on some participating countries, GG follows a different approach: Its objective is to provide a sustainable – also financially viable – alternative, with the EU relying in particular on guarantees.[7]

Despite continuing reservations both within the EU and among international partners, the participation of more than one dozen heads of state and government from partner countries at the 2025 Global Gateway Forum demonstrates that there is genuine interest in the initiative, though some countries continue to emphasise the importance of more traditional development cooperation priorities.[8] It is also noteworthy that despite its strong focus on GG, the EU remains committed to maintaining its role as one of the world's leading providers of humanitarian assistance.

New pragmatism in trade policy and an increasing focus on economic security

Since 2024, the EU has pursued a more pragmatic trade policy, placing greater emphasis on concluding free trade agreements swiftly. At the very beginning of her second term in office, von der Leyen announced at the end of 2024 that negotiations on the free trade agreement with the Mercosur countries had been concluded after more than 25 years despite strong opposition from France. Even so, success was by no means guaranteed: Indeed, approval of the agreement by the Council at the beginning of 2026 remained in doubt until the very last moment. In January, the European Parliament also voted by the narrowest of margins to refer the agreement to the Court of Justice of the European Union for clarification. Nevertheless, the trade provisions of the agreement entered into provisional application on 1 May 2026.

Another notable development was the rapid conclusion of a trade agreement with India, which was signed at a formal ceremony in January 2026. Given the many contentious issues involved, few observers had expected negotiations to conclude so quickly. Further progress followed with agreements on negotiations that had previously stalled, including those with Mexico (May 2026), Australia (March 2026), and the Economic Partnership Agreement with Indonesia (September 2025).

> *EU raw materials agreements can only succeed with close engagement on the part of the private sector.*

Negotiations on free trade or broader Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Tajikistan, and the United Arab Emirates are likewise approaching conclusion. In these negotiations, it is above all the EU that is pushing for a rapid conclusion. This new momentum has several causes. In the past, the EU generally sought comprehensive agreements, including detailed sections on sustainability and political cooperation. Since 2024, however, the emphasis has shifted towards slimmer and substantially less comprehensive agreements in order to secure faster negotiating outcomes – as illustrated by the agreement with India. The willingness of both the EU and its negotiating partners to compromise has also been strengthened by growing trade pressure from the United States and by Beijing's increasingly assertive trade policy.

At the same time, economic security has become an increasingly prominent concern. The basis for this shift is the European Economic Security Strategy,[9] which was adopted in 2023 and rests on three pillars: promoting competitiveness, protecting against risks, and cooperating with partners. At the beginning of December 2025, the EU also presented a Joint Communication that proposed – among other measures – the earlier identification of dependencies that could potentially be exploited for political leverage. Both initiatives can be seen as initial steps towards the development of a new economic security doctrine that – through its emphasis on the greater diversification of trade flows – is also shaping the EU's partnership policy. At the same time, the EU has expanded its toolkit for protecting its own economy and has used these instruments as leverage, at least on some occasions. More recently, several EU member states have called on the Commission to make greater use of tariffs and other trade defence instruments to counter unfair trade practices by China and other countries.

The EU has also become more active in the field of critical raw materials and rare earths. In May 2024, it adopted the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), which aims to secure Europe's supply of 34 critical and strategic raw materials. The EU's primary objective here is to diversify its sources of supply. In particular, through memoranda of understanding concluded with 16 countries, it seeks to promote the development of new processing capacities in resource-producing countries. These efforts are nevertheless constrained by the EU's own weaknesses, notably its insufficient processing and refining capacity. Ultimately, these agreements can only succeed with close engagement on the part of the private sector.

Managing partner countries' criticism of the Green Deal's external climate measures – such as the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and to some extent also the Carbon Border Adjustment

Mechanism (CBAM) – remains challenging. Although the EU primarily regards these measures as climate policy instruments, they are externally perceived in part as a form of disguised protectionism. Partly in response to criticism from within the EU itself, the Union has narrowed the scope of some measures, such as the CBAM, and has postponed the implementation of others, including the EUDR.

The EU nevertheless remains one of the WTO's strongest supporters. For many within the EU, the EU–US trade compromise that was reached in July 2025 was therefore particularly difficult to accept given the significant doubts surrounding its compatibility with WTO rules. There also remain differing views on how best to respond to the trade policy pressure exerted by the Trump administration.

