



EU Development Policy and Dissensus over Liberal Democracy

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I INTRODUCTION

EU development policy has long been intertwined with the EU's identity in the international system, its will to position itself as a normative power upholding democracy, human rights, and governance standards. This role has been challenged by both internal and external dissensus. Internally, member states such as Hungary and Poland have resisted Europeanisation, creating distinct donor profiles that diverge from elements of the EU's liberal democratic agenda. Externally, recipient countries, particularly in Africa, show increasing assertiveness in negotiations, questioning the EU's legitimacy as a normative power in a growingly multipolar world. This chapter explores how dissensus over liberal principles and/or practices has manifested in EU development policy in recent decades. It discusses the EU as a development actor (both as donor and coordinator) and development as an instrument of EU foreign policy. It then analyses dissensus in development policy by focusing on three main elements: the thematic area of democracy promotion, the geographic area of relations with African countries, and the perturbing element of dissensus from within, operated by countries like Hungary and Poland. It elicits different degrees of dissensus, from mild to potentially disruptive. In highlighting frictions between EU normative ambitions and geopolitical pragmatism, the chapter concludes with reflections on potential implications of

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dissensus over future development policy, in light of the current (revised) EU geopolitical conundrum: finding (or keeping) relevance in a more and more illiberal international (dis)order (Holden, 2020).

2 SITUATING EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY

EU development policy is as old as EU integration: the Treaty of Rome already foresaw an association with countries and territories (mainly in Africa) part of the—at the time—colonial realm of the founding member states (Raimundo, 2021). The colonial and clientelist mindset and structure of the policy in its early days have been documented (Dimier, 2014; Hansen & Jonsson, 2014) and continue to shape today's external dimension of dissensus, as a reaction to Normative Power Europe (Manners, 2002).

The objectives of EU development policy are enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 208 TFEU and Article 21 TEU). On top of poverty reduction, since the 1980s, democracy promotion, good governance, respect for the rule of law, and human rights were added. Critiques have pointed out how different norms or principles that the EU upholds in development collide with its own actions or decisions. For instance, aid being conditional on the respect of human rights or democratic principles has negative social and economic implications for populations in recipient countries (Orbie, 2020, p. 424).

Contestation of EU development policy has come from multiple sides of the political spectrum within the EU. From the left, the idea of “developing” other countries is perceived as inherently colonial. From the right, calls for a stronger link between development disbursements and the EU's own interests have been made, in particular in relation to migration control, investments for EU companies, security (Orbie, 2020, p. 420). Contestation has been manifested by recipient countries themselves. Dissensus has not been preponderant, though, but has taken different forms, in thematic and geographic programmes, as I show later on in the chapter. In what follows, I focus on the EU's dual role as both a *donor* and a *coordinator* of member states' development policies. Situated within EU external action, development policy has been considered as an instrument of foreign policy, with normative power at play.

Donor EU: Deciding on EU Aid Budget

The EU aid budget has been considerable since 1957. The Treaty of Rome foresaw a specific European Development Fund (EDF) allocated to 18 countries and territories (mainly in Africa), negotiated by the founding members of the European Economic Community (EEC) and implemented by the High Authority (precursor of today's European Commission—EC). Other geographic and thematic budgets were created in the 1970s for countries other than Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) and regrouped under the Development Cooperation Instrument only in 2008. Specific budgets also

exist for democracy and human rights promotion such as the “Human Rights and Democracy” programme, succeeding to the “European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights” (EIDHR)¹ (Orbie, 2020, pp. 420–421; Vandeputte et al., 2024, p. 22).

The EDF has been budgetised within the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (2021–2027) and regrouped, together with most of such instruments, under the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). With a total amount of 79 billion EUR for the period, most of the NDICI budget is allocated to geographic programmes (60 billion) around the Neighbourhood, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Pacific, and Americas and Caribbean regions. Another part (6 billion) is devoted to thematic programmes, including—but not limited to—the Human Rights and Democracy programme (Funds and Tenders Portal EC n.d.).

