



REPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DEPARTMENT



Democracy in distress!

Analysis and tools for trade union democracy work

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The Swedish Trade Union Confederation

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Cover photo: Lars Forsstedt

Graphic design: LO

Production and printing: Bantorget Grafiska AB, Stockholm 2024

ISBN 978-91-566-3696-7

LO 24.09 100

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Introduction

IN ITS 2023 ANALYSIS of the state of democracy in the world, the V-dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg notes that we have wiped out 35 years of advances in a short space of time. There are rays of hope: both countries and some areas of policy, such as women's representation and same-sex rights, are showing progress. But there is more bad news than good, and in many countries the rule of law and human rights are being undermined.

Globally, autocracy has gained more ground than democratic structures and authoritarian leaders have become increasingly bold, notes V-dem. In addition to obvious democratic deficits, totalitarian regimes are hardly characterised by caution and consideration in terms of climate or gender equality. Democracy is the first thing that must be safeguarded if countries are to achieve sustainable economic growth, general prosperity, and success in climate action.

An important part of LO's contribution to strengthened democracy is to push for greater equality. Democracy and equality are interlinked. The higher the trade union density in a society, the more equal the income distribution will be, which in turn has a strengthening effect on participation. In other words, promoting independent trade union organisation and activities is a way of strengthening democracy.

Dissatisfaction and populism grow when there are large income gaps, which disrupts public trust and solidarity. Inequality can be perceived as a comparatively low income, poorer health care, infrequent or non-existent local transport, or no option to use environmentally friendly means of transport. For those who fall behind, the defects can be measured in ill health, shorter life expectancy, a low living standard and an uncertain work situation. Large differences in living conditions between groups lead to frustration and despair and are fuel for forces that, for political purposes, want to polarise society.

Keeping communities together is not only a pleasant idea, but the basis for avoiding chaos. Equality is one of democracy's strongest mainstays,

because people with good opportunities to get an education, work, live, eat and stay healthy, find it easier to trust others and feel part of society. The primary task of the State is to create public confidence and to work for the common good. This is done by ensuring that political representatives keep their promises and build systems with the public interest in mind.

People who have their basic needs met, have secure incomes and feel they are being listened to, are inclined to contribute to community building by paying taxes, participating in elections and being tolerant towards each other. Working for equality and a good quality of life and combating inequalities is not about preventing someone from becoming richer than anyone else, but about decency, democracy and securing peaceful societies.

The trade union is a democracy movement that reaches out to the workers. We have a valuable platform for discussions concerning such things as the work environment and co-determination, which helps employees use their democratic rights in the workplace and in society in general. LO takes this task very seriously and staying silent is not an option for us. Democratic rights cannot be taken for granted and recent developments remind us that we have to claim them. By highlighting problems, questioning anti-democratic ideas, standing up for human rights and equal life opportunities, we protect and strengthen democracy.

This report describes the state of play from a trade union perspective, discusses the role of trade unions in democratic development and provides examples of available tools for change. A little over a year of discussions with elected representatives around the country has resulted in many thoughts and suggestions on how to contribute from the local, regional/district or central level. In the hope of being able to offer inspiration, there is a summary of the proposals that have been raised in connection with these courses and workshops.

1. How is democracy doing?

This section summarises LO's view of the state of democracy. External analysis focusing on Sweden.

Hooray, it got better!

Let us begin by noting that there are plenty of examples of progress from a democratic point of view. From the UN's work to unite countries of the world around common goals to achieve sustainable development, called Agenda 2030, we see that despite a wide variety of political values, it is possible to work together to advance positions in different areas. Unfortunately, efforts to meet several of the Agenda 2030 goals have now slowed down or even reversed, which may be a sign of the times.¹ But until the COVID pandemic, incomes rose globally and since 1990 extreme poverty in the world had decreased by as much as 75 per cent. Much remains to be done but at the same time it can also be noted that gender equality has increased and the participation of women in politics and business has never been greater than now. Another example of the success of democratic rights is that more and more countries allow same-sex marriage, in recent years these include Namibia, Nepal, Cuba, Greece and Switzerland. We will come back to why this issue is particularly interesting in this context.

Further examples of democratic progress that can be mentioned are the fact that, for the first time in a long time, the number of organised workers is increasing in the United States; the Biden administration has a completely different approach than the Trump administration to the right of workers to demand good working conditions. In Qatar, the Swedish and international trade unions have forced improvements for migrant workers who have so far been extremely vulnerable in terms of both pay and work environment. In Brazil, former trade union leader Lula da Silva defeated right-wing nationalism and became president, giving hope that the country can now contribute to confidence in the future of its own population and a positive force towards improvements

¹ The Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart. UN 2023

in climate and democracy in the rest of the world. In Poland, an authoritarian government was voted out, hopefully restoring the rule of law and citizens' rights, as well as a positive impact on EU cooperation. Within the EU, the new possibility of withholding EU funds is available and used for Member States that operate in an anti-democratic direction, as this is a departure from a basic requirement for membership. Hungary, which no longer counts as an electoral democracy, has been required to rectify the democratic erosion that has taken place over a number of years. In Sierra Leone, the government has put forward a proposal to strengthen women's rights at work. In South Korea, following trade union protests, the government was forced to withdraw a proposal to extend working hours. In 2022, the International Labour Organisation of the United Nations (ILO) adopted a binding convention on the right of all to a good work environment. This just to name a few of the bright spots that we must not forget are actually around us. Progressive forces and democracy fighters are everywhere.

But it is also going downhill

Democracy is a broad concept. One fundamental assumption is the existence of free elections, the rights and freedoms of citizens, that everyone is equal before the law and to a large extent participates in elections and feels included in society. It is not easy to accurately define democracy, where it begins and where it ends. Perhaps it is actually based on our common responsibility for every child's life opportunities, respecting others' opinions, or caring about a high voter turnout? Perhaps democracy is eroded by unsafe neighbourhoods, hateful comments on social media, or when a placard with the message "No to war" leads to a long prison sentence?

There are many definitions and many actors that measure the state of democracy in the countries of the world given people's conditions, but although the definitions vary, the results seem to point to three clear conclusions:

1. Sweden and the other Nordic countries are still among the most democratic countries in the world.
2. The global state of democracy is a cause for concern.
3. Anti-democratic currents seem to be contagious.

Let's start with the international perspective, and then look at the state of Swedish democracy. In recent times democratic institutions have been exposed to high-profile and tangible threats to democracy in countries we might not first have expected: the storming of the U.S. Congress in the aftermath of the 2021 presidential election, a similar event in Brazil in connection with the 2023 presidential election and, in addition, an averted planned coup directed against Germany's political governance in 2022. Democratic development is on a clear downward slope, and it also seems to be moving fast.

