

Democracy Lighthouse Digest



Edited by Leo Shanahan

INTRODUCING

The Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Launched in May 2024, the Democracy Lighthouse appeared during a period of mounting anxiety and widespread political unrest about democracy's future. Funded and supported by the Toda Peace Institute, the Democracy Lighthouse has since then aimed to be an independent beacon and distributor of information on the global subversion and renewal of democracy.

The threats confronting democracies are evidently becoming more dangerous and intractable. Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, rearmament in Europe, terrible wars in Sudan, Myanmar and Palestine, big power rivalries, the threats posed to democracy by the Trump administration in the United States, the repression of public protests against the abuse of power in countries such as Argentina and Serbia, and weakened judiciaries in Israel, Hungary, Mexico, and Türkiye are just some of the many challenges facing democracies everywhere. In this fast-changing and turbulent context, the Democracy Lighthouse has expanded its remit beyond its founding focus on platforming the hundreds of organisations and networks engaged in advocating for democracy. Our platform has added a range of new features, including interviews featuring the work of activists and scholars, latest book reviews, and publications by our Global Challenges to Democracy group. As part of this expansion, we have launched the Democracy Lighthouse Digest, a newsletter that provides monthly updates on our group's work.

This edition of the Democracy Lighthouse Digest includes the latest publications from our research team. The January feature article is an extract from a lecture on democide given by Yogendra Yadav, an Indian activist and academic. This issue also includes Tom Theuns' book 'Protecting Democracy in Europe' and a short commentary from Professor John Keane on America's abandonment of democracy in the world.

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DEMOCRACY LIGHTHOUSE

Yogendra Yadav 'Democracy and Dictators'

Yogendra Yadav is an Indian activist and academic, a founding member of the political organisation Swaraj Abhiyan, and a prominent voice in mobilising the farmers movement in India. The extract below is taken from a recent lecture in which Yadav contends that democracy is nowadays not usually killed by tanks or censorship but by stealth, by changing the rules of the game in the name of democracy. Read the extract below.

We all say that there is a danger to democracy. We have been saying it for so many years now that we have forgotten what exactly the nature of the threat to democracy is. In the 21st century, we no longer live in an era of democracy and dictatorship. We live in an era where most regimes are hybrid regimes, they combine a bit of democracy with a lot of dictatorship. In the 21st century, dictators do not come in a military uniform, they do not announce martial law, they do not impose formal censorship. In the 21st century, dictators emerge in the name of democracy; they utilise the instruments of democracy and rule in the name of the people. They murder democracy in the name of the people. This is not just in India, look at what is happening in Türkiye, in Hungary, and what happened in Sri Lanka two years ago. I can give twenty examples like this from all over the world. These are authoritarian, dictatorial regimes which go through all the rituals of democracy because in the 21st century for a dictator to rule it is important that they prove their popularity, real or imagined. Popularity, or at least a semblance of popularity, is an ingredient of dictatorial rule in the 21st century. This is exactly what is happening in India. When people say that there is no emergency, there is no censorship, that because I have given speeches against Mr. Modi, this cannot be a dictatorship. Please remember that in Putin's Russia people can give speeches against Putin. Those who give speeches which are very uncomfortable disappear into Siberia a few months later, but they can still give speeches. Remember there is someone called Umar Khalid who has been in jail for five years with no court in India having the courage to give a verdict or to even hear an argument for bail and then tell me that no this is democracy.



Yogendra Yadav

Democracy and Dictators



Toda Peace Institute



Yogendra Yadav
Activist and Academic

Watch here >>

WATCH THE FULL VIDEO HERE



The Empire Has No Clothes: America's Democratic Sermons and the Authoritarian Boomerang

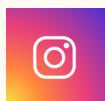
BY JORDAN RYAN

On December 4, Donald Trump hosted a ceremony celebrating a 'historic' peace deal between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Within hours, fighting resumed. The next day, a ceasefire in Cambodia and Thailand that he had brokered in July collapsed, triggering airstrikes and displacing nearly half a million people. These are not anomalies. They are the predictable consequences of a strategy that treats peace not as a sustained political process, but as a commodity to be flipped for profit.

