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THE EU'S DEMOCRACY PROMOTION INITIATIVES IN SOUTH ASIA: PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract: *The European Union (EU) and its member states have played a significant role in South Asia, consequently aligning with its fundamental principles, e.g., the rule of law, respect for human rights and minority rights, good governance, democracy, and equality based on values like inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination. The EU has always supported the promotion and consolidation of democracy, not only in South Asia but also across the world. In this sense, the study examines the EU's democracy promotion initiatives in association with its programmes. This study addresses the literature gaps in the comparison of the EU's democratic intervention with references from past and present perspectives. The article further investigates challenges in the region in the context of rising populism and satrapy in South Asia and its neighbourhoods. Afghanistan and Myanmar are the best examples of the current scenario. However, the rise of populist government has already been raised in Europe to challenge a liberal democracy, where positioning the EU's role in democracy initiatives is questionable in terms of credibility and impactful promises.*

Keywords: Democracy Promotion, European Union, South Asia, Satrapy, Elections.

1. Introduction: Understanding of the EU's Democracy Promotion Initiative

The Democracy Promotion Initiative is one of the priorities for the European Union to support democracy worldwide. The European Parliament cites that “Democracy remains the only system of governance in which people can fully realise their human rights and is a determining factor for development and long-term stability” (Lerch, 2021). The Maastricht Treaty of 1991, defined the foreign policy objectives as “to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”. Even the European Council and Commission expressed in their Joint Statement on Development Policy the incorporation of the promotion of human rights, democracy, rule of law, and good governance

in November 2000 (European Union, 2000). But in May 2001, the EU communication stated the term “The EU’s role on Promoting Human Rights and Democratization in Third Countries”. The 2001 Communication identified three major areas of engagement: 1) through promoting coherent and consistent policies, particularly in the promotion and mainstreaming of human rights through development and other official assistance; 2) by placing a higher pro-active approach, in particular by using the opportunities offered by political dialogue, trade, and external assistance; and 3) by adopting a more strategic approach to the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) by matching programme and projects (European Commission, 2001b; Jain, 2009, 2015a).

The European Council adopted the conclusions of the communication on 17 democracy support on November 17, 2009, which cooperates through the EU’s External Relations. This is a new strategy outlined for the mainly country-based approach to democracy support with greater coherence and participation of all stakeholders. There is a key role for the ‘directly elected EU institution’ and the ‘European Parliament is primarily committed to promoting democracy’. The EU refers to its democratic approach as complements to human rights as the grounded principle based on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN-UDHR) as well as other international and regional institutions that follow standards on human rights, democracy, and elections. After 2015, the EU’s democracy promotion initiatives were incorporated with ‘the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ to support democracy in third countries. In particular, it focuses on goals 16 and 10, respectively, “accountable institutions and inclusive and participatory decision making and reducing inequality” (Lerch, 2021).

The Council adopted another communication conclusion on ‘democracy based on the same principles of 2009 conclusions and the EU reconfirmed its commitment to combat challenges urgently and comprehensively through its external action. The new democracy promotion agenda includes “the undermining of democratic processes and institutions; low levels of trust in institutions and politicians; a shrinking democratic space for civil society; increased violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms; and manipulation using online technologies”. In November 2020, the Council adopted another commitment to stepping up as

‘EU Action Human Rights and Democracy’. The new Democracy Support Agenda defines the five-line of action that is called “Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies”. In 2012, the Council emphasised its role through civil society in the conclusion “The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe’s engagement with civil society in external relations”. The same commitment was reconfirmed as the conclusions of 19 June 2017 through “an empowered and resilient civil society as a crucial way to support good governance and the rule of law in any democracy” (Vandeputte and Luciani, 2018; Lerch, 2021).

Therefore, the EU provides funding related to democracy assistance related funding to its partner countries through the ‘European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).’ In this regard, the election observation is the backbone of the EU’s support for democratic development in developing countries to employ the promotion of human rights, the rule of law, conflict resolution, and the peacebuilding process. The vision supports democracy and peace in the world, but it is also linked to development policy. The EU’s external action is integrated into areas like trade, development, enlargement, and neighbourhood policy. The EU aims to pursue this through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that drives ‘political and diplomatic relations with third countries and multilateral institutions’. The EU viewed itself as a soft power organisation that is ‘guided by a normative vision’. This soft power instrument is implemented through its peace and democracy support mission in third-world countries specifically towards fragile states and geopolitical context applied in those areas of conflicts, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and the crisis of liberal systems (Jain, 2015a; Zamfir and Ionel, 2019).

However, this study draws attention to the objectives of the EU to emphasise strengthening its bilateral cooperation with countries in South Asia. There are eight countries in South Asia, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, which have unique features due to their natural diversity in aspects of cultural, social, economic, and political put together. The focus areas of the EU are mainly three: 1) human and social development; 2) good governance and human rights; and 3) economic and trade development. The region of South Asia is represented by a dysfunctional organisation called the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which tries to maintain its

multilateral relations with the other member states. The priorities of the EU for the countries of South Asia align with its policy, as a key objective is the reduction of poverty. In this regard, the European Commission prioritises good governance, human rights, and democratisation towards South Asia in the EU's development policy (Kumar Nepali, 2009).

