

Written Submission to Prosjekt Vendepunkt

June 2026

Submitted by International IDEA in response to the Prosjekt Vendepunkt public consultation process. International IDEA is an intergovernmental organization with 35 member states and a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide. Norway is a founding member state.

Executive Summary

Norway's Prosjekt Vendepunkt asks a fundamental question: how should Norwegian development cooperation be structured to deliver security, stability, and results in an era of constrained budgets and growing global disorder?

In response to this question, International IDEA argues that, in an era of tighter budgets and growing geopolitical instability, coupled with deepening democratic decline worldwide, investment in democratic resilience offers one of the highest returns for Norwegian development aid. We advance three key arguments, based on our own and others' research and evidence:

(1) democratic governance is an enabler of inclusive and sustainable development and shared prosperity, which strengthens the effectiveness and impact of development assistance;

(2) investments in democracy strengthen global peace and security, and help advance Norway's own security interests;

and (3) as support for democratic values and the rules-based international order weakens globally, Norway has a strategic opportunity to step forward as a leading middle power in defence of both.

We therefore encourage Norway to place democratic governance at the centre of its new development cooperation framework as an enabling foundation for achieving its security, development, and humanitarian objectives.

We recommend a dual approach: investing in democracy as a standalone strategic priority through targeted support to strengthen rule of law, anti-corruption systems, democratic and accountable institutions, electoral integrity, civic space, human rights and democratic resilience to threats; while also more strategically integrating democratic governance objectives across all its sectoral programming in sectors such as health, education, poverty reduction, water and sanitation, infrastructure, economic development, trade and security.

Democratic governance should not be seen as a peripheral values agenda, but a strategic investment in the institutional foundations of development effectiveness, long-term security, sustainable prosperity, and trusted trade partnerships that advance both global stability and Norway's own interests in tandem.

1. Introduction

Projekt Vendepunkt comes at a moment of growing strain for international development cooperation, characterized by tighter budgets, geopolitical fragmentation, and increasing pressure to demonstrate measurable impact. In this context, Norway is right to reassess how its development cooperation can most effectively contribute to security, stability, and sustainable development.

International IDEA submits this contribution in recognition of its longstanding partnership with Norway, a founding Member State and key supporter since the Institute's establishment in 1995. As the only intergovernmental organization with a sole mandate to support democracy worldwide, IDEA was founded on the premise that democratic governance is not only a normative good, but also a foundation for sustainable development, stability, and peace. This is directly relevant to the priorities identified in Vendepunkt.

2. The evidence

- **Democracy as central to development effectiveness: democratic governance strengthens the impact and durability of development assistance by producing better development outcomes and creating enabling conditions for sustainable growth, public service delivery, and trade and investment**

Vendepunkt calls for stronger results and accountability in Norwegian development cooperation, and for strategic concentration in areas where Norway's support delivers measurable impact. Evidence shows that investments in democratic governance directly supports these objectives by increasing the effectiveness, transparency, and sustainability of other development investments.

The evidence shows that investments in democracy generate development dividends by reducing corruption and conflict, improving the delivery of public services, creating better conditions for economic growth and investment, strengthening trust between citizens and institutions, and enabling development assistance to be used more effectively and accountably.

International IDEA's recent report [Democracy as Engine of Social Development and Shared Prosperity: An Overview of Evidence and Pathways](#), drawing on its own data and scholarly evidence, demonstrates the strong relationship between democratic governance and higher social spending, stronger health and education outcomes, shared prosperity and equality, and more sustainable growth trajectories.

Data from International IDEA's [Global State of Democracy Indices](#), which track democratic performance across 173 countries from 1975 until today, demonstrates that democracies consistently outperform non-democratic regimes on basic welfare, equality, and corruption control. On average, measures of political equality, such as Gender, Economic and Social Group Equality are around 40–47 per cent higher in democracies; Basic Welfare (health, education, and social protection) is roughly 30 per cent higher; and corruption levels are about 50 per cent lower. Stronger democratic quality is consistently associated with better performance across all those indicators. Conversely, a number of studies show that autocracies and [democratic backsliding](#) correlate with poorer development outcomes. Strengthening democracy and democratic institutions is therefore essential to delivering equitable socio-economic development.