The roles of the EU as a donor imply different institutions/actors for each phase:

- (1) *General budgeting phase*: interinstitutional negotiations around the MFF involving the European Council, the European Parliament (EP), and EC; legislation involving Council, EP, and EC through the ordinary legislative procedure;
- (2) *Strategic programming phase*: decisions on country/regional priorities involving EC and the European External Action Service (EEAS);
- (3) *Management phase*: involves the EC, particularly the Directorates Generals of International Partnerships (DG INTPA) and Enlargement (DG NEAR—as of 2024 DG Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, DG ENEST);
- (4) *Implementation phase*: delegated to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), local governments, development agencies, and international organisations (Orbie, 2020, pp. 431–434).

Coordinator EU: a Shared Competence For Non-Shared Sensibilities

Development policy is a shared competence: the EU’s policies and those of the member states should complement and reinforce one another. For this purpose, the EC can take “any useful initiative” (Article 208–210 TFEU) such as benchmarking, support for peer pressure, common declarations, and Joint Programming (EC, n.d.). Other soft law instruments, such as Council conclusions and support coordination, bind the member states from a rhetoric perspective (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024, p. 3). The Europeanisation of

¹ The “European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights” (EIDHR) was a thematic programme focused on democracy and human rights promotion. It was created in 2006, following the 2000–2006 European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, for a 7-year period. Reconducted until 2020 (Dobrevá 2015, p. 2), it has since then been replaced by the NDICI—Global Europe “Human Rights and Democracy” programme.

development policy has however been mild: differences among member states' policies persist on cultural, historical, and national interest terms (Orbie & Carbone, 2016)—e.g., security, demographic, economic, or foreign policy issues. This has led to a variety of donor profiles (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024, p. 2). For instance, different perceptions about development targets exist between Northern and Southern members: the latter—particularly France and Italy—attribute greater relevance to their previous colonies; the former—such as the Netherlands and Germany—opt for relations to a wider spectrum of countries, around the respect of gender equality, environmental and social issues (Orbie, 2020, p. 423). Differences exist between Western and Eastern EU member states as well, the latter prioritising their neighbouring countries, rather than relations to ACP countries (Carbone, 2021; Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024). Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, in particular, have pushed for a migration-stemming agenda within development policy (Carbone, 2021; Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020). In spite of this diversity, the EU proudly talks of itself as “Team Europe”.²

EU Development Policy as a Foreign Policy Tool?

The rhetoric of “Team Europe” is used to show the EU's commitment and relevance in international cooperation through aid disbursements, as the world's largest donor in terms of Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Throughout these decades, the EU has also shaped international development norms. Both dimensions contribute to the broad objective of asserting its place as a global actor (Orbie, 2020, p. 414), a global normative power, capable of influencing recipients' norms and policies, including through aid conditionalities.

Substantive objectives have been *economic* (poverty reduction), *political* (promotion of democracy, rule of law, good governance and human rights), and *sustainability* ones. However, these have been increasingly watered down, to give space to broader *internal and external* ones: migration control, fighting climate change, stability of neighbouring regions, and investment opportunities for EU enterprises. This is visible in institutional and discursive/rhetoric terms. Institutionally, the DG for Development Cooperation (DG DEVCO—today DG INTPA) has lost power to the EEAS (created in 2010), with which it now shares the management of development cooperation through an often-unclear division of labour. Discursively, the 2016

² “Team Europe” is an approach to coordination introduced by the EC in April 2020 as the EU's global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in financial terms, and rapidly expanded to other areas, including development cooperation. Part of “Team Europe” are “the EU, its member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)” (Keijzer et al., 2021, pp. 1–2). Today, “Team Europe Initiatives” (TEIs) are proposed on a country-by-country basis, which should increase development coherence (Team Europe Explorer n.d.).

Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy linked development cooperation with EU foreign policy interests (Smith, 2022, p. 256), which should, however, not be detrimental to other—more procedural—objectives, like *policy coherence* and *aid effectiveness* (Orbie, 2020, pp. 418–419). Since the Revised European Consensus on Development (2017), EU development policy seems to have lost its specific purpose to a broader geopolitical agenda (Orbie, 2020, pp. 420 and 436).

