

# Defend Democracy

**Ms. Vera Jourová**

Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency

**Mr. Josep Borrell**

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy; EU Commission Vice-President

**Ms. Dubravka Šuica**

Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography

**Mr. Margaritis Schinas**

Vice-President of the European Commission for Promoting our European Way of Life

**Mr. Didier Reynders**

European Commissioner for Justice

**Ms. Ylva Johansson**

European Commissioner for Home Affairs

Brussels, 15 March 2023

Dear Vice-President Jourová,  
Dear Vice-President Borrell,  
Dear Vice-President Šuica,  
Dear Vice-President Schinas,  
Dear Commissioner Reynders,  
Dear Commissioner Johansson,

Defend Democracy commends the European Commission for the announced initiative on the **EU Defence of Democracy Package**. Defending and strengthening democracy is crucial given the escalating foreign, domestic and technological threats to democracy. Defend Democracy would like to raise some considerations on the objectives and scope of the package, to ensure that the EU responds to these challenges as effectively as possible.

Defending democracy must always start at home. With European elections slated for 2024, citizens' trust in democratic institutions and process must be restored by strengthening democratic principles, transparency, accountability and ensuring the integrity of democracy. **Fundamental rights, rule of law, free media and civic space** also must be fully respected as interconnected and mutually reinforcing pillars of our democracy.

The Defence of Democracy Package can help achieve these objectives if legislative and non-legislative initiatives complement each other to form a coherent package and if **ambitions and scope go beyond the relaunch of existing policy initiatives**. The package must contain policy innovations that continue and expand on the European Democracy Action Plan, the Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats, the EU Rule of Law reporting mechanism and the proposals of EU Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference and the Conference on the Future of Europe in the following areas: **democracy; electoral processes, civic participation and civic space; rule of law; news media; digital platform regulation; foreign and domestic information manipulation; foreign interference and disinformation; media and digital literacy; hybrid threats.**

There is an urgent need to counter malign foreign interference in democratic societies, European and national elections, with a clear link to countering FIMI and disinformation, maximising the transparency of political finance and effectively regulating the digital sphere. However, an **excessive focus on foreign interference would be counterproductive**, as it will be abused by autocrats to promote their own anti-democratic narratives and actions. An EU version of the US Foreign Agents Registration Act could be weaponised by authoritarians like Hungary PM Viktor Orbán to clamp down on pro-democracy forces in their country. (See also the Putin-style 'foreign agent' bill in Georgia, which threatens civil society.)

Hybrid or political warfare targets existing vulnerabilities and divides in democratic societies. Therefore, **strengthening democratic resilience *within the EU*** by fostering participation of citizens, ensuring transparency and accountability of democratic institutions, increasing the integrity of democratic processes and ensuring a not-for-profit information space is paramount. Civics and initiatives to tackle polarisation will be essential to defend democracy.

We call on the European Commission to consider including legislative and/or non-legislative initiatives in the Defence of Democracy Package, aiming at: **investing in whole-of-society resilience to hybrid threats to democracy**; ensuring a strong and vibrant civil society; engaging citizens and investing in civic education; increased cybersecurity in democratic processes, including but not limited to elections; ensuring sustainability of news media organisations and their editorial independence; fostering political parties' commitment to ethical behaviour; improving the transparency and oversight of political finance and lobbying; supporting the exchange of best practices between Member States authorities, civil society and academia on current, new and emerging digital and technological threats. Defend Democracy would like to offer support in view of developing such initiatives.

Likewise, the EU should consider including measures that address loopholes and weaknesses in the current digital regulatory framework, as the information disorder and its threats to democracy and our security will only accelerate with emerging technologies. Information manipulation, disinformation and covert interference in EU's societies and political processes will skyrocket if digital platforms, AI, XR are not adequately regulated.

**Any comprehensive Defence of Democracy package should go beyond the Digital Services Act.** We call on the EU to urgently propose legislation to ban surveillance advertising, ban addictive engagement algorithms and also include anti-trust measures.

If the EU is serious about defending democracy, it must do everything in its power to prevent foreign and domestic bad actors from exploiting and weaponising digital technologies, platforms and critical infrastructures for (geo)political and/or economic gain.

The future of democracy, even our security, is in your hands.

Yours sincerely,

Alice Stollmeyer  
Founder & Executive Director  
Defend Democracy