

E U R O P E

COOPERATION AND DEMOCRACY: FACTORIES OF PUBLIC POLICIES IN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION



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INTRODUCTION

HOW CAN COOPERATION GENUINELY CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTENANCE OF DEMOCRACIES WITHOUT INFRINGING ON STATE SOVEREIGNTY OR STANDARDIZING THEIR POLITICAL PRACTICES?

Cooperation: The act of “working together or participating in a shared endeavor.” It also translates into a policy of understanding and exchanges between states, particularly concerning governance and democratic development.

Democracy: A political system in which power belongs to the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives. It is based on fundamental principles such as citizen participation, equality before the law, transparency in decision-making processes, and respect for fundamental rights.

During the Westphalian era, these concepts were distinct. Today, cooperation and democracy share a close relationship in contemporary political systems. Cooperation has become essential for addressing global challenges. These initiatives aim to strengthen democratic processes, protect human rights, and prevent authoritarian drifts.

Regional cooperation, often highlighted as a model, provides a space for dialogue and exchange, enabling the implementation of democratic principles on a supranational scale.

These dynamics create tensions → Democratic states must reconcile their sovereignty with the demands of international cooperation, particularly when it involves internal political reforms or the adoption of externally perceived standards. Additionally, the emergence of authoritarian or hybrid regimes within democratic systems raises questions about the relevance and limits of cooperative mechanisms.

PART 1: COOPERATION AS A TOOL TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACIES

A) International Cooperation and Support for Emerging Democracies

International organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), play a crucial role in promoting democracy. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supports electoral processes, strengthens judicial institutions, and promotes human rights in transitioning countries.

1. Role of International Organizations

Electoral observation missions, carried out by organizations such as the OSCE or the European Union, help ensure transparency and credibility in elections. These initiatives reduce fraud and build citizens' trust in electoral processes. For example, election observation in Tunisia in 2014 marked a pivotal step in its democratic transition.

2. Programs for Assistance and Electoral Observation

The transfer of democratic norms occurs through bilateral or regional partnerships. The European Union's enlargement encouraged Central and Eastern European countries to adopt democratic and legal reforms, as demonstrated by Poland and the Czech Republic in the 2000s.

3. Transfer of Democratic Norms: Success Stories

B) Regional Cooperation and Democratic Governance

The European Union is often cited as a unique model of supranational democratic governance. Through its institutions, such as the European Parliament, it ensures democratic participation for citizens of its member states. Additionally, the EU imposes strict accession criteria, such as respect for human rights and the rule of law, reinforcing democratic norms in candidate countries.

The EU conditions its economic and political aid on adherence to democratic principles. For example, its neighborhood policy targets Eastern European and Mediterranean countries.

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) supports territorial cooperation goals.

1. The European Union: A Model of Cooperative and Democratic Governance



The Council of Europe, through the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights, establishes a binding legal framework for its members.

These mechanisms protect citizens from state abuses and promote a transnational democratic culture.

2. The Council of Europe: Democratic Charter and Human Rights

The treaty signed on October 24, 2002, between France and Monaco, strengthened bilateral relations while reaffirming their friendship and cooperation.

This included the security of the Rainier III tunnel.

Similarly, the 2005 treaty enhanced administrative cooperation through expert exchanges and the integration of French citizens into Monaco's public administration.

3. Example of European Cooperation

C) Cooperation and Territorial Democracy

Legal Foundations:

French decentralization laws have played a central role in territorial cooperation:

- Defferre Laws (1982 and 1983)
- MAPTAM Law (2014)
- NOTRe Law (2015)
- 3DS Law (2022)

Structures and legal tools:

Public agencies, SEMs, SPLs, and EPCI structures are adapted to local needs (e.g., public service management).

Tools like CTAPs (Public Action Territorial Conferences) and State-Region Plan Contracts (CPERs) facilitate coordination and funding for development projects.



D) Transnational Participatory Mechanisms



Non-governmental organizations, such as Amnesty International and Transparency International, advocate for greater governmental transparency and human rights respect. They also pressure states to comply with democratic standards.

1. Role of NGOs and Citizen Networks

On 5 September 2023, the European Commission adopted a proposal to facilitate the cross-border activities of non-profit associations in the European Union.

The aim of this text is to improve the functioning of the internal market by removing legal and administrative obstacles for not-for-profit associations that carry out or wish to carry out their activities in more than one Member State.

It is with this in mind that the Haut Conseil à la Vie associative (HCVA), after pointing out that the activities of not-for-profit organisations promote ‘the participation of citizens in the democratic process, strengthen transparency at EU and Member State level, and stimulate public debate and pluralism within society’, has, for its part, ‘welcomed this decision’.

2. Towards a European Transnational Association Status

Academic institutions play a role in disseminating democratic ideas and values. Programmes such as the European Union's Erasmus+ foster student and intellectual exchanges, reinforcing a common understanding of democratic principles across borders.