Today, development policy also aims at mutual benefits with countries no longer referred to as “aid recipients” but rather as “partners”. Policy documents since the von der Leyen I Commission have supported this rhetorical shift. As an example, the “Sub-Saharan Africa Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027” contains 29 references to “partner countries”, only three references to “beneficiaries”—not intended as countries but rather as non-state actors and individuals—and 0 references to “aid recipients”. The renaming of DG DEVCO into DG INTPA, since 2019, also marked a symbolic shift in this sense. The geopolitical rationale behind it is also linked to a rebranding of EU's external action—particularly vis-à-vis Africa—from a “donor-recipient narrative” to a “partnership of equals” (DG INTPA, EC, n.d.).

3 DISSENSUS OVER LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN EU DEVELOPMENT POLICY

In recent years, dissensus over liberal principles has materialised in EU development policy as well, driven both by internal and external actors. Two main drivers can be identified. On the one hand, tensions about liberal democratic values are related to the EU's claims of *normative legitimacy as a global actor*, claims that are tied to its foreign policy and with its poorly processed colonial past. These tensions are visible in both thematic and geographic areas of the policy, particularly in EU *democracy promotion* and *EU–Africa relations*, where development has historically been the main driver. In the field of democracy promotion, the EU is challenged especially over the principle of “ownership” (Vandeputte, 2022, p. 33), which relates to the necessity of “contextualising” aid (Brogna, 2018, p. 75) and allowing for “appropriation” (Bergamaschi, 2016). Here too, the EU's ambition to assert its role as a global normative power risks idiosyncrasy, given its internal struggles with illiberalism in some member states. In EU–Africa relations, dissensus has become visible, particularly in the long negotiations of the Samoa Agreement.³

³ EU–Africa relations through development have a long history. The EEC Treaty of Rome (1957) included an association with 18 countries and territories situated mainly in Africa, at the time colonised by France, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, and thus not consulted. Following formal decolonisation, the Yaoundé Conventions I (1963–1969) and II (1969–1975) were agreed between the EEC and the Associated African and Malagasy States. With the first European enlargement, the Lomé Conventions were agreed between the EEC and the new ACP Group (initially comprising 46 countries, established

On the other hand, through development policy *internal dissensus* against the EU can manifest, seen the particular normative emphasis of this policy domain and its symbolic meaning: dissensus here comes as a reaction to internal disagreements between national governments and EU institutions. Hungary and Poland are two cases in point (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 124). Hereunder, I elaborate on these three main areas of dissensus, eliciting its forms and rationale.

Dissensus over Liberal Democracy in EU Democracy Promotion

The nexus between democracy and development, although debated (Vandeputte & Luciani, 2018, p. 6), has found acknowledgement in EU development policy. The EU has budgetised 1.5 billion euros in the 2021–2027 MFF for democracy promotion (Vandeputte et al., 2024, p. 14). Democracy is considered as pre-condition for Sustainable Development (Council of the EU et al., 2017), and “democracy mainstreaming” is among the objectives of EU development policy (Zamfir, 2021, p. 7). Thus, democracy promotion is virtually present in all EU development programmes, on top of the specific thematic Human Rights and Democracy one. Although the EU does not give a definition of democracy, it supports a liberal acceptance (Zamfir, 2021, p. 2), an “embedded” form of democracy—also focusing on equality in resource distribution (Wetzel, 2015) and intending to support peace as per democratic peace theory (Zamfir, 2021, p. 3) (an International Relations approach according to which democracies do not wage war against one another).

However, EU democracy promotion has been controversial since its creation. Critiques have pointed to its “normative power dilemma”, whereby it has to balance (rhetorical) appeals to democratic norms and values with pragmatic cooperation with third country governments—due to the “ownership”

