



IDOS

German Institute
of Development
and Sustainability



PROJECTINFO

Protecting Democracy in Times of Autocratization and Polarization

Research and policy advice project of the
**German Institute of Development and
Sustainability (IDOS)**

*formerly German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*



[www.idos-research.de/en/research/description/details/
protecting-democracy-in-times-of-autocratization-and-polarization/](https://www.idos-research.de/en/research/description/details/protecting-democracy-in-times-of-autocratization-and-polarization/)

Motivation

For several years now, global autocratization trends have posed an increasingly fundamental threat to the liberal world order, societal peace and development cooperation. Over 70% of the world's population now live in autocratic regimes, and the trend is rising. Social cohesion is eroding, leading to an increase in violent conflicts of various kinds. At the same time, democracy as a mechanism for the peaceful and respectful resolution of social tensions is being questioned in many countries, if not explicitly attacked. Internally, autocrats use social polarization and mobilize along exclusionary identities and discriminatory narratives as a strategy to advance or consolidate autocratization in their countries. These developments are usually insidious and undermine democratic institutions and processes, such as government accountability. Although in many places protests and social movements are resisting these anti-democratic tendencies, they often fail to be effective due to the power of the state apparatus.

Global and transnational dynamics reinforce these domestic tendencies. Economically successful autocracies such as China or Russia advertise their political model and actively promote it abroad. They spread anti-pluralist norms, stabilize dictatorships and attack democratic institutions, also and increasingly through digital means.

The global trends towards autocratization and polarization are framework conditions that restrict the available options for development policy. They not only impede and prevent the achievement of development goals, but also jeopardize global and domestic common good orientation, social cohesion and peace.

Against this background, the research project aims to identify international strategies and policy options that protect and promote democracy, social cohesion and peace. To achieve this, it explores the patterns and typical dynamics of autocratization and democratization processes and how these relate to polarization and social cohesion dynamics. The interplay of domestic factors with international ones is prominently analysed.

The specific objectives of the project include:

- (1) bringing together different actors working in the field of democracy promotion and protection by supporting exchange;

- (2) helping the development of a more nuanced discussion around polarization and social cohesion by providing conceptual guidance and review the currently very diffuse literature on the topic;
- (3) understanding and investigating how development policy strategies and measures promote and strengthen autocratization and polarization processes and which and how elements of the strategies and measures need to be adapted in these contexts to minimize risk of unintended effects of interventions;
- (4) Identifying the possibilities and limitations of international cooperation efforts and development policy activities, particularly in contexts of increasing autocratization and polarization.

The research and policy advice project aims to answer the following overarching questions and examines them in two dimensions of reality (offline and online). In doing so, the project has a particular emphasis on how digitalisation is changing the context in which these debates and activities take place.

- What patterns can be observed in autocratization, polarization, and successful re-democratization processes regarding institutional reforms, actor strategies, and the role of digitalization?
- How do autocratization processes affect peace? Are certain contexts particularly prone to the outbreak of violence?
- Which inter- and transnational strategies contribute to the protection of democracy and promote active depolarization and social cohesion? (intended effects)
- How can development policy interventions be actively prevented from promoting/driving autocratization and polarization? (unintended effects)

Thematic Areas

The project consists of one overarching and four theme-based working packages (WPs).

In the overarching working package **Synthesizing Insights: Concepts, Narratives, and Strategic Learning on Democracy Promotion** we bring our diverse expertise together to discuss fundamental question of broad academic and policy relevance such as issues connected to the conceptualisation and measurement of polarization and autocratization. In this WP we also work on developments and debate about different narratives around democracy promotion, discuss and bring together the overarching significance of the findings in the individual packages and plan events and strategies to learn from democracy promotion efforts within donor countries and in partner countries.

The other four WPs aim at generating scientific knowledge and deriving policy recommendations, focusing on the interaction between social cohesion and specific policy areas. WP4 has the peculiarity that beyond focusing on the area of digitalization it links to the other WPs as a cross-cutting topic.