From democracy support to resilience policy

This change in direction is also reflected in the field of democracy support, which is one of the principles governing the EU's external action as laid down in Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union and has occupied an important place in the EU's partnership and development policy for decades, extending well beyond the enlargement countries. Programmes that support democracy in partner countries outside Europe have long formed an integral part of the EU budget's external financing instruments. Under the previous Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS) in particular did not hesitate to publicly criticise problematic developments in partner countries. At times, however, the language used by then–High Representative Josep Borrell was regarded as inappropriate and attracted strong criticism, not least in the countries concerned.

Since 2024, both the Commission and the EEAS have become more restrained in publicly criticising violations of international norms in countries outside Europe. As early as in 2023, officials within the Commission were arguing that the EU should engage in "less preaching, more practicing". Although existing democracy support programmes have continued, there has been less interest in highlighting them publicly.

The "Democracy Shield" presented in November 2025 illustrates the EU's changing strategic priorities. Its principal focus is on strengthening democratic resilience and countering foreign information manipulation and interference within the EU itself and in the enlargement countries.[10] At the same time, there is growing recognition in Brussels that the EU's existing toolbox is insufficient to be able to respond rapidly and flexibly to political openings in third countries and to provide timely support for democratic forces when opportunities arise.

Among the EU institutions, it is above all the European Parliament that continues to actively champion democracy support, using resolutions to take a public stand against democratic backsliding in other countries. In the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework, the Parliament also continues to advocate clear objectives and minimum funding levels for democracy support projects.

”
Since 2024, the EU has concluded twelve security and defence partnerships.

New defence partnerships

Another priority of the second von der Leyen Commission lies in strengthening the EU's defence capabilities. For the first time, a Commissioner for Defence Industry and Space was appointed, with Andrius Kubilius of Lithuania (EPP) taking on the role. His mandate is to enhance defence cooperation and strengthen synergies between nationally fragmented defence industries. One key instrument here is SAFE (officially known as the "Security Action for Europe through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument"), through which investments of up to 150 billion euros are to strengthen the EU's own defence capabilities. At the same time, in order to support the European defence industry, no more than 35 per cent of the cost of components may originate from outside Europe, including Ukraine.[11]

One new EU instrument that has explicitly focused on partners around the world since 2024 is the network of security and defence partnerships. To date, the EU has concluded twelve such agreements, including with non-European partners such as Japan, South Korea, India, Canada, Australia, and Ghana. These agreements primarily deepen existing partnerships, some of them facilitate access to procurement opportunities under the SAFE instrument mentioned above, and address issues such as counter-terrorism, maritime security, and cyber security. They also establish new structures for dialogue between the partners. However, they do not constitute legally binding military alliances or mutual defence agreements.

Fresh momentum – Summit diplomacy and new partnership initiatives

At its summits with third countries, the EU is increasingly signalling its intention to respond to its partners' calls for "equal partnerships". In February 2025, Ursula von der Leyen sent a clear signal of the importance attached to the partnership with India by undertaking a two-day visit to the country accompanied by the entire College of Commissioners. A similar trend has been observed at a number of summits over the past 18 months: The seventh EU–African Union Summit marked a fresh start in relations, aiming to establish a partnership of equals and – for the first time in a joint declaration – acknowledging the "untold suffering" caused by the slave trade, colonialism, and apartheid. Although some African representatives had hoped the summit would produce more concrete cooperation projects, the EU's new tone was nevertheless received positively.[12] In relation to the countries of the Southern Mediterranean, the Mediterranean Pact – published in 2025 – sought to inject fresh momentum into cooperation in areas such as energy, the economy, and mobility. The creation of the Commission's new Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA) is likewise to be seen as reflecting the increased importance attached to the region. The EU also elevated its relationship with Jordan through the conclusion of a Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership and the first joint summit, which was held in January 2026.

> *The EU is seeking to strengthen relations with countries that can only to a limited extent be regarded as values partners.*

At the same time, the EU has sought to ensure higher-level political representation at summit meetings. The attendance of European Council President António Costa at the 47th ASEAN Summit in October 2025 should be seen in this context. By contrast, the relatively limited attendance of EU heads of state and government at the 2025 EU–CELAC Summit in Colombia had less to do with any lack of interest on the EU's part than with the hosts' attempts to use the meeting for the purpose of domestic political campaigning.