in 1975 with the Georgetown Agreement): Lomé I (1975–1980), II (1980–1985), III (1985–1990), IV (1990–1995), and IV bis (1995–2000). In 2000, the EU and 77 ACP countries concluded the Cotonou Agreement for a 20-year period, reviewed every five years. The third review, foreseen for 2015, was called off due to critiques about the usefulness and relevance of the EU-ACP framework (newer EU members had different priorities, the ACP Group was also economically more diverse) (Raimundo, 2021). A broader reflection started about a tentative post-Cotonou agreement, with pre-negotiation lasted until June 2018. Official negotiations lasted between September 2018 and April 2021. Temporary measures foreseen in the Cotonou agreement were extended multiple times after the official end of the agreement in February 2020. Finally, the new agreement was officially signed in Samoa on 15 November 2023 between the EU and the newly created Organisation of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS). The provisional application as per Art. 98(4) started in January 2024; the agreement will enter into force when 27 EU members and two-thirds of OACPS members have ratified it. As of May 2026, while all EU and OACPS members have signed, only nine EU members (Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia) and 13 OACPS member (Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga and Uganda) have ratified it (Council of the EU, n.d.).

principle—including when such governments represent authoritarian regimes (Vandeputte et al., 2024, pp. 18–20, 30, 35).

Dissensus about democracy promotion has been exerted with regard to the allegedly narrow focus of the EU on liberal democracy. For instance, in terms of supporting democracy in African countries, dissensus has been raised by local and Pan-African diasporic NGOs criticising the excessive focus on procedural, electoral democracy aspects (fair elections and party alternation in power). Democracy, it is recalled, should allow for meaningful participation of people in their “res publica”, collective decision-making over resource allocation and local/national development. Pan-African (and particularly Pan-Africanist) actors recall African pre-colonial forms of democracy, which might be revised, in line with local values and priorities (Brognia, 2023).

Dissensus might thus here resonate more with contestation of the EU as a self-asserted normative power, reverberated in the non-acceptance of norms and values considered as universal by the EU, but perceived as impositions in third countries. As an example, values related more to the collectivity and solidarity, and less to individual choice, are said to resonate more with a democratic ideal in African countries. Democracy contextualised might, for instance, give relevance to responsible leaders as “fathers” of the society and to consensual, rather than partisan, politics as an ideal (Mkandawire, 2001 and Schatzberg, 2001, cited in Vandeputte, 2023, p. 5). Supporting different typologies of democracy, resonating with local values potentially in conflict with liberal ones, might help “ownership” of democracy aid locally; this re-direction would be informed by radical democratic principles (Vandeputte, 2022, pp. 37–45; Vandeputte et al., 2024, p. 15). We can define such dissensus as midway from mild to severe, as it relates to the practice of liberal democracy but also to the relevance given to different interpretations of democracy.

Dissensus over Liberal Democracy in EU–Africa Relations Through Development

African countries have been key recipients of development aid since the beginning of European integration (Raimundo, 2021): still today, EU member states are expected to allocate a relatively more consistent share of ODA to this world region (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024, p. 3). Initially focused on trade and development, EU–Africa relations began to emphasise democracy promotion since the 1970s, when the EEC started to assert its role as a normative power abroad, but even more sharply since the 1990s, when the Lomé IV convention (1990–1995) introduced provisions for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Since then, the promotion of democracy and human rights has been seen “both as an objective and a condition of development cooperation”, applicable by the EU both as donor and coordinator. Further on, the Maastricht Treaty would enshrine democracy and human rights promotion as a defining element of the EU (Rodrigues Sanches, 2021, pp. 159–165). Lomé IVbis (1995–2000) would introduce political conditionalities to aid:

sanctions tied to the respect of democracy and human rights. If initially such respect would be assessed *ex-post* (“first-generation conditionalities”), since Cotonou (2000–2020) conditionalities would be applied *ex-ante*: the condition for receiving aid should be in place before the disbursement decision (“second-generation conditionality”). The political dimension of the EU-ACP partnership, introduced with Cotonou, contributed to a shift in the relations “from cooperation into coercion” (Carbone, 2021, p. 252), leading to a relational “fatigue” (Raimundo, 2021, p. 64). Contentious issues, particularly gender equality and migration, were present already in the Cotonou revisions (2010 and 2015), with ACP countries resisting EU proposals (Carbone, 2021, p. 245).