3. Academic cooperation and intellectual exchanges

PART 2: THE TENSIONS AND LIMITS OF COOPERATION WITHIN A DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORK

A) The challenges of national sovereignty

International cooperation can sometimes be perceived as interference in the internal affairs of states, particularly when it involves institutional or political reform. For example, some EU Member States, such as Hungary and Poland, have expressed reservations about European mechanisms for monitoring compliance with the rule of law. These states often see these actions as infringements of their national sovereignty, which can undermine solidarity within the organisation.

More generally, there is a growing gap between the people of Europe and the European institution as European integration progresses. This culminated in the British vote for Brexit in 2016. In France, the rejection of the 2005 referendum on the European Constitution is significant.

In its 2024 annual study on sovereignty, the Conseil d'Etat drew up a list of proposals. The Conseil d'Etat also recommended that 'the Court of Justice should ensure strict compliance with the powers laid down in the Treaties', 'adhere strictly to the rules on powers laid down in the Treaties' and 'organise regular information for national parliaments'.

1. Reactions of democracies to perceived interference

Sanctions imposed by international or regional organisations in response to democratic violations can be controversial. For example, measures taken by the African Union to suspend states following coups d'état (such as Mali in 2021) are sometimes criticised for their limited effectiveness or the fact that they do not have the desired effect.

2. Examples of tensions in the application of democratic sanctions

B) The paradoxical effects of cooperation

Biased cooperation: the imposition of democratic models and the risk of standardisation

The promotion of democracy by international players can be perceived as a hegemonic process, in which Western models are imposed without consideration for local contexts. Indeed, the reflex of Western democracies to impose their vision of democracy has led to major failures in cooperation. For example, in some countries in the Middle East, such as Afghanistan, democratic initiatives supported by Western powers have met with resistance because of a gap between the standards promoted and local socio-political realities. This has led to profound destabilisation in countries such as Libya, which continues to destabilise the region and prevent any policy of cooperation with that state.

Democracy is above all a Western approach to the organisation of society. As the work of anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss has shown, this approach is not shared by all human organisations on the planet. There are diverse human societies on other continents, each with its own organisational logic. Other civilisations were founded according to different orders: for example, Chinese or African civilisations, whose traces go back to the same time as European civilisation, the cradle of the democratic idea that is now widely shared.

B) The paradoxical effects of cooperation

Biased cooperation: the imposition of democratic models and the risk of standardisation

Cooperation mechanisms tend to seek to standardise democratic practices, while ignoring the specific cultural and historical characteristics of individual states. This standardisation can lead to local frustration, and even a rejection of democratic principles themselves. For example, in some African countries, traditional structures of governance coexist with modern institutions dating from the period of colonisation. This is often perceived as a new desire for domination by local populations.

A one-size-fits-all approach could upset this balance.

Need we remind you that the Greeks, from whom we inherit the idea of democracy, conceived society in the sixth century BC around just order and the concept of nomos. It was therefore necessary to find the ideal of good order in the city, eunomy (εὐνομία). From then on, it appears that the right order is not something acquired in advance but rather an order in which citizens can themselves agree to live.

Thus, cooperation sometimes requires a sincere approach between two societies that respect their particularism so that they can mutually enrich each other.

Cooperation with new authoritarian regimes

Democracies sometimes cooperate with authoritarian regimes for economic or strategic reasons, which can weaken their credibility. For example, the economic relations between certain European states and China or Azerbaijan illustrate this dilemma.

Although the European Union officially defends democratic principles, the need to maintain economic exchanges often leads to compromises on these values.

These same authoritarian regimes, such as Russia or China, are increasingly using cooperation tools such as economic aid or strategic investments to extend their influence over states in democratic transition.

These initiatives, sometimes aggressive and often described as 'debt diplomacy', can limit the autonomy of emerging democratic governments and undermine efforts to consolidate democracy.

However, it remains difficult not to cooperate with these regimes, so indispensable have they become in today's globalised world.

We can clearly see the impact that the economic sanctions imposed on Russia following the war in Ukraine have had on European economies, as well as our dependence on Chinese industry, which became apparent during the Covid-19 crisis.

Conclusion

The relationship between cooperation and democracy is both complex and fundamental, reflecting the challenges facing contemporary societies. Cooperation, whether international or regional, is an essential lever for supporting democratic institutions, defending fundamental rights and promoting inclusive governance. However, it also comes up against obstacles, such as the tensions surrounding the notion of state sovereignty, the risks of standardising democratic models and the compromises linked to geopolitical issues. These factors make the link between cooperation and democracy a delicate one.

Nevertheless, when cooperation is based on a sincere recognition of cultural and historical particularities, while adopting an inclusive and participatory approach, it can be truly transformative. It contributes not only to consolidating existing democracies, but also to imagining new forms of governance, in which the diversity of peoples becomes an asset for building a fairer world order. The future of cooperation in support of democracies therefore lies in its ability to combine effectiveness, respect for differences and the aspiration for balanced governance.

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