

# European democracy needs to win back the trust of its citizens

## European Forum Alpbach 2024 Democracy Track Report

### Introduction

Europe Jacques Delors attended the [European Forum Alpbach 2024](#) (EFA24), as one of the four track reporting partners. The Austrian think tank KONTEXT followed the climate track; the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES) examined the security track; and Bruegel reported on the finance and economy track.

Our colleagues at Europe Jacques Delors attended the sessions in the democracy and the rule of law track. The different sessions covered a broad range of topics within the two track themes “Countering Polarisation and Strengthening Social Cohesion” and “Building Democratic Resilience During and Beyond a Historical Election Year”.

Based on the exchanges and discussions, our analysts wrote three different blog posts, which pick up recurring aspects discussed in the different sessions. While they are only a limited reflection of the broader conversations had during the European Forum Alpbach, they link together some of the issues mentioned: polarisation, democratic backsliding, the effects of the far right on other policy fields, such as climate policy, as well as the future of European democracy and possible EU Treaty reform.

- Democracy in the climate crisis: Can our political systems meet the challenge?  
Sophia Caiati
- Restoring trust in democracy amidst an uncertain future, Helena van Thiel
- Reinvigorating democracy: Strategies for a stronger EU, Sophie Pornschlegel



## Democracy in the climate crisis: Can our political systems meet the challenge?

**Sophia Caiati, Policy Analyst**

What is the relationship between democracy and the green transition? This blog post examines some of the current challenges posed to the EU's Green Deal amidst the surge of far-right parties. To ensure that we reach the climate neutrality goals, the EU and its member states will have to uphold democratic principles and build resilience against political backlash.

The latest [assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) had a very clear message: Our window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future on this planet is rapidly closing and urgent action to reduce GHG emissions is needed now. This common sense of urgency and the need to address climate change through a holistic and global approach was shared among many participants of the European Forum Alpbach.

Speakers also discussed how to best respond to current and future challenges facing Europe and agreed that increased resilience, cooperation and rejuvenating trust in European democracy are essential to help navigate political fragmentation and uncertainties in the long term. As one of the panelists noted: “The EU is good at responding to successive crises with successive answers and it will be able to do so in the future.”

Indeed, amidst the climate crisis unfolding, the EU has undergone a myriad of crises in recent years: the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy and cost-of-living crisis, the food crisis, Brexit, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and migration pressures. With [the European Green Deal](#), the Commission acknowledged that the EU should play a major role in addressing the planetary crisis and established an ambitious roadmap to ensure net zero emissions by 2050, making Europe the world’s first climate-neutral continent. At the same time, participants of EFA24 highlighted that political debates - including around climate change - have become increasingly [politicised, polarised and contested](#).

This polycrisis, characterised by interrelated economic, social, political, health and geopolitical emergencies all unfolding at the same time, has increased citizens’ frustrations with politics, and also led to a rise of far-right populists giving simple answers to complex problems. In recent years, far-right forces have made substantial gains in many member states, including eurosceptic parties like the Alternative for Germany, the French National Rally, the Italian Lega or Austria’s Freedom Party. In the recent European Parliament elections, the nationalist and far-right parties won a fair amount of seats, making it difficult to construct majorities in the EP, especially on contentious issues such as green policies. Opposing the European Green Deal – and environmental and climate-related policies more broadly – has become a defining feature of right-wing populists, undermining progress on green legislation and posing a challenge to democracy in Europe and beyond.

A growing presence of far-right politicians in the European Parliament and across member states means [more fragmentation, more polarisation and more radical and Eurosceptic narratives](#). Due to this, the Green Deal’s ambition and implementation faces significant challenges. Debates surrounding the EU’s climate and environmental policy are increasingly instrumentalised by far-right groups, depicting the green transition and its economic costs as a burden for European citizens, consumers, farmers and businesses. The recurring farmer protests across Europe over the past few years is just one of many examples where far-right and populist parties have successfully exploited public anger and fears to fuel further political polarisation.

On several occasions, speakers at EFA24 emphasized that EU politics are not immune to threats from populist and right-wing extremism. “We are facing active hostility towards our democratic systems,” putting the future of the green transition and democracy itself

at risk. Therefore, the EU should [embrace political leadership to uphold its common democratic values against illiberal politics](#), build up resilience and most importantly, accelerate Europe's green transition instead of relegating the European Green Deal to the sidelines.