Since 2007, the EU has started to promote democracy through development in African countries through the African Union (AU)⁴ as well, with the 6-year Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES, culmination of a process started in Cairo in 2000 with the OAU). The JAES initially contained “democratic governance and human rights” among its four priorities, in its 3-year action plans, in the 2014–2017 Roadmap (Kell & Vines, 2021). The 2017 Abidjan Declaration, issued from the 5th AU-EU Summit, watered down references to democracy (AU and EU, 2017). Long and almost exhausted negotiations ensued between 2020 and 2022 to revise the JAES. A joint communication on a revised “Comprehensive Strategy with Africa” was published days before the COVID-19 pandemic outburst (EC and HR CFSP, 2020). Lingering resentment from African leaders about a long-lasting feeling of superiority from the EU side (manifested, for instance, in the management of vaccines) but also strong divergencies about migration, special drawing rights allocation at the International Monetary Fund and diplomatic tensions between Mali and France, delayed the organisation of the EU-AU Summit initially foreseen for October 2020 (Erforth & Keijzer, 2022). The “Joint Vision for 2030” (a declaration), resulting from the summit which eventually took place in February 2022, waters down references to democracy promotion, human rights, gender equality and the rule of law as *inter alia* among other “common priorities, shared values [...] our interests and common public goods” (EU and AU, 2022, p. 1). Conversely, migration (stemming) and multilateralism within the “rule-based international order” are fully fledged priorities, together with security and sustainable economic growth. The 7th AU-EU Summit, held in Luanda from 24th to 25th November 2025, celebrated the 25th anniversary of the partnership. Here “inclusive governance” the “rule of law” and “democracy” were reiterated commitments within a broader call for “enhanced cooperation on peace, security and governance” and a stronger focus on multilateralism (Council of the EU, 2025).

⁴ Established in 2002 from the ashes of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, created in 1963), the AU is a regional organisation comprising today 55 MS (AU, n.d.). It was created to give the continent a stronger Pan-African voice in relation to external actors (Akokpari & Bimha, 2021, pp. 121–123). The EU has ever since been among its key external interlocutors.

Ultimately, EU–Africa relations have also been revamped in the broader EU–OACPS framework with the “Samoa Agreement”. Samoa expands the political scope of the partnership (Carbone, 2021, p. 244): “Human Rights and Democracy” becomes here a clear priority (Art. 8–12), consolidating existing provisions on human rights, democracy, and rule of law (Art. 9), and including new commitments on gender equality (Art. 10), the right to development (Art. 9.6), good governance (Art. 12), and inclusive and pluralistic societies (Art. 11) (Samoa Agreement 2023). The length of the negotiation and ratification processes shows once more the relational fatigue of the two blocs with diverging interests, but also the growing assertiveness of African countries in a multipolar context in which they have alternatives to the EU (Haastrup, 2022).

Samoa reflects EU liberal values, mainly agreed upon by African governments as well, but with some remarkably contentious issues (Carbone, 2024, p. 1320). During the negotiations (2018–2020), these included the following:

- (i) *Sexual orientation and gender identity*, contested by the OACPS over cultural specificities;
- (ii) *Sexual and reproductive health and rights* (SRHR), particularly challenging the protection of sexual rights: strongly proposed by the EU, but contested both by Hungary and Poland and by OACPS (over cultural sensitivities);
- (iii) Cooperation with the *International Criminal Court*: OACPS contested the court conduct as discriminatory against African leaders;
- (iv) *Death penalty*: OACPS resisted the EU’s will to include strong language about a moratorium and contested this over cultural specificities;
- (v) *Civil society space*: OACPS considered the role of international Civil Society Organisations as external interference in domestic affairs, if not accurately controlled: for them, such organisations can be useful service providers but not human rights promoters (a function which should be a state prerogative);
- (vi) *Migration*: the EU proposed a security-focused approach, while the OACPS wanted to strengthen legal migration pathways and the migration-development nexus.