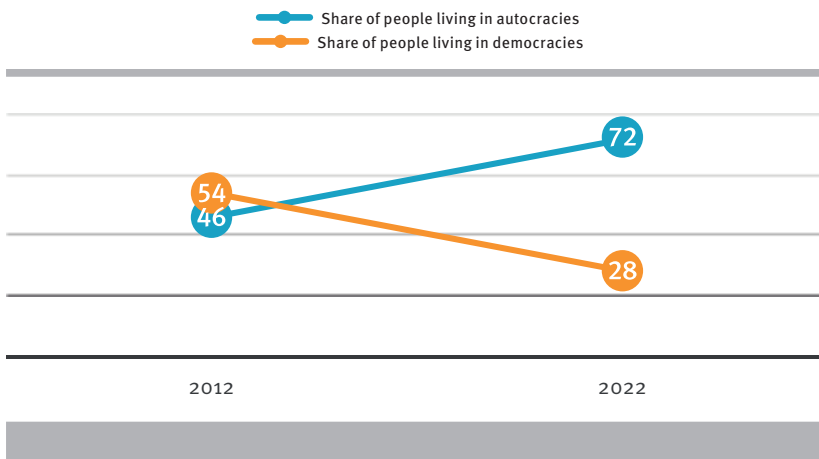
The Varieties of Democracy Institute, V-dem, at the University of Gothenburg, compiles data from thousands of researchers all over the world whose combined knowledge gives us a picture of the situation. Their 2023 annual report² shows that 35 years of democratic progress has been erased, which means that in 2022 we were once again at the same level of democracy in the world as in 1987. It is true that several countries are moving in a democratic direction but even more have restricted the rights of citizens. Chart 1.1 below shows that the share of the world's population living in countries with concentrated power and severely restricted rights, called autocracy, has gone from 46 per cent to as much as 72 per cent in just a decade.³

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, IDEA, is an intergovernmental organisation that also measures the state of democracy, with special focus on participation, representation, rule of law principles and rights. The 2023 report from IDEA shows a decline in the last five years for half of the countries in the world. If we look more closely at the Nordic countries our neighbours rank highest on the list of Europe's most democratic countries. Sweden is placed in the upper part but further down (place 7) and in 2022 the Swedish index fell most among the European countries, along with Belarus and Russia. Since 2012, when development was at its best, democratic space has increased in several countries on our continent. But in more than half

2 Evie Papada, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg. *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023*. University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute) 2023.

3 As above.

Chart 1.1 Democracy vs autocracy, share of the world's population (percent)



Source: V-dem 2023.

it has reversed. Sweden is one of these, which according to the report, is mainly due to reduced participation (election participation, civic engagement, and civil society/associations), not least -driven by a reduced number of trade union members as a result of increased consumer prices and lower real wage income.⁴

The sociologist Larry Diamond at Stanford University identifies four non-democratic tendencies since 2006. Firstly, a clear and accelerating pace of democratic decline in the form of military coups and dictatorships. Secondly, a reduction in political stability and undermined democracy in a number of large and strategically important countries. Thirdly, authoritarian elements were deepened even in large countries. Fourthly, shortcomings in the functioning of established democracies and their reduced willingness and self-confidence to stand up for democracy abroad. The latter, according to Diamond, applies not least to his own home country of the United States, where this trend has lingered even after the end of the Trump administration in 2021.

⁴ The Global State of Democracy 2023: The New Checks and Balances. IDEA 2023.

Clear trade union challenges

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) measures and presents annually the development of trade union conditions in what is known as the Global Rights Index. Even in the narrow trade union context, there are many examples of the democratic space being under pressure. To highlight some of these presented in the 2023 compilation:⁵

- 9 out of 10 countries in ITUC’s survey violated the **right to strike**. For example, in Canada, Togo, Iran, Cambodia and Spain, workers have been threatened with fines, dismissal or prosecution for striking.
- 77 per cent of countries deny the right to **establish or join a trade union**. These include India, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The right to free **speech and assembly** was restricted in 42 per cent of countries. In France, legal protests were met with police brutality, in Iran teachers were arrested and beaten for participation in May Day demonstrations.
- 8 out of 10 countries violated the right to **collective bargaining**. Rights have been reduced in the Netherlands, Serbia, and Zimbabwe, for example.
- Workers were **arrested and imprisoned** in 69 countries targeting trade union leaders, for example in Myanmar, Hong Kong, and the Dominican Republic.

The world’s worst countries for workers according to the latest survey are Bangladesh, Belarus, Ecuador, Egypt, Eswatini, the Philippines, Guatemala, Myanmar, Tunisia and Turkey. Perhaps the attentive reader will note the last country, which is defined by Sweden’s Foreign Minister Tobias Billström as a democracy⁶ This is without doubt an incorrect definition. Violation of the right to strike, arrests of trade unionists and systematic trade union busting are unfortunately part of daily life in Turkey.

Why is this happening?

There is plenty of research that reinforces the picture of declining democratic space, and the situation is evidenced by facts from many quarters. But what then drives development? In the UN context, we talk about

5 2023 ITUC Global Rights Index, The World’s worst countries for workers. ITUC 2023.

6 Dagens Nyheter 18 October 2022, New Foreign Minister Tobias Billström: “I can be diplomatic when necessary.”

Figure 1.1 Worst countries for workers

Bangladesh

- Regressive laws
- Obstacles to union formation
- Police violence

Ecuador

- Regressive laws
- Police violence against strikers

Belarus

- Repressive criminal laws
- Targeted arrests and imprisonment of trade union leaders
- Forced dissolution of unions

Egypt

- Repressive laws against union formation
- Union busting and dismissals

Guatemala

- Violence against trade unionists
- Climate of fear and impunity

Eswatini

- Murder
- Police violence during strikes

Myanmar

- Arbitrary arrests
- Anti-union dismissals
- Severe violation of freedoms of speech and assembly

The Philippines

- Violence against trade unionists
- Arrests of trade unionists
- Union busting

Tunisia

- Arrest of trade union leaders
- Violations of collective bargaining rights
- Severe violations of civil liberties and denial of the right to international trade union solidarity

Turkey

- Repression of strikes
- Arrests of trade unionists
- Systematic union busting

Source: ITUC Global Rights Index 2023.

“civic space” to describe the opportunity that people and groups have to participate politically, economically, socially, and culturally in society.⁷ A 2021 study shows that civic space is under pressure from three different directions:

- *From the top down*: Through politics, legislation and other methods, parties and authorities cut the space for the democratic civil society. The aim is to reduce scrutiny and criticism.
- *From the bottom up*: High activity from conservative civic organisations, far-right movements and government-run non-governmental organisations.
- *Business sector*: The establishment of so-called SLAPP processes (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), i.e. legal proceedings conducted in order to silence public debate, also contributes to a restriction of civic space.⁸

The first-mentioned type of pressure, from the top down, is a reminder of what the political scientist Larry M Bartels at Vanderbilt University says in his book *Democracy erodes from the top*, where he analyses developments in Europe in recent years.⁹ He believes that it is the elite in society that has driven the development and that it is a myth that citizens’ support for democracy has declined. The fact that democratic space in Hungary and Poland diminished was not because voters wanted autocracy, but because conservative parties, once elected, seized opportunities to entrench themselves in power.