Therefore, the EU strategy papers and the European Parliament aimed at promoting democracy as a key priority in South Asia to realise the importance of regional integration. This article traces applications of the EU's democracy promotion programme in the countries of South Asia with two frameworks: 1) past perspective (a historical evaluation) is an assessment of the EU's doctrine of engagement; and 2) present perspective is an assessment of the EU's empirical and contemporary engagement, especially when talking about rising current challenges like populism, Russian aggression and refugee crisis. This study answers three major questions: 1) How does the EU perceive South Asia in its foreign policy? 2) What is the basis for the EU's promotion of democracy and past engagement in South Asia? 3) How have people in South Asia viewed or perceived the role of the EU? and 4) Why has the EU engaged NGOs and CSOs for the implementation of democracy initiatives in the region? Additionally, this research also verifies the hypothesis: if populism is already rising among EU member states, there is a question about how the EU can play a credible role in South Asia.

2. Methods and Materials

However, South Asia is one of the conflict-affected areas of the world where the United States has also been involved with its allies for about 20 years. The region has seen religious fundamentalism (Afghanistan and Pakistan), long ethnic insurgencies (Sri Lanka), Naxalist extremism (India), moist armed insurgencies (Nepal), and the shadow of terrorism, especially in the past 20 years. Likewise, the region has also witnessed land and border disputes between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Despite this, the region is craving peace and development, which encompasses challenges not only from the above-mentioned conflicts but also illiteracy, access to quality education, safe drinking water, human rights, health, and inequality, and South Asia is affected by extreme poverty (Bharti, 2021, 2022, 2023). In the following context, this study explores the human rights and democracy promotion and human rights interventions of the EU in South Asia and whether it's able to bring change and promise in the light of rising

populism not only in South Asia but also in Europe. In addition, it is also focusing on the effect of these aspects on the EU's agenda for promoting democracy and human rights throughout the world and raising the question of the credibility of the Union.

The EU supplies a humanitarian approach as an instrument of soft power¹ towards third countries. In this context, the Union's approach in South Asia is applied as a case study for this research, where the humanitarian approach is engaged through civil society organisations (CSOs), local authorities, and NGOs. Since the launch of democracy promotion initiatives, the EU has played the role of a humanitarian actor in international relations, and its promotion initiatives have been challenged in the discourse of academia. The discussion also deals with critical remarks by scholars in social science debates. The methodology is applied here based on primary (press briefs, EU and governmental reports, official Facebook posts, NGOs and CSOs websites, official statements, and parliamentary speeches) and secondary (newspaper clips and reports, online conferences and lectures, think-tank reports and working papers, magazines, works of literature, and archival). The data above are incorporated to analyse the engagement of the EU in democracy engagement in South Asia through qualitative empirical analysis methods with the application of partial content analysis. Likewise, this study draws on the EU's geostrategic coverage of South Asia through past and present engagements.

3. Tracing the History of the EU-South Asia Relations

Historically, there has always been a profound relationship between South Asia and the EU, whether it's political, economic, or cultural. Yet, South Asia has never been a top priority in regard to the policy of the EU. It had always been limited to African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries (Jain, 2015b). The first EU engagement in South Asia can be traced back to the 1967 Food Aid Convention, which was approved by the European Economic Community (EEC). India and today Bangladesh were beneficiaries of the Food Aid Convention. According to the Food Aid Agreement, India and Bangladesh were the main recipients of the EEC's aid, accounting for 6.5% and 6.4% of the total committed aid, respectively. After the introduction of

¹ The term 'soft power' was coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye as the ability to attract other countries through diplomacy, culture and institutions rather than using the military (hard power) to perceived foreign policy goals. More can read, Nye Jr, Joseph S. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public affairs, 2004.

the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) of 1971, the EEC envisaged fostering development along with humanitarian aid for other than ACP states. Thus, the trade relations between the European Community and South Asia are also included (Birocchi, 1999; Amin, 2011, 2015). Looking outside the ACP, the mandate given by the Paris European Summit in 1972 and Lomé Convention-IV in 1975 was the waking moment for the EEC/EU to cooperate with other developing countries. Initially, it was established in the Mediterranean rather than in Asia and Latin America. (Frisch, 2008).

Furthermore, Britain was included in the EEC in 1973, and then the European Community started thinking about Asia/South Asia. India was the only country closer to being a member of the EEC. In the same year, India signed the first Commercial Cooperation Agreement in December (a similar agreement was followed by Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), and it was enhanced with trade in June 1981. Not only was India the first country to establish diplomatic relations with the EEC (European Parliament, 2003; Amin, 2015). In 1974, the European Community announced that its development policy would cover 40 countries in the Asia and Latin America (ALA) region, and the annual aid programme was dedicated to the poorest and rural areas (Tripathi, 2011). In 1976, the EEC launched a financial and technical assistance programme for “non-associated developing countries” and South Asia was also a beneficiary related to food aid and rural development. In 1985, the “non-associated developing countries” title changed to “developing countries of Asia and Latin America”. In 1988, the budget for these two regions was also separated, respectively, “Latin America” and “Asia”. Almost 500 million euros were dedicated to Latin America and 1 billion euros to Asia per year. The amount was channelled by the European Investment Bank (EIB) (Frisch, 2008).