Democracy produces better development outcomes through [four main pathways](#): it creates incentives for governments to deliver public goods through elections and political accountability; it strengthens rule of law and reduces corruption, helping resources reach those in need rather than elites; it protects rights and civic participation, while enabling free media and civil society to scrutinize government performance and spending, expose abuse of power, and improve public decision making; and it fosters stability and peaceful conflict management, creating the conditions for long-term investment and socio-economic development.

Democratic mechanisms also strengthen the [effectiveness of development aid](#) by ensuring that public resources and aid investments are subject to democratic accountability, and institutional, civil society and media scrutiny, [reducing leakages, ensuring that scarce resources reach those it intends to serve](#) and thereby improving long-term development outcomes.

While the relationship between democracy and development is strong, it is not automatic. Some democratic governments fail to deliver for their citizens, and when they do, [trust in democratic institutions erodes](#). International evidence shows that satisfaction with democracy is [declining worldwide](#), driven by [perceptions](#) that some democracies are not responsive to citizens' economic and social needs. Therefore, investments in strong and accountable democratic institutions should be paired with the systematic integration of democratic guardrails, including accountability, transparency, and citizen participation across public service delivery, budget oversight, and sectoral programming, to help countries better deliver on citizen expectations. Norway's development cooperation is well positioned to advance both agendas in a mutually reinforcing way.

- **[Democracy as security infrastructure: democratic resilience as a cost-efficient security investment.](#)**

Vendepunkt explicitly frames development through a security lens: how can Norwegian development cooperation prevent the instability and displacement that ultimately generate humanitarian, financial and political costs at home and across Europe?

The evidence shows that investing early in democratic governance is far [more cost-effective](#) than responding later to the conflicts, instability, and crises caused by weak institutions, democratic erosion, and external interference. Strong democratic institutions increase resilience not only to conflict and instability, but also to foreign influence operations, disinformation campaigns, and other forms of hybrid threats that seek to undermine public trust and democratic processes. Investing in democracy advances both global and Norwegian security interests by reducing the risk of conflict and instability, increasing resilience, and creating the conditions for more peaceful, locally grounded sustainable development.

A large body of evidence shows that democracy is a security imperative: democracies are less likely to go to war with each other, experience lower levels of [internal political violence](#), and are generally better able to [prevent large-scale civil conflict](#) than autocracies. Regions with higher concentrations of democratic states also face [lower risks of armed conflict overall](#). Conversely, [democratic backsliding](#) is associated with greater instability, displacement, economic disruption, and weakened investor confidence.

International IDEA's analysis of [SDG 16](#) on peace, justice, and strong institutions further demonstrates that the targets under SDG 16 act as key enablers of all the Sustainable Development Goals, while weak institutions, [corruption](#), conflict, and democratic decline undermine development outcomes across the entire 2030 Agenda.

The number of armed conflicts worldwide is now at its [highest level since 1946](#), while violence is estimated to cost the global economy nearly [USD 20 trillion annually](#), equivalent to [13 per cent of global GDP](#). This rise in conflict coincides with broader democratic decline, weakening rule of law, shrinking civic space, and growing institutional capture, as documented by International IDEA's [Global State of Democracy Report](#). Democratic vulnerabilities are increasingly exploited by external actors through disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, covert political financing, electoral interference, and other forms of foreign information, manipulation and interference (FIMI) designed to erode trust in democratic institutions and exacerbate social and political divisions. The rapid rise of AI is accelerating these threats by making disinformation, and other forms of digital manipulation and interference faster, cheaper and more accessible and persuasive, underscoring the need for strong democratic oversight and safeguards.

Fragile or incomplete democratic transitions also carry risks. Hybrid regimes often face higher risks of civil conflict than both consolidated democracies and autocracies, while periods of democratization or democratic reversal can generate instability where institutions are [weak](#) or political competition is [exclusionary](#). This underscores the importance of investments in inclusive democratic governance, institutional resilience, and rule of law in such contexts.

For Norwegian development cooperation, the implications are clear: [supporting democratic resilience](#) is integral to security policy. Investing in accountable institutions, credible elections, independent media, and inclusive governance strengthens democratic resilience and [reduces the long-term risks of conflict](#), instability, displacement, and democratic decline and lowers the future humanitarian, security, and economic [costs](#) associated with crisis response, forced displacement, and conflict management.