### **Amidst the polycrisis, Europe needs to be a firefighter and an architect at the same time**

This double issue of tackling growing societal fragmentation and defending the EU's democratic values was a recurring theme at the European Alpbach Forum. During the discussions, a broad consensus emerged, which recognised that building democratic resilience, finding common ground and defending Europe's core and foundational values is essential to address the EU's multiple challenges.



EU decision-makers and member states must work together to find new strategies and tactics to operate in times of political uncertainty. As Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission and fierce proponent of European integration, once said: [“\*In Europe, you need the firefighter but also the architect.\*”](#)

Particularly to tackle the climate crisis, the EU will have to both counter the political backlash while maintaining momentum for climate politics. This will not be an easy task, as the climate crisis brings such transformative social, economic and political changes

that it will put democracy under pressure. For this reason, the EU needs to strengthen its democratic resilience to better navigate the far-right surge. Overcoming polarisation and reaching consensus on climate and environmental policies will also require cooperation and more room for negotiation and dialogue - as experienced at the European Forum Alpbach.

## Restoring trust in democracy amidst an uncertain future

Helena van Thiel, Programme Assistant

Trust is a foundational element for democracies. Without trust of citizens in electoral processes, democratic institutions and political parties, democracies cannot function. But even further, democracies require a certain amount of trust of citizens in each other - which allows for social cohesion. During the European Forum Alpbach, different scenarios for the future of democracy were discussed, based on different types of trust and citizens' role in democracy.

As anti-democratic forces emerge and gain strength all across the globe, the question arises of what this means for the future of democracy. Is the world experiencing a period of global democratic backsliding? If so, is this merely a phase in a cyclical pattern of democratic rise and decline, or the beginning of the end of democracy as a political system?

Discussions at EFA24 highlighted both threats and opportunities in light of emerging technologies, novel modes of governance and new citizen movements. Positions ranged from rather pessimistic outlooks on the resilience of the rule of law, to hopeful perspectives on the potential of citizen initiatives to reinvigorate democratic participation.

Independently of the future outlook on democracy, a recurring theme was trust - and the lack thereof. The erosion of citizens' trust in governments, political parties and generally democratic institutions is a driver of democratic backsliding and the rise of far-right populism. This erosion is predicted to continue as a result of an increasing spread of disinformation, accelerated by the development of artificial intelligence. These discussions on trust echo findings of a recent [report on the global state of democracy](#), which highlights the importance of citizens' trust in institutions for democratic stability. In the "super election year" 2024, this issue has found particular resonance, as trust can influence [everything from voter turnout to the acceptance and legitimacy of election results](#).

### **From a "McMafia" to a cooperative approach: Three scenarios on the future of democracy**

Faced with the question "What will democracy look like in 2100?", speakers at the European Forum Alpbach presented three differing future scenarios.

The pessimist scenario told a story of unregulated neoliberal capitalism further accentuating socio-economic inequalities. Simultaneously, the new oligarchs of Silicon Valley accumulate wealth and political power, build alliances with autocratic forces, and use their platforms to accelerate the spread of disinformation. Both growing inequality

and the spread of disinformation drive the rise of autocratic governments, cementing the demise of democracy by the end of the century.

This “McMafia” scenario highlights first the threat that socio-economic inequality poses to democratic systems. It points to how citizens’ trust in democratic systems depends on the ability of governments to provide guarantees of fundamental freedoms and civil liberties as well as socio-economic security. This notion underlies what was a recurring argument across sessions at EFA24, namely that democratic forces should counter far-right and populist narratives with tangible solutions to citizens’ – notably economic – concerns. Addressing such concerns would reduce the appeal of far-right narratives and the political polarisation they breed.

This pessimist scenario also describes how the control over information, concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few, endangers democracies. This mirrors arguments raised in other discussions on the role of disinformation and harmful uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in undermining trust in democratic institutions. Without explicitly discussing trust, the pessimist scenario therefore attaches central importance to it: The impacts of both socio-economic inequality and disinformation on the viability of democracy work through their effect on citizens’ trust in democratic institutions and actors.