Moreover, during 1994–2004, the EU and countries in South Asia signed five cooperation partnership agreements concerning the development of two-way trade, economics, and promotion of investment, financial and technical assistance, development aid, human rights, and democracy promotion. From a historical point of view, EU-South Asia relations are based on the third-generation agreement in reference to trade, bilateral political dialogues, and development assistance. The EU signed a third-generation Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development with countries in South Asia, viz., India and Sri Lanka (1994),

Nepal (1996), Bangladesh (2000), and Pakistan (2001). But there would be yet to sign a third-generation agreement with Bhutan and the Maldives, and the EU adopted the 2017 and 2020 strategy for Afghanistan (European Parliament, 2003; Amin, 2011, 2015).

Since the 1990s, the EU's concern towards South Asia has always been strategic, with almost all policies regarding democracy and good governance. Promoting democracy has been one of the desirable ends of achieving its foreign policy goal through a peace strategy, fostering a strategy of socio-economic development, and promoting human rights. In this regard, the EU and its member states use it as an instrument through democracy aid along with governance, human rights, and support for civil society (Smith, 2003). There was no other project undertaken under EIDHR for South Asia between 1994 and 2002. The EU adopted EIDHR in 1994 as a financial instrument for the promotion of democracy and human rights in third countries. However, South Asia received almost 6.5% (7.23 million euros) of the EIDHR financial allocations between 2002 and 2006. The EU and its member states were only engaged before 2001 in funding human rights rather than elements of democracy promotion. It only increased after 2001 as an active role through election observation in South Asia. (European Commission, 2007a; Jain, 2009, 2015).

In 2004, the EU and India signed a strategic partnership based on shared values and principles of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the promotion of peace and stability, as well as a rule-based global order on multilateralism and commitment to cooperation in various sectors (Benaglia, 2019; European Parliament, 2021). India, as a strategic partner of the EU and the world's largest democracy, can significantly contribute to democracy promotion and strengthen EU cooperation on regional and global levels. In the second EU-India Summit, both partners agreed to cooperate.² In 2005, both sides repeated the commitment and the strategy paper mentioned "look together for possible synergies and initiatives to promote human rights and democracy"³. Kugiel (2012) criticised that the commitment to democracy promotion has been silenced from the ongoing dialogue'. There are also no such as 'many examples of the practical implementation of these commitments'. Next, he mentioned that "democracy seems to

² Cooperation agreed in "Joint Communiqué: Second India-EU Summit", New Delhi, 23 November 2001.

³ The strategy paper signed on "The India-EU Strategic Partnership. Joint Action Plan", New Delhi, 7 September 2005.

have become more often a point of friction between the two than an area for cooperation” (Kugiel, 2012). There is an ideological divide between both sides due to ‘distant civilisation values and divergent worldviews.

4. Growing Engagement of the EU and the Importance of South Asia

The 9/11 attack in the United States changed security dimensions in the context of non-traditional security threats and raised a serious question about the national security of the world, and it was an alarming concern for the EU in South Asia. Europe’s prosperity is linked to South Asia due to security concerns. Post-9/11, the interest of the EU began to grow significantly, and the relevance of Pakistan became very important for counter-terrorism in the region. Until the 1990s, the region was not a main priority for the EU because its prime focus was the ACP and the EU was itself in the process of integration. The EU’s major interest could be seen when India and Pakistan were invited to join the Asian-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 2006. The EU is a uniform regional intergovernmental organisation, so there are obvious political and economic interests because both countries have economic growth in the region. The EU showed serious concern for the region, and democracy promotion and human rights initiatives were regarded as important engagements. After that, the Union started a more assertive role in South Asia, especially with the increased focus on engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan with numerous development activities (Tripathi, 2011; Mayr, 2020).

From a security perspective, there are two nuclear powers existing (India and Pakistan), and regional security complexity makes the region hostile. The footprint of militant organisations makes South Asia home to terrorism, and the presence of the Islamic State (IS) also creates a problem of fundamental extremism, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are more affected by them. Except for the threat of terrorism, there are many other challenges, such as armed force groups, religious and ethnic extremism, and long-standing insurgencies. The current situation in Afghanistan raises several questions of stability, not only within the country but also across the region as a whole. After the drawdown of an international force in 2014 and the complete withdrawal of the US and its allies’ forces on August 31, 2021, Afghanistan was already a top-10 fragile state, but the recent situation created instability after

the Taliban took full control of the country. The regional stability and peace of the region are important to the world, making South Asia a potentially significant security and strategic partner. India is the only country for this, which has a strategic partnership with the European Union. So, there are several reasons that attract the EU to further partnerships (Bharti, 2020).

Since the 1990s, almost all countries in South Asia have adopted an open market policy (liberalisation, globalisation, and privatisation), and significant growth (average 5%) has been seen in the region. South Asia is a diverse and dynamic region that shares a complex nature. Almost 1/3 (25%) of the population occupies 4% of the landmass of the world in this region. World Bank data showed that the region is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Rapid growth in South Asia is expected at 7.2% annually, even after the pandemic and the strengthening prospects in 2021. India is a strategic partner and one of the largest growing economies in the world. The World Bank report favoured that the largest population increased purchasing power, and at least 400 million have the spending capacity of any American or European, as well as growing potential markets (consumer size due to the large population) and attracting foreign investment (Vivekanandan and Giri, 2001; Mayr, 2020; The World Bank, 2021).