Compromise reached on such aspects included the following:

- (i) a commitment to human rights promotion against an extensive list of discrimination grounds “including sex, ethnic or social origin, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, disability, age, or other status” (“other status” being open to include LGBTQIA+ persons);
- (ii) an agreement to uphold SRHR only within the framework of already agreed international commitments (which only recognise women’s

- sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights), thus not as extensive as the EU would have sought;
- (iii) a commitment to fully cooperate with criminal justice mechanisms at all levels, including ratification of the Rome Statute;
 - (iv) a commitment to engage in further political dialogue on the death penalty between the EU and each OACPS country;
 - (v) a pledge to “preserve and broaden an enabling space for an active, organised, transparent civil society”, with guarantees of transparency and accountability;
 - (vi) an agreement to fully cooperate in return and readmissions of migrants, with potential sanctions for non-compliance, to stem irregular migration; on the other side, the parties agreed to also strengthen legal migration pathways and integration policies (Carbone, 2021, pp. 256–261; 2024, pp. 1320–1326).

We can analyse dissensus from the OACPS side in two connected ways. According to Carbone, OACPS countries resisted a too limited view about human rights by the EU: one only focused on civil and political rights. Their reading of human rights promotion—in line with that of most Global South countries—would favour economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as third-generation rights (e.g., the collective right to development that got finally enshrined in the agreement). Indeed, whereas for the EU civil and political rights are a prerequisite for development, the opposite is true for OACPS members (Carbone, 2024, p. 1324). EU’s equalling civil and political rights with human rights is, in this sense, particularistic and Eurocentric, while entertaining an old civilisational mindset: as the cradle of civil and political rights, surged as the most relevant among human rights generations, Europe can claim normative legitimacy as a global actor. OACPS dissenting from such liberal values, in this sense, is to be read not so much as an ontological threat to the essence of such rights and principles, but rather as resistance against EU self-legitimation. Secondly, it is readable as a claim for sovereignty, against perceived interference, which gains its relevance (rhetorically or not) from a decolonial perspective.

Dissensus from EU internal actors was present already since the pre-negotiation phase, particularly through Hungary (and Poland to a lesser extent) holding back the Council of the EU over migration: the EC negotiating directives finally contained a security-oriented understanding of migration (stemming) (Carbone, 2021, pp. 247–250). Both countries also argued against the possibility for SRHR to include same-sex marriage, support for abortion and adoption for same-sex couples. On these issues, they found convergence with external actors from the OACPS.

Taking both internal and external dissenting actors in this framework, we can consider dissensus here as tendentially destructive: the objectives of such actors are diverse and sometimes opposed (mainly limiting migration for the EU, increasing one’s assertiveness and sovereignty for the OACPS), although

convergence was to be found on SRHR. The stakes here concern liberal principles; however, the instrumentality of such dissensus has to be taken into account.

Dissensus from Within: Hungary and Poland as Developmental Actors

The Europeanisation of development policy in Central and Eastern Europe has been generally weak, with many member states diverting from the “global consensus on aid” (OECD DAC principles and EU aid acquis) (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024, p. 3). Although historically perceived as a prerogative of Western European countries, development policy has become politicised, in the last decade, in countries like Hungary and Poland: the debate about illiberalism between them and the EU reverberated on national development strategies. The fight with Brussels over breaches of the rule of law (both Poland and Hungary), discrimination of minorities, and consequent EU funding cuts (Hungary) exacerbated an already present diversification trend.

For Hungary, since 2011, the disputes with Brussels have led, on the one hand, to the promotion of economic nationalism through “tied aid credits” (Hungarian investments and exports in exchange for development aid), in order to decrease economic dependence on the EU (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024, pp. 8–9). For example, the 2011 “Global Opening” strategy already contained funding for infrastructures tied to contracts for Hungarian enterprises and scholarships for students from developing countries (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 126). On the other hand, since the 2015 refugee crisis, Hungary proposed to redirect aid at tackling the root causes of migration (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 130). Since then, Hungary has been fiercely diverting its aid for migration-stemming purposes, as per its internal “nativist identity politics”—comprising a strong anti-migration and religious rhetoric. Going against DAC and EU non-discriminatory norms, for instance, the Hungarian humanitarian and development agency (Hungary Helps) has targeted aid to Christian communities only (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 127; Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024, p. 9).

