For the sake of democracy, Europe must get its governance act together, urges new report

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Los Angeles/DNA - Although Europe's place among the world's democracies remains at the top of the heap, the latest research from governance experts warns that the continent is slipping from its lofty perch as the runaway global leader.

According to the report - based on the European Berggruen Governance Index (EBGI), which analyses states' governance performance according to the quality of democracy, government, and lives of citizens - European states' years-long dominance is stagnating. Over time, this could undermine democratic accountability and raise questions about the region's long-term stability.

The findings of the report, titled "*Sustaining and Expanding Europe's High Governance Performance*", show that complacency, what researchers refer to as the "silent killer of governance", is a cause for concern that must be addressed by a renewed focus on bolstering democracy and engaging citizens.

The report was produced by researchers at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), the Los Angeles-based Berggruen Institute, and Berlin's Hertie School.

Europe still leads the way

At first glance, Europe remains the envy of democracies around the world. Overall, Europe dominates the global index's category of "Consolidated Democratic States" with 15 European countries ranked among the top 20. When it comes to the quality of government, the European average is a whopping 56 percent higher than the non-European average, while quality of democracy enjoys a 40 percent lead.

With such high scores, Europe appears well placed for the future. In fact, the 39 European countries surveyed scored almost 78 per cent in the overall assessment of governance, whilst the non-European countries lagged behind at 54 per cent. Though a closer look at Europe from 2000 to 2023 tells a more nuanced story, one that researchers say needs greater attention.

A tale of three factors

Around the world, quality of life has improved almost everywhere, with the provision of public goods increasing in all 39 European states. However, those gains were not matched by Europe's institutions, which have seen state capacity stall and democratic accountability decline since 2010, according to the report.

Although the report shows that this trend of better lives and worsening democratic structures is a global issue, in Europe the problem is more pronounced.

The report found that democratic accountability, or quality of democracy, has come to a global standstill, with many countries, including those in Europe, on the decline. At the same time, even as the quality of government has held steady throughout the world, the fortunes of citizens have improved. In Europe, the increased quality of life mirrors that of non-European countries, but the quality of governance has stalled.

Europe's shifting landscape

To gain a better understanding of Europe's governance fortunes, the report sorted countries into three clusters, or "worlds". The first cluster identified those with strong institutions and high governance performance. The second cluster groups post-communist EU members, along with aspiring and candidate states. The third cluster is composed of Europe's weakest performers of democratic accountability.

Through examining the "worlds" between 2000 and 2023, researchers found what they refer to as a "convergence from below", an upward shift that saw 12 countries move into a higher governance cluster, a discernible improvement. These countries are Albania, Armenia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Italy, Malta, Moldova, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia. But the move was largely the result of better public services, not a stronger democracy, which the report says does not bode well for the future.

The clusters were ranked according to economic, social, technological, and climate factors. Research

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shows that the top cluster is best placed to deal with future challenges in the decades to come. While the findings show that quality of life alone cannot ensure the democratic accountability and state capacity provided by robust institutions, the report details how the allure of EU membership does result in reforms among accession countries that help fuel governance progress.

Estonia as an example of a success story

Among the success stories, the report highlights Estonia, which was able to combine EU accession, fiscal discipline, low corruption, and extensive digital government, all key governance indicators, to move into the top cluster of countries.

By comparison, Greece was an example of what the report called a “distinctly European pathway of decline”, whose weakened state capacity and democratic accountability have been undermined by economic crisis and external conditionality brought on by loans, austerity measures, and forced reforms.

The report also outlines how the increase in the provision of public goods is not always domestically driven. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans have partially relied on funding from Brussels, while other parts of Europe have amassed debt to improve quality of life, which can lead to limited growth among poorer countries.

Strengthening the weakest links

The authors make it clear that while Europe has succeeded at boosting the quality of life through better provision of public goods, it has struggled to maintain democratic accountability and sustain a high level of state capacity needed to navigate the decades ahead.

To begin addressing the governance gap that exists between Europe’s core and peripheral countries, in addition to administrative reform and democratic renewal, the report recommends that building a stronger democracy depends on social accountability, an area largely beyond EU influence.

Specifically, researchers point to attacks on freedom of the press and a shrinking civil society as greater threats to democratic accountability than “rigged elections or captured courts”. In their view, media pluralism and civic space need to be treated as “governance infrastructure” to not only help “reinvigorate democracy and make citizens feel that they are represented”, but also to prevent the “silent killer” of complacency from taking hold.

The full report, “European Berggruen Governance Index - Sustaining and Expanding Europe’s High Governance Performance” can be viewed and downloaded from the website of the UCLA's Luskin School.

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Caption: Three worlds of governance in Europe: The new report, based on the Berggruen Governance Index (BGI) 2026, divides the European countries analysed into three groups. These are "Consolidated European Democracies", "EU Convergence States" and "Peripheral European States". (Infographic: Factstory for DNA)

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