The European Union is one of the top trading partners with South Asia, and the Commission shows its core interest in the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), where they can deal with all the SAARC members on one platform as an easy engagement. The EU Regional Strategy Papers (RSP) for 2007 and 2014 have shown that regional integration programmes are a core objective for SAARC, along with ASEAN. The majority of EU trade is traded via maritime routes that provide interest in the Indo-Pacific, and security is also of concern. Recently, the Union expressed its attention to its involvement in conflict resolution with South Asian countries. The EU is an expert entity in trade and security secured by NATO, which can provide expertise to resolve security-related challenges and conflicts in South Asia so that a peaceful trade environment can be enriched. There are also non-traditional security challenges in South Asia in the context of climate change and global warming, and the whole region is facing the problem of an unwanted and unexpected climate crisis. In recent years, South Asia has experienced intense rainfall, heat waves, resulting flooding, cyclonic winds,

storm surges, etc. South Asia is one of the most significant in both traditional and non-traditional security aspects, which provides a market opportunity (Bharti, 2020).

5. The EU's Doctrine and Democracy Promotion Initiatives

The EU adopted a strategy paper in 1994 under the title “Towards a New Asia Strategy” that mainly focused on open access to the market and trade, with special emphasis on expanding and deepening its political and economic relations. 1994 Strategy Paper: one of the fourth objectives was “to contribute to the development and consolidation of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and fundamental freedom (application of core European values and norms)⁴ in South Asia” (European Commission, 1994). Under this document, few countries in Asia were involved in consolidating democracy and promoting human rights, and support was provided for diversified areas such as elections, NGOs, free media, vulnerable groups’ information, and sensitive human rights. But South Asia was not a top priority, except for India.

The European Union approved the 2001 revised Asia Strategy (Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership 2001), and it was the first paper that was concerned about the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. It was almost based on a 1994 document but with more comprehensive and clear objectives for the development of cooperation policy and recognition of regional diversity. The 2001 revised Asia Strategy was once again chosen as the fourth objective out of six that mentioned “contribute to the spread of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law and protection of human rights” (European Commission, 2001). The paper emphasised the strengthening of the EU’s political and economic presence in the region. It specifically mentioned ‘actively supporting efforts towards strengthening governance and participation of civil society concerning Pakistan.’ At that time, the EU was continuously encouraged via any opening towards democracy. The document also recognised threats to regional stability and ethnic conflicts, especially in Afghanistan and Sri

⁴ The EU and its member states have the common values and norms follows and aspire for all the policies, which is available at <https://ec.europa.eu/component-library/eu/about/eu-values/>.

Lanka, posed by terrorism and religious fundamentalism. The EU showed its concern and established political and policy dialogues with key countries.

After the 2001 Strategy Paper, the programme moved from bilateral to multi-country in 2005 and introduced the new “Strategy Paper and Indicative Programme for Multi-Country Programmes in Asia 2005-06”. This programme is specially focused on addressing sub-regions (EU defines) notably SAARC. Once again, similar objectives were repeated in the 2001 paper for the promotion of democracy, good governance, and human rights. This paper was implemented for 2005–2006 with involvement in political, economic, and social affairs. In the 2005–2006 paper, the main focus was poverty and the implementation of trade liberalization. The special focus was on poverty, migration, and human drug trafficking. 11 action plans were adopted under the “Integrated Programme of Action,” and the paper also recognised the world’s most difficult political crisis: the conflict between India and Pakistan, the Maoist armed insurgencies in Nepal, the civil war in Sri Lanka, as well as ethno-religious insurgencies in Afghanistan. The EU was interested in supporting the resolution of the above political tensions (European Commission, 2005).

However, the European Union adopted the long-cycle RSP under the title “Regional Programming for Asia: Strategy Document 2007-2013” and was focused on regional cooperation, and South Asia (SAARC) was one of the key dialogue partners along with ASEAN. Although ALA regulation was replaced with the Instrument for Development Corporation (DCI) and was incorporated with the regional strategy programme for Asia in 2007. The strategy document for 2007–2013 concerned the protection of human rights and indigenous peoples. It was considered an unstable region in terms of large refugee and migratory flows, the risk of nuclear proliferation, a lack of respect for human rights, security challenges, and the fragility of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (European Commission, 2007). The RSP included three areas of engagement priorities, including cross-cutting issues such as the promotion of human rights, gender equality, the rights of children and indigenous peoples, and democracy. Under the DCI, an indicative budget of almost 775 million euros was allocated for regional assistance for Asia.

In 2014, the European Union updated and revised its Regional Strategy Paper (RSP) and adopted “Regional Programming for Asia: Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014-2020. RSP 2014–2020 has been taken as a key priority towards fostering peace, security, and stability. Thematic budget is covered under DCI as “Humanitarian Assistance, the Partnership Instrument; the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights; the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace; and, to a lesser extent, the Instrument for Nuclear Safety Cooperation” (European Commission, 2014). The EU approved the “Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027,” and heading 6 mentioned ‘Neighbourhood and the World’. The seven-year budget is followed by a mid-term review and upholds fundamental values including democracy, human rights, peace, and stability. Globally, the EIDHR focused on democracy and human rights promotion with a thematic budget of 1.3 billion euros. The new strategy paper for South Asia is still under discussion (Velina, 2019).