The four WPs include:

- **Protecting democracy and promoting social cohesion:** WP1 places a particular focus on international efforts of democracy promotion and protection. While democracy promotion generally intends to advance democratization, democracy protection attempts to prevent a 'roll-back' of democracy. To understand mechanisms of democracy protection, the work package zooms into a set of country cases in which ongoing autocratization has been halted and investigates how international democracy protection contributed to these reversals. In addition, the work package examines potential unintended consequences that may follow from international efforts to protect democracy.
- **Strengthening public administrations as an instrument for promoting and protecting democracy:** WP2 explores the role of public administrations in protecting democracy and reducing polarization. While often seen as passive, public administrations are in fact powerful, independent actors that can shape political developments. As these are the state institution citizens interact with most directly, it is crucial to understand how these encounters

influence political attitudes and regime support. The work package also examines when and how public administrations use their power to either defend or undermine democracy.

- **Societal peace, protests and autocratization** WP3 investigates the relationship between autocratization, social cohesion and political violence. It analyses whether autocratization increases the risk of violent conflict or if more autocratic regime are more capable in suppressing violence. Moreover, it aims to investigate the circumstances that may increase or decrease the risk of violence, in particular the role of international support and protest dynamics. Furthermore the work package is interested in the legacy of violent conflict for societal peace, i.e. how political violence such as intra-state conflict or violent protests impact on social cohesion.
- **Digitalization, disinformation, and autocratization:** WP4 addresses digital challenges that threaten democracy, societal peace, and international cooperation worldwide. Our aim is to identify international strategies and policy measures to counter these challenges. Our guiding questions are centred around offline and online drivers of disinformation and its impact on democracy, how digital technologies shape autocratization and polarization in different contexts, strategies used by autocratic actors to undermine international democracy efforts, and regulatory frameworks and toolkits to fight digital information pollution.

Our core partners



Afrobarometer, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, the economy, and society. It is considered the world's leading source of high-quality data on what Africans are thinking.



Together with the World Bank we organise the Social Cohesion Online Seminar Series conceived as meeting point for leading researchers of diverse disciplines, policy-makers and practitioners of national and international organisations to discuss new insights in the area of social cohesion as well as their implications for development cooperation.

Social Cohesion Hub

The Social Cohesion Hub is a knowledge-sharing platform originally conceived and launched by the former IDOS Project "Social Cohesion in Africa". The platform aims to bring together those interested in social cohesion and related areas such as polarization. In particular, the Hub encourages dialogue between academics and practitioners working on the topic. In this vein, the Hub aims to promote exchange as well as foster cooperation and discussion between different stakeholder groups. Interest and demand is growing and with it the amount of information on the Hub which lives from the active involvement of its growing community and network.





Events - Selected ones since 2024

Social Cohesion Online Seminar Series

Expert Discussion organised in cooperation with the World Bank, hybrid events on a regular meeting approximately every 4 months

- Fostering inter-group cohesion: A review of strategies and emerging evidence from Lebanon and beyond. (April 24)
- Exploring the effect of global identities on inter-group cooperation and pro-social behaviours. (September 24)

Protecting Democracy in the face of digital challenges

Parallel Session at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum, Bonn, 18th June 2024

“Rethinking Information Resilience: Alternative Toolkit, New Alliances

Parallel Session at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum, Bonn, 7th July 2025

“Contested Democracy-Lab“

Event for the Shaping Futures Academy 2024, Accra/Ghana, 23rd October 2024

Collegial retreat

Exchange Meeting of IDOS, GIGA, DEval & University of Erfurt, Bonn, 7-8th November 2024

Democracy Protection in the Global South(s) and North(s)

Expert Exchange Meeting, Berlin, 28th November 2024



Academic publications - selected since 2024

Civil society, public support, and democratic recession in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Lorch, Jasmin / Marlene Mauk (2025). *Democratization*, 1-29.

Strategic responses to autocratization in international democracy promotion. Leininger, Julia / Karina Mross / Jonas Wolff (2025). *Democratization*, 1-23.

The international dimension of autocratisation and its prevention: linking an actor-centred approach with a concept of external autocracy prevention. Wingens, Christopher (2025). Dissertation, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48565/bonndoc-502>

From polarisation to autocratisation: the role of information pollution in Brazil's democratic erosion. Breuer, Anita (2025). Discussion Paper (2/2025) Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)

COVID-19 and Political Trust in Local Governments: Evidence From Nepal. Fiedler, Charlotte / Hugo Marcos-Marne / Karina Mross (2024). *Political Studies Review*, 22(4), 930-947.