- **[Geopolitical vacuum and opportunity](#): strategic opportunity for Norway to step forward as a leading middle power in defence of a rules based international order underpinned by democratic principles**

Norway is well placed to exercise leadership in support of democracy at a moment when global support for democratic values and the rules-based international order is weakening. As major bilateral donors cut aid budgets, with [democracy support facing particularly severe reductions](#), and with multilateral engagement on democratic governance becoming more contested, efforts to support democracy are facing growing pressure. The United States, long a key supporter of democracy assistance, has stepped back from that role. If democratic states do not help fill this vacuum, authoritarian powers will increasingly shape the norms, institutions, and rules of the international system, with significant implications for global stability, conflict risk, economic openness, and the future of the rules-based international order. This retreat is strategically short-sighted.

Norway is well positioned to help fill part of this leadership gap. Norway already champions democracy, transparency, anti-corruption, and SDG 16 across its foreign policy and multilateral engagement. Its longstanding commitment to democratic governance, human rights, anti-corruption, and accountable institutions gives it credibility across regions and political contexts. Through institutions such as International IDEA, Norway already has the partnerships, multilateral channels, and evidence base needed to advance democracy support as part of a broader strategy for security, development, and economic resilience.

Vendepunkt presents an opportunity to make these commitments more coherent, strategic, and closely aligned with Norway's long-term security and development goals at a time when stronger international leadership in support of democratic governance is urgently needed.

3. Prioritizing engagement priorities and modalities

International IDEA therefore encourages Norway to place democratic governance at the centre of its development cooperation framework as an enabling foundation for achieving its security, development, and humanitarian objectives. We recommend a dual approach, with investments in democracy as a standalone strategic priority through targeted support to strengthen rule of law, anti-corruption systems, accountable institutions, electoral integrity, civic space, human rights and democratic resilience to threats and backsliding, and counter foreign interference, disinformation, and other forms of hybrid influence, while also more strategically integrating democratic governance objectives across all its sectoral programming in sectors such as health, education, poverty reduction, water and sanitation, infrastructure, economic development, trade and security.

Norway should invest in democratic resilience both in its wider neighbourhood and in reform-oriented partner countries in other regions, recognising that democracy and rule of law and accountable institutions not only underpin sustainable economic development, but also lower migration pressures, strengthen reliable trading partners and acts as a preventive security investment.

At the country level, we encourage Norway to prioritise comprehensive, long-term support for reform-oriented democracies by combining investments in democratic institutions, rule of law, and accountable governance with investments in jobs, public services, infrastructure, climate resilience, and economic growth, recognising that democratic resilience and sustainable socio-economic progress must advance together to build citizen trust.

We also recommend tailored democracy support strategies for conflict-affected, hybrid, and authoritarian contexts, with flexible support for independent civic society and media, and locally rooted democratic actors. This should include support for electoral integrity, political finance transparency, independent media, digital literacy, and information integrity initiatives that strengthen resilience to foreign interference and manipulation of democratic processes.

We also encourage Norway to use its multilateral leverage to defend democratic norms globally, pursuing a coherent multilateral strategy that aligns with its foreign policy and security goals, to also strengthen democratic norms and multistakeholder approaches in the UN, regional organisations, international financial institutions, and plurilateral forums.

We also encourage closer partnerships with like-minded countries across both the Global North and South to strengthen collective support for democracy and the rules-based international order. Framing democracy in terms of tangible development and security outcomes can help broaden international support for democratic governance, positioning it not as a Western-led agenda, but as a foundation for prosperity, resilience, and sustainable development.

Effective democracy support requires investment at global, regional, and local levels. International networks and multilateral platforms play an important role in connecting democratic actors, facilitating peer learning, and sharing evidence and comparative experience across contexts. This should be complemented by sustained support for local democratic actors, including civil society organisations, independent media, research institutions, reform coalitions, and social movements. Greater scale and cost-effectiveness can be achieved by working through regionally rooted intermediaries to reach local actors.

Support should also extend beyond short-term projects to include sustained investment in evidence-based policy research that strengthens the effectiveness of interventions based on international good practices and democratic innovations, combined with mutually reinforcing approaches such as **advocacy, capacity building, and peer exchanges**.

As Norway redefines its development cooperation priorities for a new geopolitical era, International IDEA stands ready to partner in advancing a more strategic, focused, and evidence-based approach that recognises investment in democratic resilience as one of the most effective multipliers of development assistance and a foundation for inclusive prosperity, long-term stability, and shared global security.

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