6. The EU’s Democracy Promotion Engagement in South Asia

The EU has chosen a ‘bottom-up’ approach to promoting democracy and human rights in South Asia that was delivered through the participation of civil society and NGOs. These were the main recipients of the EU’s assistance. The impact was seen in the region as the role of civil society increased significantly, which has been debatable among scholars and policymakers. The democratic model and regionalism of the EU are often discussed and referred to in South Asia as a more accountable institution to the people. The promotion of democracy in the region was recognised as part of a ‘peace strategy’, with a focus on the inherent benefits of fostering socio-economic development and promoting human rights. Development cooperation and assistance programmes, bilateral political dialogue, and trade negotiation have been used as instrumental tools that have been applied through EIDHR funding in South Asia. The European Commission was taken into account by the European Union Election Observation Mission (EOM), which was first deployed in October 2001 to observe the general election in Bangladesh (Khatri, 2009).

Similarly, in Bangladesh, the European Commission identified six core areas of engagement, which include capacity building to consolidate good governance and the rule of

law. The Commission provided support for electoral reform, election observation, and the training of lawyers. The success of the EU was achieved in Bangladesh by participating in the Preparation of Electoral Roll with Photographs (PERP), which was completed in 2008. More than 80 million voters registered scientifically under a programme run by the Commission and contributed 15 million euros. Reliable conditions were created through the role of the EOM and helped to lift the 'State of Emergency' just two weeks before the day of the national election's polling day (Khatri, 2009).

Belal (2015) highlights in his research that members of the local civil society perceived the implications of the EU's neoliberal democracy support programme in Bangladesh. Political dialogue has been a key priority with government executives and opposition leaders in Bangladesh. The EU provided democracy assistance to Bangladesh in the following terms: 1) 100 million euros for 1999-2001 to support the 'governance and institution building' as development cooperation; 2) 560 million euros allocated for 2002-2006 to 'promotion of democracy and human rights' along with other engagement areas; 3) a total sum of 403 million euros provided to address 'governance and human rights' with the other two focal areas and comply with the MDGs during 2007-2013; and 4) the MIP 2014-2020 focused on three priority sectors along with strengthening democratic governance and a total of 690 million euros dedicated (Syed Belal, 2015). In 2019, the Joint Commission of the EU and Bangladesh Joint Commission committed and reviewed political developments from both sides in their 9th session. The session also discussed the strengthened role of democracy, the rule of law, and good governance, as well as the importance of holding a free and fair election, and Bangladesh reiterated its 'zero tolerance' policy in the context of accountability, violations of the law, and human rights (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

In Nepal, three major areas of engagement identified as being involved by the EU with national stakeholders and the international community collaborated for citizen action, and they were: 1) democracy and human rights; 2) empowerment of marginalised groups, e.g., women; and 3) Dalit and collective rights for excluded groups. Between 2002 and 2006, the EU provided 10 million euros for the democracy assistance programme in Nepal. After the successful restoration of democracy in 2008, the EU revised its priorities in Nepal through peacebuilding,

education, and consolidation of democracy as the support areas for 2007–2013. Nepal became the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal on May 28, 2008, after the end of 240 years of monarchy. The EU opened its full delegation to Nepal in 2010 and allocated 120 euros in aid under the 2007-2013 country strategy paper (Jain, 2009, 2015; Khatri, 2009; Furness, 2014; Limbu, 2020).

In addition, the 'Election Support Programme' was launched in 2015 to improve the capacity of the Election Commission and other stakeholders to plan, train, educate, and participate in gender-neutral and peaceful elections. The EU supported its aid through two large programmes: 1) a contribution to the Nepal Peacebuilding Trust Fund (NPTF) and 2) an education budget support programme. The EU's MIP 2014-2020 highlights its support for post-conflict Nepal in sustainable rural development, education, and strengthening democracy and decentralisation. The indicative allocation total of 74 million euros from the EU was provided for strengthening democracy during 2014–2020. In 2019, the “Federalism Support in Nepal” programme adopted a two-way approach: 1) building the capacity of institutions and people through the ‘Provincial and Local Governance Support Programme’ (PLGSP); and 2) fiscal decentralisation through the ‘Integrated Public Finance Management Reform Programme’ (IPFMRP), with 32.35 million euros supported for it (Government of Nepal, 2014; European Commission, 2015, 2021b).

In Pakistan, the European Union favoured a partnership approach to supporting the democracy-building process. Then the EU became part of the ‘Friends of Pakistan Forum’, which was launched in September 2008. Since then, the EU has continued to support the Government of Pakistan in its effort to consolidate democracy. The EU supported micro-projects due to the security threat posed by terrorism. The EIDHR financial allocation was supported by a micro-project with 2,715,000 euros in Pakistan during 2002–2006. The Union’s EOM supported the February 2008 election, which helped to increase public confidence in democracy in the country. Abbasi (2009) argued that there is a fragile democracy in Pakistan that requires support and assistance from international actors, which can help establish a strong foundation and strengthen state institutions. It can also help to overcome the threat of terrorism and fundamental extremism in the country. In this regard, the EU can play a significant role in

Pakistan. The role of the EU can be seen in the areas of good governance, strengthening civil society, and democratic electoral processes (Abbasi, 2009; Khatri, 2009).