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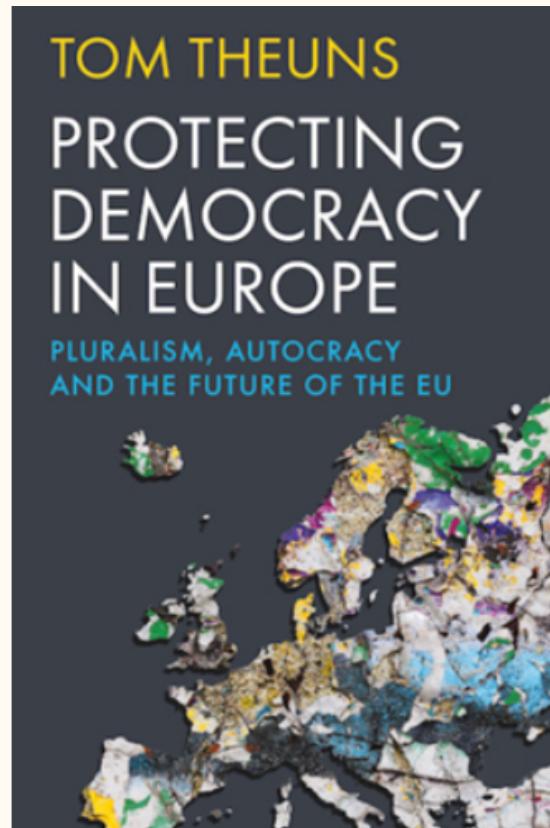
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Democracy Lighthouse

*a research and publications platform and global guide
to the organisations, networks, and scholars currently
rethinking and advocating democracy*





Protecting Democracy in Europe is published by Hurst and is available for purchase for 25GBP. It will be released in paperback form in May 2026 and can be pre-ordered for 19GBP.

values is unsurprising: the EU's existing toolbox is based on an impoverished conception of democracy, and runs counter to its fundamental principles. Close attention to speeches by European Commissioners shows that they see democracy in a technical and legalistic way. This perspective—‘democracy without politics’—is easy for would-be autocrats to exploit.

To protect democracy in Europe, Theuns argues, the EU must urgently correct policies that make it complicit in democratic backsliding. It must contain autocratic influences (within the strict limits of its political authority). And it must cultivate pluralist democracy within its constituent countries. But where this fails, he concludes, autocratic members should be expelled.

FROM THE SHELF

Protecting Democracy in Europe: Pluralism, Autocracy, and the Future of the EU

BY TOM THEUNS

Why has the European Union failed to combat rising authoritarianism within its own ranks? And how can it defend democratic governance inside member countries?

The future of Europe as a community of democratic states is deeply uncertain. The European Union, founded to promote ‘ever closer’ integration, aims nominally for peaceful, prosperous cooperation. But this ideal has been battered by a series of bruising crises, and now by war.

Protecting Democracy in Europe examines how, in this brave new world, the EU can and must safeguard democratic governance within its member states. Reviewing the Union’s past responses, Tom Theuns demonstrates that its existing laws and policies are normatively and expressively incoherent. Its failure to defend democratic

Thank You Kevin Clements

Kevin Clements, the Director of the Toda Institute, has announced that he will be stepping aside as Director. Kevin will be succeeded by Professor Stein Tønnesson who is a Senior Research Fellow at Toda, with a long-standing association with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in Norway. We would like to extend our thanks to Kevin for supporting our Democracy Lighthouse initiative. Without his support, this project would not have been possible. Kevin will remain at Toda in 2026 as Honorary Director, as a Senior Research Fellow working on “Understanding Nuclear Risk and Uncertainty in Northeast Asia,” and as a member of the Democracy Lighthouse research team.

Democracy Watch

John Keane, Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney, discusses America's abandonment of democracy in the world.

Among the most astonishing features of the recently published and much-discussed US National Security Strategy memorandum (2025) is its bold announcement that the 'days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over.' At a stroke, out through the window goes the old vision of liberal democracies protected by an international liberal order. The new priority is to build a powerful 'America First' sovereign nation state. Remarkably, the memorandum says almost nothing about the emergent Chinese empire, except for the need to 'help rebalance China's economy toward household consumption'. In the name of a tough-minded 'flexible realism', it calls for an end to NATO expansion and urges sharpened awareness of the dangers of European 'civilizational erasure', without either defining what that phrase means, or how it could be prevented (through the military invasion of Greenland?). Scrapping 'liberal ideology' foreign aid programmes in Africa and building good working relations with those 'Middle East partners' committed to 'combatting radicalism' are strategically important, it says. Take note, declares the memorandum: the United States is no longer in the business of promoting worldwide 'freedom' and 'liberal democracy'. The time has come for America to bid farewell to all that junk ideology, to retreat into its regional shell by projecting its shrinking economic, political and military might into the Western Hemisphere, as it has done in the recent military invasion of Venezuela, and promises to repeat in Cuba, Mexico, and Colombia. It's a brazen farewell to democracy. What comes next? A dreary but dangerous 'Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine' geared to the elimination of 'narco-terrorists, cartels and other transnational criminal organizations', the protection of 'critical supply chains' and 'access to key strategic locations' and, no doubt with China in mind, freedom from 'hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets.'



John Keane

The White House (2025) National Security Strategy of the United States of America, available at:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

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