Increasingly, the EU is also seeking to strengthen relations with countries that can only to a limited extent be described as values partners but with which it nevertheless shares important interests. The first EU–Gulf summit took place at the end of 2024, focusing primarily on connectivity, energy, and responses to regional conflicts. The mandate granted by the Council to open negotiations on bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreements with all six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council reflects the growing importance attached to these relationships and also demonstrates the EU's recognition of the Gulf states' increasing international influence.[13] Relations with the Central Asian countries have likewise been characterised by a similar pragmatism. In April 2025, the first summit between the EU and the region at the highest political level was held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, focusing on economic and geopolitical issues. During a lengthy tour of Central Asia the previous month, Commissioner Síkela had also agreed on a number of GG projects.[14] At both summits, issues relating to democracy and the rule of law played only a relatively minor role. The EU's attempts to establish relations with the Syrian transitional government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa illustrate this new approach: Alongside expanding humanitarian assistance and increasing support for reconstruction, the Council lifted the majority of its economic restrictive measures against Syria. At the beginning of 2026, EU Commissioner for the Mediterranean Dubravka Šuica proposed a "strategic partnership" with Syria, while Commission President von der Leyen and European Council President António Costa visited the country in January 2026. The EU harbours few illusions about the continuing differences that remain in the relations with these countries. Nevertheless, intensifying relations is regarded as unavoidable in light of economic and security interests.

The financial reorientation of the EU's partnership policy

The draft Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2028–2034 suggests that the increasingly explicit emphasis on the EU's own interests in development and partnership policy is unlikely to prove temporary. The Global Europe Instrument – which will provide the financial basis for the EU's external action – is to be considerably more flexible than at present while placing greater emphasis on interest-based partnerships and on strengthening Europe's competitiveness and security. The Commission's proposal to suspend support for partner countries that fail to cooperate in the readmission of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants has received broad support, although differences remain regarding its precise conception. One interesting innovation concerns democracy support: The EU intends to make funding available more rapidly in order to seize short-term political opportunities when they arise.

Federal Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul has spoken out in favour of a 'qualified majority' in foreign policy. In the EU, this is achieved when at least 15 of the 27 Member States agree and these Member States account for 65 per cent of the EU's population. Photo: © Anadolu Agency, Imago.

"Left-wing groups in the European Parliament oppose a more business-oriented development policy, while parties to the right of the EPP would prefer to abolish it altogether.

Institutional and strategic constraints on the new approach

A common European strategic culture is still only beginning to emerge. National interests continue to diverge regarding many important partner countries and world regions. This applies not only to traditionally contentious issues such as policy towards Israel and the Palestinian territories, but also, for example, to approaches towards the military regimes in the Sahel and to the regime in Venezuela. Such differences continue to limit the EU's ability to play a more significant role in these contexts. More importantly, even among the EU's largest member states, there is only limited willingness to modify or set aside national positions in the interests of greater European effectiveness. In some cases, a single member state has been able to block a pan-European consensus – and recently, this has by no means been only Hungary. As a result, the requirement for unanimity in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy is becoming an increasingly significant obstacle to Europe's capacity for strategic action.

Unanimity is not the only obstacle, however, as the difficult debates on trade policy and economic security also demonstrate. Here, too, fundamentally different understandings of European sovereignty collide, with some favouring the greatest possible strategic autonomy for the EU and others believing that the EU's ability to take action and remain competitive depends on maintaining a dense network of partnerships with countries that are like-minded to varying degrees. There is likewise only limited strategic consensus as to how to deal with the United States under President Trump and with China, which in turn has implications for the EU's policy towards other international partners.

Short-term domestic political considerations frequently take precedence over longer-term geopolitical interests, as illustrated by the positions adopted by some member states on the EU–Mercosur Agreement. Even in the European Parliament, geopolitical considerations took second place to other concerns for many member states – including those from moderate political groups – during the vote on the Mercosur Agreement. Indeed, the European Parliament itself is not always united on key aspects of policy towards international partners. On votes concerning Venezuela and the situation in Gaza, the dividing line ran straight through the traditionally pro-integration alliance of the EPP, the Socialists and Democrats, the liberals and centrists of Renew, and the Greens. Reaching a consensus on the future direction of development policy also remains difficult: Left-wing groups in the European Parliament oppose a more business-oriented approach towards development cooperation, while a majority of parties to the right of the EPP would prefer to abolish development policy altogether.