Poland has dissented in more subtle and technical ways. Even in the Law and Justice party (PiS) period of stay in power (2015–2023), with ongoing disputes with the EU around the rule of law, Poland had continued (rhetorically, at least) to align itself to EU development principles (Szent-Iványi & Lightfoot, 2024, p. 10). Economic nationalism and the focus on Christian communities materialised in the Polish case too, yet not as prominently as for Hungary (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, 127). A relevant change happened however in democracy promotion. Although Poland had historically focused on democracy promotion, the PiS government decided to decrease its relevance, both due to ideological reasons and because democracy promotion was understood as interference in internal affairs (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, 128). However, it was not totally interrupted.

Another important shift happened, like for Hungary, in relation to migration: Poland successfully negotiated aid diversion for migration-stemming purposes, agreeing with other EU countries on different trust funds (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 130). However, such a shift found a strong consensus among EU member states, which is symptomatic of a broader conflict between liberal values of the EU (enshrined in the *acquis*) and the securitarian rhetoric around migration diffused in “Fortress Europe”⁵ at large, not only by specifically illiberal governments. Since 2015, Poland increased humanitarian assistance in the Middle East, with the declared purpose of halting migration.

Another element through which dissensus has materialised, for both countries, pertains to the backlash against gender equality; this has happened internally and it has reverberated in development policy, particularly against SRHR, for example ahead and during negotiations about the Revised European Consensus on Development and the Samoa Agreement (Carbone, 2021; Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 133).

Thus, for Hungary, dissensus over liberal democracy has led to dissensus against the EU, in economic conditionalities for aid, aid diversion to contrast (irregular) migration, and discriminatory aid-targeting policy, to show Hungary’s dealignment vis-à-vis the EU. At the time of writing, it is soon to see how the 2026 change in government might impact Hungarian development policy. For Poland, dissensus has been less visible—although present—in its development policy, and has decreased with the change in government in late 2023. Dissensus by such internal actors has been of a disruptive type, with internal issues impacting development policy, both for ideological and instrumental reasons.

Reshaping EU Development Policy Rationale?

A number of considerations can be made about how such dissensus might reshape the rationale of EU development policy. First of all, trade-offs between internal jeopardy of liberal values and external normative action could be raised: internal attacks on liberal democratic principles, with attempts to media freedom, the independence of the judiciary and manipulation of information, risk to have repercussions on the legitimacy of EU democracy promotion abroad (Vandeputte et al., 2024, pp. 21–22), putting further pressure on

⁵ The term “Fortress Europe” represents EU’s external border regime, more particularly EU’s “access barriers”, or the limiting character of EU migration policies for citizens from the Global South. It implies at the same time “the physical and administrative externalisation of the EU border” (policies and technologies for border control and security) and the discursive operations (cultural and media practices) which contribute to depict those citizens in negative terms (Engelbert et al., 2019, 143). This amounts to “a manifestation of continuing imperialism”, the paradox of “liberalism with borders”: “aggressive pursuit of universal free movement for capital and goods, but obstruction of any equivalent universal free movement for people—especially the racialised working classes of the South” (Reynolds, 2020, pp. 342–343).

the credibility of Normative Power Europe. Strengthening the rule of law within the EU and “upholding our values” internally are once more among EC priorities (von der Leyen, 2024, pp. 23–24).

Secondly, the rise of extreme right-wing populist parties to government and in the EP could reshape development policy, decreasing the relevance of democracy promotion (Monkos 2021, in Vandeputte et al., 2024, p. 22). More broadly, the spread of illiberal principles across governments might lead to even more diversification of donor profiles away from the so-called “global *acquis* on aid”, not simply “eroding loyalty to EU development cooperation” (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 131) but more profoundly modifying such an *acquis*, if a critical mass of populist decision-makers finds its way to Brussels. The less confrontational character of the Polish participation in EU development policy, as opposed to the Hungarian one, might be an element of reflection: modifying EU policy on migration has been possible because of wider agreement than the one from openly illiberal governments.

