Position Paper

Democratic Solidarity Today: Definitions and Challenges in a Contested World

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Democratic solidarity has re-emerged in contemporary political and intellectual debate as an urgent necessity in the face of the expansion and consolidation of authoritarian regimes. However, far from constituting a clear and operational principle, it is now presented as a concept fraught with strategic dilemmas, gaps in understanding, and profound normative contradictions. In today's world—and particularly from and for Latin America—democratic solidarity faces the challenge of redefining itself, not only as a moral or rhetorical gesture, but as a coherent, effective, and sustained practice in the face of adversaries who do not operate under the rules of liberal democracy. Based on the debates and dilemmas existing within our *Democratic Solidarity* community, these reflections are motivated by the commendable effort promoted by the *Forum 2000 team*. I hope they encourage a broader, more pluralistic, and practical conversation about the challenges we face as democrats in that mestizo region of the West and the Global South that we call Latin America.

A complicated situation... that is becoming even more complicated

In the mid-1970s, Latin America was largely dominated by military dictatorships, with few democratic exceptions. Half a century later, the formal landscape appears to have been reversed: most countries in the region are governed by democratic regimes. However, this quantitative progress coexists with a qualitative deterioration in institutional performance, high levels of social conflict, regulatory confusion, and deep citizen disenchantment with the republican promise.

This context has facilitated the emergence and persistence of an authoritarian ecosystem composed of consolidated dictatorships—such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—and illiberal or populist governments that are progressively eroding democratic checks and balances. One of the most disturbing phenomena is the expansion of a kind of "Plan Condor 3.0," through which regional autocracies, with external support, deploy new forms of transnational repression. Selective assassinations, attacks, monitoring, and harassment of exiles aim less at mass physical elimination and more at generating fear, demobilization, and fragmentation of opposition networks. Faced with this type of threat, democratic solidarity has reacted belatedly, in a fragmented manner and, in many cases, merely declaratively. In cases such as Venezuela, despite the discussions sparked by the way the US has intervened in the crisis, solidarity is expressed broadly: the entire movement around the Nobel Prize winner demonstrates this. For Cuba—the source, model, and axis of the current "progressive" anti-liberal alliance in the hemisphere—such solidarity, despite certain actions and advances[1], proves insufficient and inadequate to the depth and extent of the threat.

The nature of these autocracies cannot be properly understood if they are analyzed solely as recent deviations from the democratic order. In several cases, these are regimes whose ideological, organizational, and repressive matrix stems from the revolutionary impulse of the Cold War, with a monistic conception of power, a logic of permanent enemy, and sophisticated mechanisms of surveillance and social control. These dictatorships also have powerful global allies—mainly Russia and China—and engage selectively with the liberal international order, disconnecting themselves from those institutions capable of exercising any kind of effective regulation or pressure.

In this scenario, the traditional idea of Latin America as a "zone of peace" has been eroding. Although there are still no conventional interstate wars, there is a convergence of persistent civil conflicts, sovereignty disputes between states and criminal actors, political warfare operations, and hybrid forms of confrontation that blur the classic categories of international security. This complexity has been underestimated by large sectors of democratic public opinion, as well as by political, academic, and media actors who have shown serious difficulties in interpreting the nature of the authoritarian adversary and anticipating its strategies.

[1] Review the paper *"Monitoreo de GAPAC documenta una expansión y diversificación de la solidaridad democrática internacional con actores prodemocráticos cubanos"*.

Adding to these dilemmas today is a new and disturbing variable for Western democratic solidarity: recent developments in the United States. For decades, Washington has been a central pillar of the liberal international order, not only because of its material weight, but also because of its role in providing global public goods, supporting development cooperation, defending human rights, and backing—directly or indirectly—civil society in authoritarian contexts. However, Donald Trump's second term in office introduces a different reality. Cuts in funding for development aid and global human rights programs, explicit or implicit threats to historical allies such as Canada and Denmark, as well as tendencies to disregard Europe and support Ukraine, erode both the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic solidarity in the West. These signals weaken the cohesion of the democratic bloc, reinforce authoritarian narratives about liberal hypocrisy, and reduce the capacity for collective action against illiberal regimes.

However, a balanced assessment requires avoiding simplistic conclusions. The US political system—including its vibrant associative world, the media, and party and community initiatives—is much broader and more complex than the illiberal populism embodied by the group and project led by Donald Trump: it includes institutional checks and balances, a robust civil society, active subnational governments, and democratic traditions that continue to act as partial brakes on the most disruptive tendencies. Even in this scenario of retreat and ambiguity, the United States continues to be, in relative terms, a lesser threat to the democratic order than consolidated illiberal autocracies such as China and Russia, whose challenge is structural, strategic, and openly revisionist. Recognizing this distinction is key to maintaining perspective: the internal and external erosion of US leadership complicates democratic solidarity, but it does not negate the need to prioritize the containment and coordinated confrontation of those regimes that actively seek to dismantle the global liberal order.

Democratic solidarity: what are we talking about?

Democratic solidarity is both a principle and a practice of collective, transnational, and multilevel action, through which actors committed to the liberal order—activists, public intellectuals, and political leaders—articulate cooperation, mutual support, and shared responsibility to defend, restore, and deepen the rule of law, the effective enforcement of human rights, and inclusive governance. It is based on the recognition of the interdependence between democracies, on the conviction that systematic violations of freedoms and rights are not merely internal matters, and on the moral and political obligation to respond to them through democratic, legal, and pluralistic means, both domestically and globally.

