

Case Study

A Context in Which Europe is Expected to Lead, with Ambition and Consistency

The European Union, its member states, along with their democratic partners including Canada, Norway and Switzerland cannot replace what the United States has withdrawn. However, they can and must lead differently by providing more ambitious and flexible funding, holding themselves to the same standards they expect of others, and forming coalitions capable of sustaining the human rights system during a period of US disengagement.

The expectations being placed on Europe are real and widespread, and not unreasonable. Governments, human rights defenders, and communities around the world are watching to see whether Europe will rise to the challenge. The risk of a vacuum is very real: if democratic governments do not actively challenge the direction of multilateral institutions, of humanitarian frameworks, and of the normative standards that govern state behaviour, others will do so instead. China has invested systematically in multilateral influence and bilateral relationships centred around development funding without democratic conditionality. It has also developed alternative normative frameworks that exclude independent civil society, free media, and accountability mechanisms. The void created by the United States' political and funding withdrawal presents an opportunity for this approach.

Europe must act on three levels simultaneously:

1. In its foreign policy, Europe must actively contest the authoritarian takeover of multilateral institutions. This involves defending UN human rights bodies, the OSCE, the International Criminal Court, and other such mechanisms, as well as building new alliances with democratic actors from around the globe, who are ready to join and are waiting for leadership. Europe should demonstrate its willingness to lead. Building genuine partnerships with democratic governments and civil society all around the world is both an ethical and a strategic necessity;
2. In terms of funding, the EU and its member states, as well as Canada, Norway, and Switzerland — whose track record in development cooperation and democratic credibility make them essential partners — must accept that the post-USAID world requires a different level of ambition. This does not mean replicating the USAID model, which had its own structural distortions and dependency risks. Rather, it is about funding more strategically and flexibly, and with genuine respect for local ownership. Multi-year core funding, reduced administrative burden, and direct support for frontline civil society organisations are the minimum requirements. As with its commitment to reinforce its defence architecture, Europe's commitment to defending democracy and civic space must be reflected in budget lines, not only in political declarations;
3. In terms of domestic policy, Europe should be held to the same standards it applies externally. Foreign influence laws in democratic member states that restrict civil society's participation in public debate are incompatible with the EU's foundational commitments. Canada, Norway, and Switzerland face equivalent pressures and must resist them with equal firmness. Governments that defend civic space abroad while restricting it at home provide authoritarian governments with a significant rhetorical weapon, as they are quick to point out double standards. The EU's rule of law mechanisms and fundamental rights conditionality attached to EU funds must be applied consistently and without political exception.

The window for leadership is open. However, given the speed at which the current realignment is moving, this opportunity will not remain open indefinitely.