According to an extensive study¹⁰ carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, polarisation drives autocratisation, thus an erosion of democracy. Some politicians have understood this better than others and succeed in using the mechanism in their own interest. The study is based on fictitious electoral situations and responses from 10,001 respondents in European countries: Germany, Poland, Sweden, Spain, Estonia, Serbia, and Ukraine (some months before the war). The result clearly shows that

7 Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space. United Nations 2020.

8 Negri, G and Pazderski, F. Mapping shrinking civic space in Europe. Civitates 2021.

9 Bartels, L. M. Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens and the Challenge of Populism in Europe. Princeton University Press 2023.

10 Amravovska, Lutz, Milacic, Svolik. Identity, partisanship, polarisation: How democratically elected politicians get away with autocratizing their country. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2022.

democratic backsliding is not about cultural differences. Most voters understand what democracy is and what it is not, and even if the level of democracy differs in the countries compared, the mechanisms that underlie the progression of autocracy work in a similar way everywhere.

Instead, the explanation is that in all the countries studied, voters tend to strike a trade-off between identity and democratic principles. That is to say, they are willing to compromise on democratic rights if it is a standpoint taken by their favourite party, or if the right is set against an issue on which they hold a strong personal opinion. For example, voting for your favourite party if it promises spending relief by lowering the price of electricity and petrol – even if it has a negative impact on the climate and the environment at the same time. Or choosing to support a political representative because they say they want to fight crime relentlessly – though that certainly also means restrictions on constitutional rights and violations of international conventions. According to the study, particularly polarising issues are the climate/environment, immigration, and same-sex couples' rights. These issues, in particular the latter, are not a top priority among the fictitious voters in the study, but nevertheless are a watershed and influence how people vote more than other interests, such as tax policy. It is this polarising potential that politicians can exploit to drive society in an autocratic direction.

International conventions

An **agreement** between countries on rules to prevent common problems.

Regulated by international organisations.

For example, fundamental trade union rights such as the right to organise and bargain collectively, equal wages for equal work, prohibition of forced labour, etc., are determined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) of the United Nations.

To be clear: voters are thus not indifferent to violations of democratic norms. Politicians who undermine fair elections, for example by in some way disrupting political gatherings, cause voters to abstain from voting for that politician/party. This also applies if politicians deviate

from democratic processes (for example by implementing legislative amendments without parliamentary support) or restrict civil rights (for example by banning foreign funding of trade unions). But in the latter two cases, the tendency of voters to turn a blind eye seems to be greater than in the first.

Finally, the findings of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's study show that the greatest threat to democracy in Europe comes from right-wing parties. The extreme right is a danger to democracy. Their voters are most partisan and least inclined to punish politicians for undemocratic behaviour. They are also far more inclined to undermine democracy than left-wing/far-left voters. But even voters from some centre-right parties not only tolerate the dismantling of democracy, but even support it. Voters on the left play an ambivalent role. On average, left-wing voters in all countries studied are far more likely to punish undemocratic behaviours. However, if their preferred identity policy is at stake, there is a strong tendency to let identity politics outweigh democratic principles.

Repressed trade unions a reason for undermined democracy

If we look a little more closely at another aspect of the democratic space – the possibility for groups to participate economically and socially in the community – it is particularly interesting to examine the development of the power of companies and capital owners in relation to workers. One starting point is to look at the distribution of resources between them, and the clear global trend for decades has been a falling share of wages: of the values created, more and more has gone to the owners of capital. Over time, both companies and countries have become richer overall, while labour markets have become increasingly precarious, and wages have lagged behind.

Some companies have sales turnover equivalent to the gross domestic product (GDP) of entire countries. These financially strong players have great economic power that can be used to adapt rules to their needs. The downside is that States' commitments to the population are then set aside and manifest themselves as restrictions in public service and protection of workers, since in practice it entails lower income for the State via "discounted" corporate taxation and acceptance of mediocre working conditions. It also poses a democratic problem when private

actors can buy water rights or other natural resources that are crucial for people's quality of life. Or that multinational corporations engage in aggressive tax planning and practice tax stress that puts States in a competitive position against each other. In the next section, we return to the impact of globalisation on eroded democratic space.

To this picture should be added the development of trade union influence. Generally speaking, the trade union movement has seen a decline in membership in many countries in recent decades. The Nordic countries are most well organised, although union density has fallen over time. This is due to several factors, including globalisation, structural changes in the labour market and policy changes.

In some countries, trade unions have a strong presence and influence, while others have seen significant declines in union density. By comparison, just over 70 per cent of the workers in Sweden belong to a trade union, while the average in the OECD countries is about 16 per cent. In developing countries, trade unions can face particular challenges due to lack of legislative protection, economic conditions, and political instability.

Many trade unions are not only shut out by regulation but are actively and aggressively opposed by what is called "trade union busting". For example, American unions are confronted by campaigns and outright lies from employers to intimidate or persuade employees not to join trade unions.

Some countries create the illusion of workers' representation without actually granting real power or the right to negotiation to workers. In order to unequivocally stand on the side of the members, it is crucial that trade unions are independent, i.e. free from external governance. In countries where the State or employer wants to control the organisation and influence of workers, there are "yellow trade unions", which is also an explanation of the current situation. Yellow unions look more to the interests of employers than workers and pose a challenge to democratic states and free trade unions in representative contexts.

At the same time, there has been an increase in trade union activism and organisation in some places, especially in industries and sectors where workers experience exploitation or poor working conditions. International trade unions and networks, including the Swedish Trade

Union Confederation, LO, play a role in supporting trade unions and labour rights across borders.

The rapid development of social media and artificial intelligence, AI, is also a partial explanation of the state of democracy. Rapid mass dissemination of information and opinions that are not rooted in facts and truth has made it much easier than before to work for anti-democratic purposes. In addition to being able to easily mislead and manipulate people, it has also become easier to silence critical voices through threats and hatred. Online trolls and bots work effectively to undermine trust and security in public discourse.

Historian and journalist Anne Applebaum points to how democratic values are undermined by authoritarian forces that very consciously manipulate by using false information and an inflamed tone.¹¹ Her description of Donald Trump as a *vector of resentment* is a telling explanation of why propagandists and demagogues express themselves in the way they do. Playing on emotions and harnessing the forces that arise from polarising people into groups, helps anti-democratic forces come to power.