Outlook

Across a wide range of policy areas, the EU has begun to adjust a number of important levers in order to strengthen its ability to build effective partnerships worldwide. This has already produced tangible results, particularly in trade policy. In other policy areas, however, it remains too early to draw firm conclusions. Managing expectations will be crucial. Many of the EU's initiatives – including free trade agreements, raw materials memoranda, GG, and security and defence partnerships – have generated considerable interest among partner countries. At the same time, the EU's often highly ambitious rhetoric has created expectations that these initiatives cannot fulfil in the short term.

It is in Germany's interest to play an active role in shaping this reorientation of EU policy. German companies, for example, stand to benefit from the greater emphasis on competitiveness and economic cooperation embodied by GG as well as from a more proactive and pragmatic trade policy. In the field of economic security, Germany should resist excessive protectionist reflexes. At the same time, it must

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney advocates an alliance of middle powers at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos – a coalition of countries such as Canada, Japan, Australia and EU member states aimed at preserving a rules-based international order. Photo: © Avalon.red, Imago.

abandon its longstanding naivety towards China, reduce dependencies wherever possible, and respond firmly to aggressive political and economic practices. Strengthening the EU's security resilience will also be crucial in determining how seriously the Union and its member states are taken in future international disputes.

The call for an "alliance of middle powers" – articulated most prominently by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in Davos – has found a receptive audience in Brussels. Given the diversity of interests among international partners, however, this is unlikely to become a coherent alliance. Rather, it is more likely to take the form of a flexible network of coalitions of the willing that varies according to the policy area in question. Such an approach requires a long-term strategy and a considerable degree of coordination. Without a stronger consensus within the EU on how to deal with China, such a network of partnerships will, however, never be able to realise its full potential. If the EU wishes to establish itself as an independent actor rather than a pawn in an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment, it will have little choice but to pursue further integration in foreign and security policy. The creation of a European Security Council, possibly combined with a transition from unanimity to qualified majority voting – a step that remains controversial among member states – would represent important progress in this direction. However, it will not be a panacea either.

A further prerequisite is the development of credible instruments of economic and security deterrence either by the EU itself or by a group of its member states. The EU should not abandon its established approaches altogether; rather, it needs to complement them with more robust instruments – including stronger defence capabilities and investment protection agreements – if its partnership offers are to remain attractive. Conversely, when flagship projects in defence or economic policy fail due to short-term national interests, the attractiveness of those partnership offers is significantly diminished.

Although the normative appeal of a democratic Europe governed by the rule of law may no longer carry the same weight as it once did, the EU should not abandon either its commitment to values-based policymaking or its role in supporting democracy, even if the priorities of such support need to be reconsidered. For all the necessary pragmatism, an overly conspicuous accommodation of authoritarian elites risks undermining the EU's image among younger societies seeking greater democratic participation. At the same time, neglecting support for democratic governance would weaken long-standing democratic partners in a profound and lasting way. Ultimately, democracies have traditionally proved to be the EU's most reliable and – over the long term – its most stable partners. However, support for democratic governance should focus on areas that resonate with the societies concerned. Overall, if the EU is to strengthen its ability to build effective global partnerships, it will need to strike the right balance – that is, in development cooperation: between necessary reform and established strengths; in trade policy: between economic security and open markets; and more broadly: between the pursuit of interests and the continued provision of global public goods. In general, the EU will need to reconcile its commitment to values with a pragmatic approach. It must accept that for most countries beyond its immediate European neighbourhood, it is only one of several attractive partners. It will also have no choice but to continue cooperating and building partnerships with authoritarian states in areas such as trade, energy, security, and climate policy. At the same time, it should reduce dependencies on those authoritarian regimes that act as close partners and key enablers of authoritarian centres of gravity, such as Russia and China. This makes it all the more important to strengthen cooperation with those countries that represent islands of democracy and the rule of law within their respective regions. The welcome new pragmatism that is evident in many areas of EU policy should not obscure the fact that the closest and most reliable partnerships can be forged with countries that share broadly similar values. /

Translated
from German