Democracy protection: fundamental reforms needed to adjust to the new context. In: *The European Union's global role in a changing world: challenges and opportunities for the new leadership.* Hackenesch, Christine / Julia Leininger (2024). In: Christine Hackenesch / Niels Keijzer / Svea Koch (eds.) Discussion Paper (11/2024) Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

EU engagement in fragile and conflict-affected states: towards a dedicated strategy. Bergmann, Julian / Jasmin Lorch (2024). In: Christine Hackenesch / Niels Keijzer / Svea Koch (eds.), *The European Union's global role in a changing world: challenges and opportunities for the new leadership*, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), 28-31.

Democratization and peace after civil war: what difference can international engagement make? Insights from Liberia. Mross, Karina (2024). *International Studies Perspectives*, first published 17th October 2024

E-government and citizen-state relations: evidence from a randomized information campaign with the Botswana Unified Revenue Service. Governance. Ziaja, Sebastian / Markus Geray / David Sebudubudu / Armin von Schiller (2025). *Governance*, 38(2), 1-21.

Religious actors and autocratization. Leininger, Julia (2024) in: Croissant, Aurel / Luca Tomini (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*, London: Routledge, 289-304.

The role of transnational democracy activists during Togo's constitutional reform episode, 2017-2019. Nowack, Daniel (2024). In: Sven Grimm / Stephan Klingebiel (eds.), *Transnational cooperation – an explorative collection*. Discussion Paper (4/2024) Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability, 40-45.

Out of sight, out of mind: The impact of lockdown measures on sentiment towards refugees. Abdul Reda, A., Sinanoglu, S., Aboussalah, A. (2024). *Journal of Information, Technology, and Politics*, 21(2), 166-75.

Strengthening social cohesion to mitigate human insecurity: Promise and peril. Leininger, Julia / Armin von Schiller / Charlotte Fiedler (2024). In: Human Development Report 2023-24, *Breaking the gridlock: reimagining cooperation in a polarized world*, New York: UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 163-166.

Information integrity and information pollution: vulnerabilities and impact on social cohesion and democracy in Mexico. Breuer, Anita (2024). Discussion Paper (2/2024) Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)

Triggers and strategies of revenue bargaining: evidence from Mozambican municipalities. von Schiller, Armin (2024). In: Anne Mette Kjær / Marianne S. Ulriksen / Ane Karoline Bak (eds.), *The Politics of Revenue Bargaining in Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 83-105.

What works in democracy support? How to fill evidence and usability gaps through evaluation. Leininger, Julia / Armin von Schiller (2024). *Evaluation*, 30(1), 7-26.



Policy briefs and opinion pieces - Selected ones since 2024

Last chance for a fundamental reform of German development policy?

Heiner, Janus / Armin von Schiller (2025). The Current Column of 28th April 2025, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Why democracy needs a narrative on political liberalism.

Nowack, Daniel (2025). The Current Column of 5th May 2025, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Why United Nations Peacekeeping Matters.

Dworschak, Christoph / Karina Mross (2025). The Current Column of 12th May 2025, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Countering information pollution to protect democracy.

Sinanoglu, Semuhi / Anita Breuer (2024). Policy Brief 29/2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Spotlight on protest dynamics in Mozambique.

Dworschak, Christoph / Salvador Forquilha / Karina Mross (2024). The Current Column of 25th November 2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Harnessing the democratising potential of the EU's foreign policy

agenda. Vandeputte, Nathan / ... / Julia Leininger / ... / Christopher Wings (2024). Mapping and Organizing Research on Dictatorships (M.O.R.D.O.R. project), Report.

Mutual learning to rethink democracy promotion.

Nowack, Daniel (2024). The Current Column of 11th November 2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Countering information pollution to protect democracy.

Sinanoglu, Semuhi / Anita Breuer (2024). Policy Brief 29/2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

The EU's support to democracy: recognising the democratising potential of the EU's foreign policy agenda. Mapping and Organizing

Research on Dictatorships. Vandeputte, Nathan / ... / Christopher Wings / ... / Julia Leininger (2024). Mapping and Organizing Research on Dictatorships (M.O.R.D.O.R.) Policy Brief.