¹¹ Applebaum, A. 2020, *Demokratins skymning* (The Twilight of Democracy). Albert Bonniers Förlag.

2. Trade union analysis of the situation

In this section, we look at why the situation looks the way it does, and what the problems are.

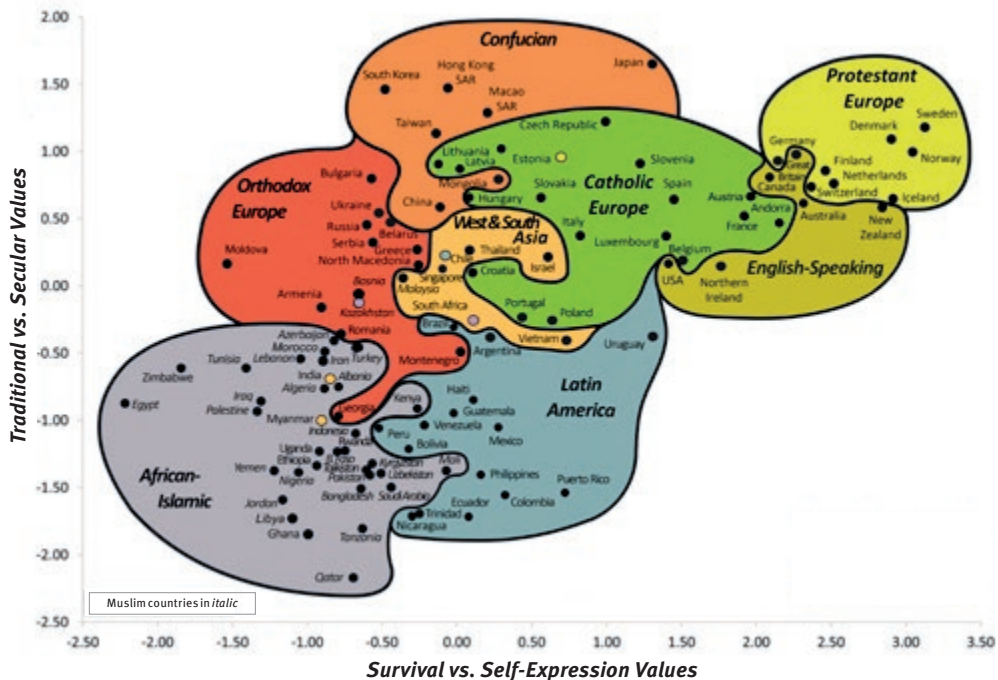
LO ASSERTS EVERYONE'S RIGHT to good working conditions – to have skills development, be involved in and influence the workplace, and be able to express criticism of a harmful working environment without fear of reprisals. No one should be discriminated against because of their ethnic background or who they love. It is a matter of urgency to adapt companies and jobs to climate sustainability, while ensuring that everyone has access to skills development or retraining to keep up with that change. LO is also a feminist organisation.

These standpoints will probably not cause the reader of this report to fall off their chair in amazement. But in some parts of the world, these are provocative ideas. In the recurring World Values Survey, Sweden is usually placed in an extreme position on the map of cultural values. According to the metrics used, the Anglo-Saxon countries and Western Europe are closest to us. Others are further away, with differences around religion-state relations, family policy, trust and tolerance. The diagram below shows a fairly clear breakdown where geographically neighbouring countries also have closely related basic values. The higher the value of the *vertical* axis, the less weight religion has in society and the view of the nuclear family and gender equality is freer. The higher the value of the *horizontal* axis, the greater economic prosperity and space for people to focus on more than just matters of survival.

From this point of view, it could be understood that some perceive the typical Swedish mindset as extreme or even provocative and that these differences between countries may be a partial explanation for global polarisation. But the metrics are really only rough indications and there are large variations of values and opinions within countries. A look at our own parliament, the Riksdag, is enough to note a large breadth of opinion, despite common affiliation to a “national culture”. It is therefore reasonable to have a complementary starting point other than geography for comparing values.

International exchange is about economic growth and jobs but also

Figure 2.1 The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map 2023



Source: World Values Survey & European Values Study (2005–2002).

about striving for norms and development in line with the values we believe in.

If we want gender equality, equal societies, a sustainable economy and democratic development, more people around the world need to agree that this is where we are going. As shown in the cultural map, opinions differ on what is perceived as self-evident. Democracies have an interest in collaborating with other democracies and champions of democracy must find and strengthen each other.

One problem with this is when representatives of progressive and democratic attitudes are challenged *within* countries by more or less authoritarian forces that, however contradictory it sounds, are inspired by and

have an international exchange of ideas. Even nationalists seem to realise that international cooperation is necessary, but for completely different purposes than those who want to work together for peace and consensus.

The members of LO affiliates are affected by globalisation, not least as many work in internationally competing businesses. Businesses often relocate production or services in a long chain of suppliers. Workers' conditions and security are under pressure and challenged by companies' constant pursuit of new markets, lower costs, and higher returns. Complex production chains make it more difficult to guarantee good and secure working conditions. The result is that workers are forced to compete with each other. Substandard working conditions do not stop at the national border to only affect workers locally but proliferate by influencing competitiveness and the margin for negotiation for others as well.

Together with the negative effects of globalisation, the widespread impact of COVID-19 on the economy and the labour market has driven large disparities in income and participation. This added to attacks on democracy, leads to increased political tension and polarisation. Protectionism and isolationism are not, however, the answer to the challenges of globalisation, partly because it is not a feasible and effective way to protect one's own labour market model, and it is also a given for LO to assert a decent working life in the international context as well as in Sweden. For both solidarity and rational reasons, LO is for open trade and political interaction with other nations.

Openness to the outside world generally provides opportunities for economic growth. By channelling financial resources and investments to where demand is, economies grow, generate job opportunities, and increase the financial space for welfare. But the advantages of international exchange do not benefit everyone, and this is where the problem lies. Among other things, globalisation is seen to be competition through unhealthy working conditions, a polarising labour market with the emergence of jobs with poor conditions and increased income inequality.

There are several income groups being pressured by deterioration; according to the OECD, the middle class in advanced economies has seen its real income decline despite the growth of the economy.¹² Moreover,

¹² Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class, OECD Publishing 2019

in many countries, a large proportion of those with the lowest incomes have hardly benefited from an increase in growth. According to a survey by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), about 70 per cent of trade unions surveyed in 33 countries say that the standard of living for workers and their families is often insufficient despite regulated minimum wages.¹³

The unequal distribution of risks and benefits of globalisation is therefore likely to be an explanation for protectionism, trade barriers and the fact that many see openness to the outside world as a threat. Today, a few gain a great deal from insufficient demands for sustainable action by companies and private capital interests, while many more face risks in the form of precarious employment and low incomes. In order to achieve sustainable international economic exchange, workers must be given a greater share of the values that they help to create, and this requires redistribution through strong trade unions, a more regulated financial sector and political will.