On June 1, 2021, the Joint Commission of the European Union and Pakistan took place via video conferencing on “Democracy, Governance, Rule of Law, and Human Rights,” and the “EU reaffirmed its commitment to the promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms with respect to religious freedom and belief (EEAS, 2021). The European Union EOMs initiatives undertaken in the following years in South Asia: Bangladesh (2008, 2014, and 2018), Bhutan (2008, 2013 and 2018), Nepal (2008), Pakistan (2002, 2008, 2013 and July 2018), Sri Lanka (2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020), and Afghanistan (presidential election 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019) (European Commission, 2008b; Dupont, Torcoli and Bargiacchi, 2010; Jain, 2015).

In Bhutan, the political system changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 2008. The first National Assembly elections took place on March 24, 2008, and the European Union participated after an invitation from the Royal Government of Bhutan. The EU-EOM observed this election and ensured the electoral process met international standards. At that time, the Chief Observer was Javier Pomes from EU-EOM, a Member of the European Parliament, and six core teams and nine long-term observers were appointed from 13 Member States. So, the observation was carried out in all 20 districts for 8 weeks (EUEOM, 2008; European Commission, 2008a).

Currently, the EU supports Bhutan through the Annual Action Programme, which was launched in 2020. The Union supports the extent of the “Action Document for Promoting Good Governance: Support to Civil Society and Bhutanese Parliament Engagement with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)”. The Action programme contributes to improving access to information, transparency, and accountability. However, the main aim is to improve and strengthen the capacity of civil societies to engage them in sustainable development and good governance. The EU reports say that the action programme is part of MIP 2014-2020, and its main purpose is to contribute to “Democracy and decentralisation strengthened,” which is a target of the key national result of Bhutan under the five-year plan (2018-2023) adopted by the government.

European aid is funded under the DCI for a cycle of 2014–2020 to Bhutan, and the amount of 42 million euros is included in the development policy (European Commission, 2019).

The 9th Annual Consultations between the European Union and Bhutan took place on December 15, 2020, and the priorities focused on the EU-Bhutan partnership under the MFF 2021-2027 on three thematic areas: climate change, good governance, socio-economic development, and recovery from COVID-19 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). But in the case of Afghanistan, the EU funded the project “Support of Enhanced Sustainability and Electoral Integrity in Afghanistan (PROSES)” to support electoral intuitions in the country. The project was implemented to support the election cycle concerning the parliamentary and district elections in October 2018 and the presidential and provincial elections in April 2019 (PROSES, 2021). However, the EU supported its long-term commitment to support peace, security, and prosperity, and more than 4 billion euros in development aid has been provided since 2002. Under the MIP 2014–2020, the EU focused on three priority sectors: peace, stability, and democracy. (European Commission, 2021a).

However, the latest press release on behalf of the EU declared that the negotiation process has been offered to the Taliban for the guarantee of security and peaceful coexistence. The EU committed its support to the people of Afghanistan towards democracy, good governance, human rights, and development in the country, as well as counterterrorism (European Council, 2021). The European Union foreign ministers agreed to the talks and engaged with the Taliban, but formally stepped down to recognise the new government. Josep Borrell, a High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, mentioned that “in order to support the Afghan population, we will have to engage with the new government in Afghanistan, which does not mean recognition; it is an operational engagement.” (Euronews, 2021).

7. The EU's Engagement in South Asia through NGOs and CSOs

The EU's involvement in Sri Lanka was considered a conflict between the EU and the Government of Sri Lanka over an insurgency with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There was a long-standing insurgency in Sri Lanka for a period of 26 years. The EU

and its member states emphasised their own individual relationships with Sri Lanka. The relationship between the EU and Sri Lanka is based on the 1995 Cooperation on Partnership and Development Agreement. Hence, both became partners in trade and economy other than recipients of aid by Sri Lanka. Because the agreement did not cite references to ‘conflict and also included no conditionalities or clauses stipulating the agreement’ in “cases of violations of human rights or a failure to maintain democratic principles”. Due to conflict, the development policy was not properly implemented in the eastern and northern parts of the country. The main point of conflict between the EU and the Sri Lankan government was that the EU stood out with its involvement with the LTTE due to its advocacy of human rights. In 2003, the commissioner for foreign relations met with the LTTE chief Prabhakaran for a discussion on the peace process. The EU-Sri Lanka relations were of a small level of cooperation. The EU cited violence against labour and human rights in Sri Lanka, and the country did not get GSP+ benefits between 2008 and 2013. The GSP+ was renewed in 2015⁵ and Sri Lanka started receiving benefits in 2017. The EU funded 11 projects in the areas of human rights, democratic participation, and civil society development. The total budget allocated is between 400,000 and 600,000 euros under the EIDHR and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Programme (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2009; European Commission, 2010; Frerks and Dirks, 2017).

Despite the low relations between the EU and Sri Lanka, the EU funded 113 small and medium-sized projects during 2000–2015. It was particularly focused on the areas of human rights, civil society, and democracy promotion, with a focus on conflict prevention and resolution, civilian peacebuilding, peace, and security, as well as support for local and regional NGOs. Frerks and Dirks (2017) found in an interview with a local NGO that received funding under the EIDHR that this mainly works for human rights and advocacy. They also alleged that the Rajapakse government NGO was a ‘tiger’ and tried to force the intervention of NGO intervention in society. The government-controlled media branded the NGO as a terrorist. The following organisations mentioned that working for local NGOs was impossible and limited during the Rajapakse government, especially in northern Sri Lanka: *Platform for Freedom, The*

⁵ More can see at Council of the EU, Council Conclusions on Sri Lanka, Press Release 820/15, 16/11/2015.

Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), French NGO ACTED, and CSO-Local Authorities Action and Partnership Programme (CLAPP). However, in another part of Sri Lanka, positive responses from NGOs were observed. According to a statement by an NGO official, “I implemented seven EU projects. I am happy to work with the EU. They are the main donors here in the north. We did great things with the support of the EU. Without them, I do not think Sri Lanka would develop”⁶ (Frerks and Dirkx, 2017).

In addition to the challenges of working under Rajapakshe, NGOs and CSOs express mainly positive aspects of contributing to the development of democracy and the promotion of human rights in Sri Lanka. Post-conflict in Sri Lanka, there are no such problems found, and stakeholders are also mentioned as having significantly supported the EU's ‘consistent and relevant post-conflict reconstruction and development programme’, especially in conflict-affected areas. In a similar example presented by Jiwan Subedi, who is a Political Affairs Officer at the Delegation of the European Union to Nepal, he mentioned that EU countries played an important role after the post-conflict resolution. Currently, the EU as a whole engages CSOs and NGOs in the democratisation process, rural development, and human rights support. He also mentioned that even in times of global pandemic, the EU is consistently supporting Nepal. Almost 1200 NGOs and CSOs are working in Nepal with the EU’s funds in a wide range of areas.⁷ Former Nepalese Ambassador to Denmark, Yuba Nath Lamsal, also expressed that Europe and Nepal had very old relations, and the European countries have been supporting us in development, democracy development, and human rights support as our important partners.⁸ An international NGO, ‘World Movement for Democracy’, is also a recipient of aid in Nepal and works with several CSOs. The government strictly controls CSO funding because CSOs need to spend 60% of their funding on infrastructure projects or goods and services. Therefore,

⁶ More interview of NGOs officials and representative can see in the report of “Frerks, G. and Dirkx, T., (2016). EU engagement with Sri Lanka. Dealing with wars and governments. Borgh, C. van der, Frerks, G., and Dirkx, T., Findings on EU peacebuilding capabilities in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Honduras, Guatemala and Sri Lanka—A Desk Review. Utrecht: Utrecht University”.

⁷ Lecture delivered at Online NIICE International Conference on “Understanding Nepal’s Foreign Policy” in Session ‘M’, “Nepal-Europe Engagement” on 28 November 2021.

⁸ Lecture delivered at Online NIICE International Conference on “Understanding Nepal’s Foreign Policy” in Session ‘M’ “Nepal-Europe Engagement” on 28 November 2021.

there is limited funding for human rights and democracy initiatives in Nepal that include research, advocacy, and educational programmes (World Movement for Democracy, 2021).

In 2018, the EU funded a three-year project launched by News Network with the cooperation of Udayanakur Seba Sangstha (USS) for ‘Supporting Human Rights Defenders Working Women’s and Girl’s Rights in Bangladesh’. This project aims to protect and promote the rights of girls and women. In the launch programme, there were also representatives of CSOs who extended support under the civil society initiative (Karim, 2018). Similarly, in India, an NGO called ‘Human Rights Law Networks (HRLN)’ is one of the EU-funded organisations that has 28 offices in India, and more than 200 lawyers are working to increase the expansion of constitutional rights in Indian society. HRLN mainly works for initiatives: criminal justice, Dalit rights, defending and defenders, disability rights, emergency and disaster response, environmental justice, HIV/AIDS and positive living rights, labour rights, secularism and peace, women justice, sexual minorities and gender rights, and others (ECCHR, 2021; Human Rights Law Network, 2021). For example, the EU-funded ‘State Level Training of Elected Town Vending Committees (TVC) Members in Delhi’ took place on September 1, 2021.⁹ In general terms, throughout this study, it has been observed that the aid receiver or recipient appreciated the aid donor or provider. So, similar trends are also found here, and most governments, CSOs, NGOs, and other organisations have appreciated the support of the EU. The norms and principles of the EU are matched to the profiles of these organisations. However, academic discussion allows evaluation and criticism of the relationship between the donor and the receiver of the aid.

8. Questions of Credibility and Impactful Promises by the EU

The EU as a diverse donor of aid for democracy promotion initiatives and functioning has been appreciated by stakeholders in South Asia. But there are also critical perspectives on the EU among scholars and governments in South Asia. India has not yet joined the EU's promotion of democracy due to ideological beliefs, and India is not in favour of the imposition

⁹ Information from Facebook wall of Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), available <https://www.facebook.com/SLIC.HRLN/posts/10158053719956716>.

of democracy. For example, former Indian National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon once mentioned that “a people cannot be forced to be free or to practice democracy.”¹⁰ The EU is admired for its ‘bottom-up’ approach, but India believes in the ‘top-down’ approach and democracy based on local norms and values (Kugiel, 2012). It is true that all Eastern leaders do not favour the Western standard of democracy import in South Asia. There are also some other concerns among scholars in academia.