Third, considering external actors’ dissensus too, Normative Power Europe seems at stake. Political conditionalities related to the respect of liberal democratic principles are a key issue in this regard. A shift towards less normative and more realist policy-making might be read positively by recipients, provided that normative rhetoric would give way to concrete mutual partnerships rather than renewed asymmetries. Here, recipient country governments and EU member states’ extreme right-wing populist governments might find convergence, each for its own interests, and operate against democracy promotion or against normative conditionalities. In light of current geopolitical competitions, this foresight is credible and visible in the attempt by von der Leyen II to strengthen the Global Gateway appeal in ways that could “de-emphasise” its “human development aspects” (including liberal democracy promotion) (Vandeputte et al., 2024, p. 25). The Samoa negotiations give us a sign of the demands for the EU to adapt to a more plural international context. In Carbone’s views, this could allow for mutual learning, considering the full spectrum of human rights as equally relevant (Carbone, 2024, p. 1327); although admittedly optimistic, such a perspective might support a different reading of EU legitimacy as a global actor.

4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have elicited the main roles of the EU as a development donor and coordinator. I have focused on how dissensus over liberal principles has materialised in development policy, with respect to two main drivers: on the one hand, EU assertion to be a normative power internationally, which has led to critiques about development as an instrument for foreign policy; on the other, dissensus over liberal principles in development policy as an instrument to contrast the EU over internal disputes on illiberalism.

Dissensus comes from different actors, both internal and external to the EU, with an evident heterogeneity of goals and interests. Dissensus from

external recipient actors seems to rather reflect a will to overcome EU normativity: not just (or not predominantly) dissensus over liberal democratic principles per se, but rather the manifestation of frustration over the politicisation of aid, EU conditionalities, related to the respect of liberal democratic principles in recipient/“partner” countries. Such conditionalities can be read as renewed “civilisational mission” by the EU, which might go against—rather than favouring—EU ambitions as a global power. In light of the trade-offs mentioned, we might ask whether the EU will continue to uphold liberal democratic values in such disruptive times of recalibration of the international order. EU treaties enshrine this intention to operate on the basis of “the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement”, which the EU “seeks to advance in the wider world” (Art. 21 TEU). The geopolitical turbulences of recent years, the rising of new and old powers like China and Russia with different developmental rhetoric and a South–South rationale, might put the EU in a position to re-evaluate its liberal value-based development actor narrative and reconsider conditionalities. More realist geopolitics seem to guide von der Leyen II Commission (Vandeputte et al., 2024, 7). At the beginning of the new EU legislature, both the EU and several member states have announced cuts in future development aid, prompted by new priorities (Cserep, 2024). Whether this is indicative of the EU succumbing to dissensus or rather amounts to geo-strategically measured, self-interested, temporary forgetfulness, remains to be seen.

The more recent decision by the Trump II administration to abruptly cut development funds adds to the uncertainties. It meets EU decision-makers with doubts about the EU’s reaction: should (and could) it jump on the “opportunity” to fill in the void left by the USA?⁶ Or would it take the geopolitical risk, by leaving the place for other donors, of allowing for more South–South cooperation, including a realignment with China and Russia? Should it feel the pressure of upholding its values and not leave US Agency for International Development (USAID) recipients behind, thus requalifying as a more reliable partner than the USA? Or should it succumb to equally, if not more, pressing urgencies related to external defence, in light of current geopolitical tensions with Russia and—again—US NATO divestment plans?⁷ These questions show once more the connection between development and foreign policy. In the framework of the future MFF negotiations, the issue is

⁶ The USA is the largest ODA donor country (2023 OECD DAC figures give it to 20.3% of the total), whereas the EU results as the largest ODA donor when summing up EU institutions and member states’ ODA (as per the “Team Europe” rationale—41% ODA in 2023). As of March 2025, 83% of programmes managed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) have been terminated (Macasai et al., 2025).

⁷ A brief display of main contending points among EP members can be found in the episode of “Talking Europe”, by France24, broadcasted on 11/04/2025 (Georgian, 2025).

debated.⁸ If liberal democratic principles in EU development policy might stay as a sort of policy trademark, distinctive identity label (the mark of normative power), the possibility that they be overshadowed by more realist understandings of development and more compelling material interests cannot be underestimated.

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⁸ For example, discussions have started at the EP Committee on Development, together with the Foreign Affairs one, the EC and EEAS (EP DEVE Committee Meeting Agenda, 19/03/2025, Item 14).

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