But Sweden is the best at democracy! Or ...?

There are a large number of measurements of the state of democracy and each year various rankings of the best and worst countries are presented on the basis of indices that provide a picture of citizens' rights and opportunities for a life of freedom. No matter how and what you measure, Sweden is found together with the other Nordic countries in the top tier as one of the world's most democratic countries. In Sweden, we therefore seem to have exceptionally good conditions for a democratically inclusive society. The IDEA report from 2023 shows, for example, that Sweden performs well in the categories of representation, rights, and the rule of law.¹⁴ But the question is how stable it is, for there are worrying signs of a move towards weakened democracy.

According to IDEA, in the category of *participation* Sweden has fallen to 13th place in the world, compared to seventh place in 2021 and first place in 2017. This means a decline in people's involvement in political parties, non-political associations, and trade unions, i.e. a measure of how involved citizens are in society. It is emphasised that rising consumer

¹³ Global survey on minimum living wages, ITUC 2024.

¹⁴ The Global State of Democracy 2023, The New Checks and Balances, IDEA 2023.

prices and shrinking real wages have made trade union membership too expensive for many, especially in LO-affiliated unions. Thus, declining participation has affected low-income earners disproportionately hard.

In addition, the V-dem Institute shows that Sweden fell from 15th place to 23rd place between 2021 and 2022 in what is known as the *Deliberative Component Index*, an index that measures political respect for opposition, counter-arguments and how trade unions and other organisations are influenced and can exercise influence.¹⁵ One risk of lower civic engagement and reduced involvement in voluntary associations is that trust between people declines and polarisation grows.

Table 2.1 Democracy index 2023

The world's most democratic countries	
1	Norway
2	New Zealand
3	Iceland
4	Sweden
5	Finland
6	Denmark
7	Ireland
8	Switzerland
9	Netherlands
10	Taiwan

Source: Democracy Index 2023 *Age of Conflict*. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2024.

Sweden is currently led by the most right-wing conservative government of modern times. Therefore, it is not surprising that the treatment of such things as taxes, the labour market and welfare is quite different in comparison with social-democratic governments. The role of the Sweden Democrats goes beyond what is commonly referred to

15 Evie Papada, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg. *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*. Democracy Report 2023. Gothenburg University, Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute) 2023.

as a support party, as they not only exert pressure and control through the Riksdag Chamber but are also involved in the work of government by working from within the Government Offices. Taking such an active part in government policy without having to take formal responsibility for the policy conducted through public scrutiny and interpellations in the Riksdag, is unique and a sign that something new is happening to Swedish democracy. The fact that government representatives often refrain from answering questions from the media and show no great interest in the views of trade unions and others in civil society, is another.

Looking at the lessons of the rest of the world and history, democracy is being pushed back via coups and transition to autocratic states. But even more common is a creeping development where populism and nationalism pave the way for the dismantling of the elements of democracy. The change in norms applies not only to “the usual suspects” but also to countries we usually see as strong democracies. In Europe, trade union rights are challenged in Poland, Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria, France, Finland, the United Kingdom and also in the European Parliament. As has already been mentioned, we have also recently seen significant threats to democratic institutions in the United States, Brazil and Germany. Sweden is in no way immune to the dismantling of democratic space and even here an alarming change is taking place.

Sweden’s democracy is under silent attack

Together with their partner, the Sweden Democrats, the governing parties want to see a series of changes that each individually are of concern, and which together constitute a new situation for Swedish democracy and development. Not least, we in the trade unions should be concerned. Among the first on the list of those who are being weakened with a view to allowing elitism and autocracy to emerge are free trade unions. The trade union is a movement for peace, freedom and democracy that strengthens individuals to be able to influence both their own life chances and the direction of societies. For forces that want to consolidate privileges for the few, organisation in trade unions and civil society is an obstacle, because voluntary associations unite people and increase tolerance among them.

There are starting to be many concrete examples of democracy in Sweden being under threat. The Government and the Sweden Demo-

crats intend to implement a number of changes in accordance with the “Tidö Agreement”. A lot of ideas seem to come from the Timbro report *Kommandohöjderna* (The Commanding Heights). It proposes regulatory changes to stop the Social Democrats’ income from the A-lottery, to prevent the unions’/LO’s contributions to the Social Democrats, and to cut funding for adult education and ABF (the Workers’ Educational Association). The proposals are put forward under the guise of addressing shortcomings in efficiency and transparency. But in fact, it is about pushing back the labour movement, the free media, free academia and silencing political opposition while cultivating docile citizens. Our democracy is under silent attack.

Some examples that trade unionists should be particularly aware of:

Direct impact on trade union activities

- Proposal that the safety representative should be a ‘neutral’ and not a trade union assignment. But it is the security of representatives having a democratic and free organisation behind them that allows individuals to dare to question dangerous and ineffective factors in the workplace. The remit from the government ignores the fact that it is already possible for persons other than trade union representatives to be elected. Probably this desired change is actually about reducing trade union influence and creating silenced workplaces that make fewer demands on the working environment and other conditions.
- Some of the Tidö parties (Liberals and Sweden Democrats) also want to see compulsory unemployment insurance, and now and then demands for this are heard in public debate. It may seem to be a good idea for more people to have security if they are unemployed, today “only” just over 7 out of 10 belong to an unemployment insurance fund. However, this is not really about strengthening security, but about reducing the incentive to join a trade union, as unions have a potential recruitment base through administering virtually all unemployment insurance funds. With fewer members, the strength of the trade union decreases.
- The current government, compared with the past, has been less willing to invite the parties on an equal footing and fewer referrals reach the trade unions. A strategy to exclude critical voices is a clear depar-

ture from the tradition of the Swedish cooperation model, which has been recognised as effective, in which the social partners and civil society organisations from the areas concerned are consulted in connection with plans for political change. Without expertise, the risk of incorrect and ineffective policy decisions increases; to appoint, as the government did, a Labour Market Policy Council without representation from trade unions and employers is like opening a garage without mechanics.