Earlier, Muni (2009) argued that ‘the EU’s commitment to democracy is under strategic pressure and has made compromises with the position of the United States’. The EU has not been seen as a cohesive political entity with its member states committed to the promotion of human rights and democratic values because of its varying degrees among the members. According to the European context, civil society has become robust and vibrant, which leads to assumptions. There is an instrument in relations with South Asian countries that associates conflict with people and their interests. The core objective of the EU’s South Asian assistance package for South Asia is to emphasise poverty alleviation. The EU works with the international community to assist South Asia through spreading awareness, the institutionalisation of democratic norms and practices, which includes at the level of political parties and NGOs, as well as delivering development through good governance (Muni, 2009).

In recent years, the rise of populist governments in Europe has raised a serious question about the credibility of EU liberal democracy promotion initiatives. There is also the question of impactful promise in South Asia, where the EU itself faces challenges regarding populism, Russian aggression and lack of common voice about refugee management. But Cadier and Lequesne (2020) argued that the rise of populist governments has recently even in Western democracies like Sweden and the Netherlands. So, the EU is affected by a key internal political development and is ‘likely to have repercussions on its foreign policy’. Populist governments in the EU have illiberal domestic policies, but they also have the “potential to undermine the EU’s legitimacy, structural power, and resilience-building endeavours.” There are critical views on populist governments in Hungary and Poland regarding the norms of the EU legitimacy of

¹⁰ Mr. Menon delivered his lecture “16th Prem Bhatia Memorial Lecture 2011: India and the Global Scene”, India International Centre, New Delhi, 11 August 2011.

democratic government and rule of law principles. On the other hand, the Polish President advocates for the building of a democratic path in Belarus and requests that the world help them. The populist actor just contests liberal norms in domestic politics and the EU, but they criticise the rhetoric of external actors who contest the international liberal order. Therefore, both authors agree that ‘populist governments weaken the legitimacy of the exporting of democratic governance and the principle of the rule of law and its effectiveness’. So, there is a contrast in the discourse and practices of parties when the populist party used to be in power (Cadier and Lequesne, 2020).

Dempsey argued that European populism erodes the global image of the EU over time, and illiberal policies would affect soft power (Dempsey, 2015). Schmidt (2015) presented a counter-argument that the rise of populist governments in Europe is affecting only national politics, but it is still a problem for the EU. Populism should not only be seen as a negative phenomenon, but it has also given voice to underrepresented groups in society. They have a proper place in the EU because it is an optimistic view (Schmidt, 2015). In the recent decade, there has also been a rise of populist governments in South Asia and a strong power holding. In this discussion, the EU democracy promotion and human rights initiatives also face tough challenges while being implemented in South Asia by national governments. Along with Sri Lanka and Nepal, India also imposed strict regulations on funding CSOs and NGOs. It is true that anti-democratic governments do not admire the involvement of NGOs in society and sue to vote on bank politics. Here, the situation in Central and Eastern Europe and South Asia is the same. The EU governments have imposed tough restrictions on pro-democracy, civil liberties, anti-corruption, and environmental NGOs and CSOs in Croatia, Hungary, and Poland. We are also imposing tough restrictions on foreign funding and publicly destroying their image (Butler, 2017). Despite the populist challenges in the EU and South Asia, the EU is committed to democracy promotion, which is pragmatic, idealistic, and psychological. So, the EU imposes political conditions for trade, exchange, and development assistance to third countries. The EU institutions and member states remain set to promote democracy as a policy priority despite effectiveness, which comes under pessimism (JCMS, 2018).

9. Conclusion

However, the European Union played an important role in democracy promotion in South Asia, where the EU established deep and close ties with India.¹¹ During the violation of human rights in Sri Lanka, the EU imposed the sanction, and they were no longer beneficiaries of the GSP. However, after the end of the civil war, the EU resumed GSP facilitation in Sri Lanka and extended the promise to respect labour laws and human rights in the country. Post-9/11, the EU increased its interest in South Asia, and over the past decade, cooperation has strengthened with not only the Union but also its member states. They repeated their commitment to the Afghan people to guarantee human rights in the Taliban regime, but they would not comprise and recognise the new government on these issues. The EU is closely working with South Asian countries to produce positive promises for promoting democracy, human rights, peace, and stability in the region. There are four main instruments of democracy promotion initiatives in South Asia: 1) political dialogue at the government level; 2) conditionality clauses for trade and aid; 3) capacity building of administrative staff, CSOs, and NGOs; and 4) election observations. However, this study recommends that the EU also increase its engagement at the governance level. This study contributed to important gaps because most of the literature was found in 2009, but new knowledge is needed. The discussion also found that previous literature should have included important strategy papers between the EU and South Asia.

In South Asia, there are some small states; for example, Bhutan and Nepal adopted democratic structures. The diversity is the uniqueness of both countries, not only in terms of culture but also in nature. Federalism and decentralisation are key priority areas in these two countries for the EU. This study recommends that the EU conduct a needs assessment to determine whether a liberal democracy with a full package of federalism and decentralisation would be successful or not. Due to the ethnic diversity of Nepal, the country has already suffered

¹¹ In 2014, India graduated from International Development Assistance so India cannot receive aid. Then the European Union established implementing partners of development cooperation and democracy promotion in developing based on shared values and principles.

long-term insurgencies, and the federal structure can be challenging for the sovereignty of the nation. There is some influence of Chinese culture on the northern side of both countries, and they are closer to India on the eastern side, so this can be more challenging for South Asia. India has always alleged the imposition of moist insurgencies in Nepal and India by China.

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