Integrated Security in Times of Austerity. Lorch, Jasmin (2024). The Current Column of 13th June 2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Deutschlands Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie aus entwicklungs-politischer Perspektive: Zielkonflikte thematisieren, Synergien stärken Lorch, Jasmin (2024). Policy Brief 18/2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

The dream of dictatorship. Mross, Karina (2024). The Current Column of 23rd April 2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Constellations of State Fragility: improving international cooperation through analytical differentiation. Lorch, Jasmin / Sebastian Ziaja / Jörn Grävingholt (2024). Policy Brief 5/2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

2024 – Asia’s bumper election year. Lorch, Jasmin (2024). The Current Column of 4th March 2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).




Social contract and social cohesion: synergies and tensions between two related concepts. Loewe, Markus / Armin von Schiller / Tina Zintl / Julia Leininger (2024). Policy Brief 3/2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).





Security policy is not development policy. Leininger, Julia / Anna-Katharina Hornidge (2024). The Current Column of 21st February 2024, Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

Demokratie schützen, Autokratisierung abwenden. Leininger, Julia (2024). Entwicklung + Zusammenarbeit 2/2024, 6-8.



The Team - not including associate and guest researchers

	<p>Julia Leininger (Project Co-Lead)</p> <p><i>Julia.Leininger@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP1 “Protecting democracy and promoting social cohesion”:</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Political regime change, international democracy promotion and protection, future scenarios and governing sustainability policies.</p>
	<p>Daniel Nowack</p> <p><i>Daniel.Nowack@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP1 “Protecting democracy and promoting social cohesion”:</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Democracy promotion and good governance, democratisation and autocratisation, civil society and social movements.</p>
	<p>Christopher Wingens</p> <p><i>Christopher.Wingens@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP1 “Protecting democracy and promoting social cohesion”:</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Regime change; democracy promotion and autocracy prevention; sustainability transformation modelling</p>

	<p>Armin von Schiller (Project Co-Lead)</p> <p><i>Armin.Schiller@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP2 “Values, political institutions and resources mobilisation”:</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Citizen- Government interaction, attitudes towards political institutions and public administrations, public administration reform, regime performance, evaluation of governance interventions, tax morale</p>
	<p>Charlotte Fiedler</p> <p><i>Charlotte.Fiedler@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP3 “Social peace, protests and autocratization”</p> <p>Fields of expertise: International peacebuilding, post-conflict societies, local elections, democracy support, transitional justice.</p>
	<p>Jasmin Lorch</p> <p><i>Jasmin.Lorch@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP3 “Social peace, protests and autocratization”</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Political transformation, political violence, state fragility, armed conflicts, civil-military relations, civil society,</p>
	<p>Karina Mross</p> <p><i>Karina.Mross@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP3 “Social peace, protests and autocratization”</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Social cohesion in conflict affected societies, peacebuilding, democracy promotion, local elections, transitional justice.</p>

	<p>Anita Breuer</p> <p><i>Anita.Breuer@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP4 “Digitalization, disinformation and autocratization”</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, Participation and Accountability, Digitalisation in Politics and Development, political behaviour and attitudes.</p>
	<p>Semuhi Sinanoglu</p> <p><i>Semuhi.Sinanoglu@idos-research.de</i></p> <p>WP4 “Digitalization, disinformation and autocratization”</p> <p>Fields of expertise: Authoritarian propaganda and disinformation, polarization, repression, political methodology, forecasting</p>

*Please check more information at individual profiles
at www.idos-research.de*



Notes

IDOS

The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) (formerly German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, DIE) is located in the UN City of Bonn and is one of the world's leading research institutions and think tanks for global sustainable development. Our work is based on the interplay between research, policy advice and training. The IDOS is building bridges between theory and practice.

The research is theory-based, empirically driven and application-oriented. It provides the basis for the activities in policy advice of the Institute. We develop policy-relevant concepts, advises ministries, governments and international organisations, and refers to current policy issues. The training programmes of the Institute for university graduates and young professionals are integrated into the research and advisory process.

Contact

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