- The right to freely organise and bargain collectively is a fundamental right regulated in the international ILO Conventions. In Sweden, restrictions on freedom of association are proposed in order to prevent individuals from joining terrorist organisations. It is easy to sympathise with the desire to stop people who want to hurt others. The problem with restricting freedom of association is the definition of what is to be regarded as a terrorist organisation. Today, it may be obvious to think that this applies to Daesh and right-wing extremists, but in an authoritarian future government situation, it may be enough to be part of an opposition party or a trade union. Unfortunately, it would not be the first time politicians with hidden intentions sneak in seemingly reasonable changes, only to ultimately use them for completely different purposes.
- The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise has long tried to push for restrictions on the right to strike. No proposal is currently on the Government's table on this issue, nor is it included in the Tidö Agreement. However, a study from autumn 2023 shows that the government parties along with the Centre Party, are in favour of both restrictions on sympathy actions and proportionality, i.e. restrictions aimed at limiting the consequences of strikes.¹⁶ A support from the Sweden Democrats would be a decisive factor for the majority, but the party has not indicated where they stand on the question. This is a reason to carefully monitor developments. Being able to put pressure on employers to achieve success in collective bargaining is crucial for trade union bargaining power. It is not often used, in fact, the Swedish labour market has extremely few strike days compared to the rest of

¹⁶ Arbetsvärlden 231,127. <https://www.arbetsvarlden.se/regeringen-vill-se-strejkkratten-inskrankt/>

the world. The need for equal strength of action against the employer is the reason why the right to strike is a constitutionally protected democratic right.

Indirect impact via restricted democratic space

- The proposal for an “informers’ law’ in which public sector employees are to report on persons without a residence permit would, in addition to exacerbating human suffering, also put many professionals in, for example, the care sector, schools and out-of-school centres, in a difficult ethical position. The purpose of the law is that more people who are in Sweden without a residence permit are to be deported. But if the law is implemented the most tangible effect will probably be growth of the shadow society because more people give up their human rights (such as school and healthcare) for fear of being reported. The reason for not being able to deport people without permits today will probably remain because in many cases there are obstacles due to threats, wars, and the refusal of the home country to receive its citizens. Thus, the law risks creating yet another problem without dealing with those that already exist.
- There is as yet no government policy directed against LGBTQ+. However, there are concrete policy examples from the support party, the Sweden Democrats, at municipal level. Some of the examples that drew most attention concerned the drag queen story hour for children, “unsuitable” literature at libraries, refusing to allow Pride flags and censorship of artistic expression. Increasingly blatant attacks on LGBTQ+ rights contribute to an aggressive climate of public debate that affects us all and seeps into every environment we move in. It is a fundamental trade union requirement to be able at work to feel confident that managers, colleagues, clients and customers treat everyone with respect no matter who you love or how you define yourself.
- Feminist foreign policy has been abandoned, as Foreign Minister Billström put it, “to skip labels”¹⁷ Instead, the government wants to target women’s and girls’ rights and assist with trauma interventions, which of course may be excellent initiatives. Feminism, however, is about so

¹⁷ Tobias Billström, presentation of the Statement of Foreign Policy, 15 February 2023 in Sveriges Riksdag (Swedish parliament).

much more than targeted measures. It is a question of opposing, in any given policy area, the structures that create obstacles for women and girls. Trade union feminism risks having less help from the general normative policy in its work to promote gender equality and equal value and rights for everyone in working life. Sweden's former feminist foreign policy has inspired several other countries to follow and work in the same way. In a world of shrinking democratic space, clear counterforces are needed.

- Winston Churchill is said to have made the comment that without culture there is nothing to defend, which is food for thought on why culture must be given space. With reduced appropriations for museums, reintroduced entrance fees and the attitude that culture is a budget item that should not be included in the core municipal mission, existing class divides widen. If the public sector does not take responsibility, to an even greater extent it will only be a resource-rich elite that can afford to treat themselves to uplifting experiences. The fact that politicians also assume the right to censor and define what constitutes good culture does not benefit the breadth of choice and is worrying, as culture has always been used as a safety valve for social criticism.
- Another, perhaps surprisingly innovative, blow to voluntary associations and their activities, such as ABF (Workers' Educational Association), PRO (National Pensioners' Organisation), Bris (Children's Rights in Society), RFSL (Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights) and many more, is a Tidö-regulated inquiry initiated by the Sweden Democrats to amend the law to give cousins the right to inherit. In 2022 the Swedish Inheritance Fund received approximately SEK 1.2 billion, mainly via inheritances that accrued to the Fund because there were no closer relatives than cousins and no will.¹⁸ The money is distributed to about 400 different projects throughout the country for the benefit of children, young people, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Should cousins' right to inherit be introduced, the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency, which manages the Fund, estimates that 60 per cent of the inheritances will disappear, limiting funding of civil society organisations.

¹⁸ <https://www.arvsfonden.se/om-allmanna-arvsfonden/arv-som-utvecklar-sverige/hur-kommer-pengar-in-till-allmanna-arvsfonden>

- An inquiry on amended rules for lottery operations is about adversely affecting the funding of the Social Democrats and thus silencing political opposition. The Social Democrats are the political branch of the labour movement and the party that promotes an equal society where the voices of wage earners are heard. Should this politically motivated requirement be implemented, it would be clear confirmation of a new anti-democratic approach in Sweden. In this context, one can reflect that at the same time the government has nothing against other party revenues, such as contributions from companies and private individuals, which according to the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency statistics favour the Moderate Party and the Sweden Democrats.
- The government has abandoned the one-percent target (1 per cent of BNI for development aid). With sharply cut appropriations for SIDA, civil society's democratic efforts are limited, which accounted for an important part of Sweden's development assistance in the rest of the world. Trade union development assistance provides people all over the world with information about their fundamental rights, tools to influence working conditions and a living wage.
- Reduced resources for study associations where, not least, the Workers' Educational Association, ABF, has been caught in the line of fire. The government, with the support of the Sweden Democrats, is cutting study associations' state funding by as much as a third. The cut will hit these organisations hard, including people who are far from the labour market and people with disabilities. Reduced funding for adult education will mean that many people's opportunities for continuing education and development will disappear, as the range of courses will probably decrease, and fees will be more expensive. In States moving in an authoritarian direction, power over knowledge that is passed on is important. Cuts affecting education to the extent we now see cannot be interpreted in a different way than as a strategy to prevent education, information and organisation within trade unions and civil society.

3. Democratic self-defence **– this is what trade unions can do**

This section deals with reasons for trade union involvement in democracy-enhancing work and provides examples of tools at different levels that can be used to make a difference.

Why and how LO becomes involved

The trade union is a movement with the ability to gather together many whose individual influence over their life conditions is limited, into an important force for change. People whose work underpins society should not be silenced and pushed down, but strengthened and uplifted. LO does not intend to stand idly by and see the rights and freedoms of the worker collective being eroded – silence is not an option. We demand respect for fundamental core conventions on trade union rights.

Democracy is about more than party political values, not least if, in accordance with the UN's concept, it is seen as space for citizens to participate in society. The ability of all people to freely express their opinion, to be able to support themselves, to feel part of a context and to feel acceptance regardless of class, gender, ethnic origin and sexual orientation, is greater than a party-political issue. The fact that the trade union is involved in the issue of democracy is because we share these basic values.