For greater precision, this definition can be broken down into four constituent dimensions: normative, political, civic, and strategic.

1. Normative dimension: commitment to the liberal order. Democratic solidarity presupposes explicit adherence to the values of liberal constitutionalism: separation of powers, legality, protection of minorities, civil and political liberties, and accountability. It is not neutral with regard to the type of regime, but rather normatively oriented toward the defense of democracy against authoritarian, illiberal, or hegemonic populist projects.

2. Political dimension: shared responsibility beyond borders. Analytically, democratic solidarity operates on the basis of systemic interdependence: democratic deterioration in one country affects the quality of the international order as a whole. Hence, it articulates a logic of *co-responsibility* that rejects both sovereigntist isolationism and coercive interventionism, favoring mechanisms of legitimate pressure, accompaniment, legal sanctions, and institutional cooperation.

3. Social and civic dimension: a plural agency. Unlike state-centric conceptions, democratic solidarity recognizes the central role of non-state actors—social movements, human rights defenders, academics, journalists, diasporas—as producers of legitimacy, knowledge, and democratic oversight, capable of influencing both national agendas and international forums.

4. Strategic dimension: active and preventive defense. Finally, democratic solidarity is not limited to reacting to crises, but involves a long-term strategy aimed at strengthening institutions, protecting civic spaces, counteracting authoritarian state capture, and promoting models of inclusive governance that integrate social diversity, equity, and effective participation.

A summary of complex challenges

The first major challenge facing contemporary democratic solidarity is therefore **coherence**. This must bring together different dimensions—political, civic, institutional, and security—avoiding both impulsive acceleration and paralyzing procrastination. Belated responses often arrive when windows of opportunity have already closed, while hasty, unsubstantiated actions undermine the legitimacy of the democratic cause. Added to this are deficits in decision-making and understanding of crises, which have weighed down numerous movements and governments committed, at least rhetorically, to the defense of democracy.

A second key challenge is the need for **cross-ideological solidarity**. This does not imply the rejection of ideologies, but rather the ability to build spaces of convergence between different visions that coincide in the defense of open society and democratic rule. The inability to articulate these convergences has facilitated the amplification or replacement of social polarization—which is normal and manageable in democratic contexts—with polarization induced by populist leaders, identity movements, or intellectual currents that are openly hostile to the republican order.

Likewise, democratic solidarity must be **transregional and intraregional**, avoiding both abstract universalism and localist isolation. Recent experience shows a disorganized North Atlantic bloc, with the United States acting alone in some cases, Europe focused on other fronts, and Latin America deeply fragmented and subject to internal political fluctuations. This lack of coordination reduces the effectiveness of any collective strategy and sends signals of weakness to authoritarian actors.

Another unavoidable challenge is the **transgenerational** nature of democratic solidarity. Crises in democracy affect different generations in different ways, eroding expectations, loyalties, and beliefs about the viability of republican coexistence. Ignoring this dimension means giving up on rebuilding a democratic culture capable of projecting itself into the future.

Finally, we need to tackle one of the most uncomfortable but necessary debates: democratic solidarity **cannot remain unarmed**. Still anchored in the paradigm of transition and liberalization, many democratic actors rely exclusively on nonviolence, dialogue, and agreements to confront regimes that operate under a *Schmittian* friend-enemy logic. Without abandoning fundamental normative principles, democracies must review their instruments and accept the need to combine civic pacifism with state capacities for protection, counterintelligence, and defense. Treating autocracies as what they objectively are—existential enemies of the democratic order—does not imply renouncing legality, but rather realistically accepting the nature of the conflict.

In this sense, the concept of **militant democracy** (as Karl Lowenstein put it) gains relevance. These must combine preventive and sustainable instruments—economic, social, and political reforms that reduce the structural causes of unrest—with corrective and temporary measures that, with legitimacy and legal backing, neutralize authoritarian threats in their early stages. This includes, in extreme cases, the prohibition of specific movements or actions that actively undermine the democratic order.

A major challenge ahead

In short, democratic solidarity can be understood as an ethic of democratic interdependence turned into political practice, which seeks to update the liberal order of the 21st century in the face of internal and external threats, combining universal principles with localized, legal, and legitimate actions. In today's world, it faces multiple challenges that combine ideologies, collective mentalities, and communicational narratives. Its failure cannot be explained solely by the strength of authoritarianism, but also by misdiagnosis, a lack of self-criticism, and a persistent underestimation of the adversary. All of this requires abandoning moral complacency and accepting that the defense of democracy is, today more than ever, a political, strategic, and deeply conflictive task.

Rethinking democratic solidarity therefore requires a simultaneous exercise of realism and normative commitment[2]: recognizing that the defense of democracy can no longer rely on institutional inertia or unquestioned leadership,

[2] In this regard, it is worth reviewing the idea of "values-based realism" developed by Finnish President Alexander Stubb in "The West's Last Chance: How to Build a New Global Order Before It's Too Late," *Foreign Affairs, January/February 2026.*

but neither can it renounce the fundamental distinction between open societies and regimes that actively seek to destroy them. In a world where China and Russia act as revisionist powers determined to undermine the liberal order, democratic solidarity can only regain its effectiveness if it abandons moral complacency, embraces the conflictive nature of international politics, and translates into coherent, sustained, and shared strategies. Only then will it cease to be a well-intentioned slogan and become a historical force capable of defending—and renewing—the democratic project in the 21st century.

About the Author

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