Another explanation of LO's commitment is our history. Inspired by the British and German trade union movements, Swedish workers also organised themselves in the late 19th century to demand strengthened rights and freedoms. Ever since the founding of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, we have both received and given international assistance in solidarity in this struggle. Working conditions in a globalised market are interrelated. By supporting wage earners in other parts of the world in standing up for their rights, we also reduce downward pressure on our own. Democracy and the issue of influence lie in our trade union DNA.

Another perhaps obvious reason for involvement is that trade unions are among the first to be restricted when States move in an autocratic di-

rection. Free trade unions are difficult critics for those who want to rule without transparency and with a focus on the interests of the elite. In countries such as Belarus and Myanmar, it is clear how far dictatorships are prepared to go to silence resistance. Hence, in order to have a chance to achieve our primary purpose of improving the working life of wage earners, it is a purely existential question to defend co-determination and influence.

Trade unions are a strong force, both nationally and globally, but despite this they cannot reach everyone and do everything, particularly outside the labour market area. The greatest effect is therefore achieved by working with other actors who, like us, protect democracy and free societies. Even though the level of democracy is declining right now, there are still many progressive forces that want it to be different. It is a long-term endeavour that is now needed once again to reclaim and secure the cornerstones that support free democratic societies, and which today have been or are being annexed by anti-democratic forces.

Through solidarity and international cooperation, we can find solutions to problems that are overwhelming to individual countries. Coordinated efforts to strengthen employment, economic development and not least to achieve a green transition are far more effective than when countries act in isolation. LO and its affiliated unions are included in many partnerships, both nationally and internationally, which complement their own activities and extend their reach. For example, we can strengthen workers in other countries through projects via the Union to Union joint international cooperation development organisation of LO, TCO (Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees) and Saco (Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations), and the Olof Palme International Center. Structurally and long-term, we work to change norms and improve workers' life chances through international collaboration within the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS) and the OECD Trade Union Advisory Committee, to name but a few.

At national level, a new partnership is also underway with some 40 Swedish civil society organisations, aimed at a joint analysis of the situation and coordination of our resources to strengthen the resilience of Swedish democracy. Within that network, it is clear that it is not just the trade unions that are concerned about developments and who are prepared

to fight for stronger democracy. The important role of civil society for a vital democracy is highlighted by both IDEA and V-dem, among others.

The importance of politics for equality

Increased polarisation is one explanation for the deterioration of democracy. Large differences in income and life chances are driving the deterioration. Distrust of the welfare society's ability to provide basic security makes voters both angry and full of distrust. To create trust and a sense of belonging, the State, municipalities, and regions must therefore deliver what citizens expect from the public sector and what is necessary for daily life to function. It is of the utmost importance that trade unions continue to make clear demands and continue to fight for a strong welfare state leading to greater equality and social inclusion.

The dividing line in Swedish politics lies in the choice between on the one hand, a welfare system that caters for quality and quantity for all and, on the other hand, a public system with a lower ambition, supplemented from one's own wallet. The results of the different choices have completely different outcomes for equality. Since equal conditions have a positive impact on people's everyday lives and finances, they benefit participation and democracy. This manifests itself in people having the time, energy, and resources to take part in local voluntary activities, to become active in the trade union and to participate in general elections. Strong efforts are needed, and our political institutions must draw a red line to show where the boundary for public commitments lies before democratic values begin to be undermined.

Another, complementary, piece of the puzzle is to counteract forces that erode the framework for a general welfare policy. In order to achieve socially, economically, and climate-sustainable globalisation, we must tackle problems such as market dominance, underinvestment, tax evasion and imbalances between earned income and income from capital. Decades of experience show that the so-called market is not good at equal distribution but brings about large differences in income and influence. LO will continue to demand that policy must stake out the path towards a socially and ecologically responsible market model where companies contribute to more societal gains.

The negative effects of globalisation through the unequal distribution

of risks and profits lead to increased political and economic polarisation. Jobs with good conditions risk being lost and replaced by precarious employment if economic gains are allowed to be the only driver of development. For societies to be equal, it is important that we, nationally as well as globally, work for improved conditions for those who have fallen behind, and not by worsening the conditions for those who are better off. In this way we get both healthy competition and good life conditions. This is a challenge for trade unions that no national movement can handle alone. Together with other progressive forces around the world, LO not only protects trade union conditions but also pushes for even better conditions.

Inequality oils anti-democracy – and vice versa. It is not a coincidence that polarisation is increasing in Sweden. Although we are relatively one of the most equal countries in the world, the differences between income groups have increased dramatically even from a global perspective. One measure of this is that in 2023, a top CEO's income was equivalent to the wages of 67 industrial workers.¹⁹ Workers must have a greater share in the value they are involved in creating in the economy as a whole; this is a matter of fairness and the possibility of a dignified life.

When workers as a collective stick together and cooperate, we make it more difficult for private capital interests and employers to use underbidding competition to play workers off against each other. Improved wages and other working conditions are not only beneficial to trade union members, but also because they are linked to greater efficiency in the economy and more democratic globalisation. It is therefore of great importance for both individuals and society to promote trade union organisation.

States have a heavy responsibility to gain public support for openness by ensuring that, as jobs disappear, citizens have good opportunities for transition to the new jobs that arise. These may include generous schemes for student grants and loans, or an active labour market policy that, complemented by collective bargaining solutions, effectively matches the workforce with new job opportunities. At the global level, it is important that leading international organisations and institutions such as the EU, the OECD, the IMF, the ILO, and others are influenced to clearly support developments that are both socially and economically inclusive.

¹⁹ Anna Almqvist, *Makteliten – alltid goda tider* (The Power Elite – always good times). LO 2024.



Anti-democracy is contagious, and we must work actively to strengthen heroes of democracy everywhere to prevent the rings on the water spreading to us. To do as the government has done in this situation, giving up both the feminist foreign policy and the one-percent target, is a direct danger to democracy, both in recipient countries and here at home. The development cooperation activities of civil society complement those of the State with both skills and scope, which now risk being cut back in line with Sweden's lower ambitions. Development assistance is about much more than just money out, and should be seen as

investing in opportunities and belief in the future. A feminist-oriented policy does not just stop at selective measures but tries to change norms. If one of the world's richest countries cannot dedicate even a hundredth of its income to this, or one of the world's most gender-equal countries cannot be normative – then who can? Therefore, LO believes that Sweden must restore the one per cent target and re-establish feminist foreign policy in order to pursue an effective and solidarity-based foreign and development assistance policy in support of democratic core values.

Methods for organisations to contribute to strengthened democracy

In the shadow of dark headlines of doom and gloom, it may be comforting to remember all the good that humanity actually accomplishes. As mentioned at the outset in this report, there are several recent uplifting examples. None of these changes have taken place automatically. They are clear examples of the power of politics to change our societies and the outcome of patient trade union and political work. It has been shown to be important to highlight positive messages, such as the successes that trade unions contribute to, to prove that resources and alternatives exist and to counterbalance the picture of constant challenges. A multitude of studies show that good news and examples spread optimism, inspire recipients to interact with other people and to stay informed. As voters, we must take great care not to reward demagogues and autocrats who consciously want to heighten anxiety and divisions. This is not least important to remember in trade union-political cooperation and trade union election campaigns.

The study conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (see the section *Why is this happening?*) also provides some clues about ways to counteract anti-democratic behaviour. Here, perhaps the most important thing to take note of is that polarisation drives autocratisation and that demagogues must not get away with their attempts to distort the truth in order to polarise. Identity policy considerations are reinforced by polarisation and create much greater gaps in society than socio-economic interests do. Thus, it is important to clearly stand up for everyone's equal value in order to influence norms and people in their identity policy considerations. Furthermore, if voters' propensity to punish undemocratic politicians correlates with education and understanding of democracy, as the study suggests, it means that popular education concerning the framework of

democracy is very important. Finally, the fact that voters are partisan and, to a large extent, forgive politicians who violate a democratic norm if they represent that voter's favourite party, means that political parties have a great moral responsibility, as do trade unions and other organisations, not to allow undemocratic statements by their own representatives.

Just as democracy can be broken down, it can be built up. There are many ways to contribute as an organisation or individual. In a "user manual",²⁰ the V-Dem Institute lists the important contributions of civil society: making visible, questioning, offering alternatives and countering polarisation. Raising the problems you see and arguing for why you think something is wrong, combined with offering an alternative way forward in a way that avoids falling into the trap of heightened rhetoric, is what research recommends, based on what seems to work where democracy is kept alive. This "method" is nothing new for trade unions, as it is well in line with how LO and its affiliates have long been working to advance the positions of workers' rights through advocacy and collective bargaining. The new application will be to use the method consciously to stop the decline we now see, and contribute to an increased democratic space.

A few more lessons from cases where democracy has been re-established after having been displaced, demonstrate a few particularly decisive factors.²¹

- The existence of large-scale **popular mobilisation** against those in power has made it difficult for autocrats to cling on to power.
- **The judicial system** has used laws that protect democracy and thwarted the ability of authoritarian governments to assume power. That is, the judicial power has limited the executive power.
- A united **opposition** has interacted with **civil society**, such as trade unions, associations, religious communities, and others to protest against the forces challenging democratic principles.
- **Critical elections and important events** have led to a shift of power.

²⁰ Anna Lührmann, Lisa Gastaldi, Dominik Hirndorf and Staffan I. Lindberg (Eds). 2020. *Defending Democracy against Illiberal Challengers: A resource guide*. Varieties of Democracy Institute/University of Gothenburg.

²¹ Evie Papada, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2023. *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*. Democracy Report 2023. University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute) 2023.

For example, the elections in Poland in autumn 2023 meant a clear stand on future social systems, in which Polish voters seem to have chosen not to continue on the path towards an increasingly limited democracy, but instead to choose an opposition that has promised to re-establish democratic freedoms and rights.

- **International support** and protection of democracy have proved to be important, which is in line with what has been stated above about the importance of strong international voices defending democracy, and that democracies must cooperate with each other. Here is yet another recent European example of the EU's decision to suspend payments to Poland and Hungary until steps were taken to re-establish the rule of law.

In its 2023 report,²² IDEA highlights the role of 'countervailing institutions' in stopping the erosion of democracy and reacting to authoritarian forces. Here it is meant that it is crucial for thriving democracies that both state institutions and organisations cooperate. Together, it is then possible to check and balance the power of decision-makers to ensure that popular priorities are visible in politics. Such cooperation also creates openings for change in non-democracies. In that light, it can be noted that the Sweden Democrats have talked about "cleaning up" and that several heads of government agencies have been replaced to pursue the government line. The idea is that directors-general should be non-political, but it is difficult not to assume that there is a risk that the government is now appointing people they hope will be unwilling to cooperate with civil society organisations and thus not politically neutral. In that case, it would make the scrutiny and control of the incumbent government more difficult.

LO's role in the total strength of civil society should not be underestimated. Together with other organisations, we can reach many and make a great difference by focusing on what we can already do very well, such as adult education, organisation and a clear stand on freedoms and rights. One factor, on the positive side, is that civil society in Sweden in relation to other countries is unusually strong and well developed. This indicates that we have a good chance of getting our country back on the right track.

²² The New Checks and Balances, The Global State of Democracy 2023. IDEA 2023.

However, time is also a factor. It is important that we are involved in shaping future conditions while we are still well-placed to do so. In far too many countries, trade unions and the rest of civil society have been marginalised precisely to make them too weak to challenge the incumbent power. Therefore, the repeated advice from the international community is to act now, before it becomes more difficult to reverse the trend.

Specific tips on tools for change

Thus, there are quite a few methods and approaches for messages that can develop democracies. Everyone can do something: at central trade union level, national union level, district level, local level and as an individual trade union representative or member. Some policy proposals have been highlighted above as examples of tools for change which LO upholds in different advocacy contexts. In addition, we increase knowledge and create commitment through trade union training courses, arranging seminars for discussions both within and outside the trade union sphere. The affiliated unions contribute in a similar way, not least through our most powerful tool – organisation. But also through projects with a national focus and many development projects in other countries that aim to support other trade unions. At district level, among many other things, involvement in voluntary activities is an important contribution to building trust in the local community.

In order to improve the situation, policies, organisation, and training are strong and important instruments that the unions and labour movement have become proficient at using in the course of history. But for the individual, it may seem quite abstract and perhaps you wonder what, more precisely, you can do yourself to contribute. Many concrete examples of how to contribute, right down to the individual level, have emerged from the courses and workshops that have been conducted so far with participants from trade unions, folk high schools, and ABF (the Workers' Educational Association). You can find some of these below that will hopefully inspire you. The small things we do help shape the big contexts!

Suggestions on what you can do yourself

1. Silence is not an option! *Trade unions have always been a driving force for freedom and democracy – and we continue to be.*

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The state of democracy in the world has regressed, with more than three decades of development wiped out. There are worrying signs in Sweden too. This publication provides a factual background and analysis of the situation, as well as a review of methods and tools for strengthening democracy. For we must not forget that there are also many examples of social, ecological, and democratic successes – it is possible to make a difference!

LO upholds good conditions for workers, which helps people use their democratic rights in the workplace and in society. Democracy and the issue of influence lie in our trade union DNA.

September 2024

ISBN 978-91-566-3696-7

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