The optimist scenario took a different angle in conceptualising both democracy and trust. Looking less at who holds political power and what they do with it, it focuses instead on how democratic societies can be built from “below”. This scenario argued that interpersonal trust and people’s sense of belonging to a community are the foundations of democracy. The scenario’s case for optimism is built on the assumption that humans by nature look for such connections to a community and thereby are made to build and maintain democratic societies.

The notion of mobilising cooperative, community-oriented elements of human nature to strengthen democracy was addressed in another session in Alpbach on building democratic resilience. The importance of citizens’ sense of belonging to a community, was an even more prominent concept, raised in various sessions. To counter far-right narratives, for instance, participants argued that besides socio-economic realities, democratic parties must also address societal marginalisation, a key driver of radicalisation and political violence. In line with [literature on democratic resilience](#), discussions on democratic backsliding identified a sense of community as a crucial element to ensure people’s sense of ownership over their political system and mobilise them to actively defend democracy against autocratic tendencies. Compared to many of the current discussions on the role of trust in democracy as outlined above, a distinctive element of this understanding is the importance accorded to citizens’ trust not just in institutions, but in one another.

Finally, between the demise of democracy at the hands of the wealthy and its trust-based grassroots rebuilding, the third scenario was more “middle way”. It foresees the world “muddling through middletopia”, with a persistent coexistence between democracies and autocracies. The scenario describes an inevitable, cyclical rise and decline of democracies as societies respond in different ways to emerging challenges. A specific emphasis is placed in this scenario on people’s feelings of loneliness and alienation, which other speakers in Alpbach had equally identified as key drivers of societal polarisation.

The “middle way” scenario, however, also proposes means by which societies striving for more democracy can rebuild trust. Echoing the optimist scenario, it argues that human nature makes people yearn for personal connections and a sense of belonging to a community. To build this sense of belonging and counter distrust and polarisation, the scenario emphasises the need to address the right topics in political and societal debates. Citizens should be discussing the human dimension of their coexistence and the values that bring them together, turning away from debates on material factors. Like the optimist scenario, this argument highlights the importance of how citizens perceive and shape their own role in democratic systems as well as how they relate to one another.





## **Conclusion: Restoring both institutional and interpersonal trust in democracy**

Despite varying predictions for the future, the proposed scenarios share the assumption that trust is the foundation on which democracies are built. The erosion of this trust therefore poses a significant threat to democratic systems. An important distinction to make is that trust is not only trust in the institutions but also between citizens. For those seeking to safeguard democracy and protect it from autocratic tendencies, the question therefore is how decision-makers can strengthen both institutional and interpersonal trust. In particular, promoting spaces where civil society actors and citizens can come together initiate dialogue, and begin building trust-based relations seems essential.

## **Reinvigorating democracy: Strategies for a stronger EU**

**Sophie Pornschlegel, Deputy Director**

As the European Union (EU) faces multiple challenges and crises, the discourse surrounding its future increasingly centres around the nature of its governance structure and its democratic fabric. The crisis of democracy in the 27 member states inevitably is reflected at the EU level, with increased contestation and politicisation of decisions taken by the EU.

While the institutional set-up can be considered democratic, the relatively low engagement in EU elections, weak European political parties and a fragmented European public sphere make the EU still subject to discussions around its “democratic deficit”. On top of this “unfinished” political system, EU democracy has also come under strain with two developments. First, the far-right forces gaining ground threaten the EU as a political system but also the democratic fabric in the member states. Second, the rise of foreign interference and online disinformation has reinforced anti-European narratives in the media and on digital platforms.

During the discussions at European Forum Alpbach, several approaches were put forward to counter democratic backsliding in the EU while reviving EU democracy. The following blog post puts together these suggestions, from improved participatory mechanisms to reforms.

### **Bridging the disconnect between decision-making and citizens through participative formats**

Democracy does not solely hinge on strong institutions; it also relies on the active participation of its citizens. In an attempt to improve citizen participation, the Conference on the Future of Europe was organised in the last mandate, with mixed results. This dialogue format was criticised for being merely a communication exercise for the institutions, rather than a true attempt at participatory democracy in the EU. While strategies to improve communications are essential to inform EU citizens, they are not the same as true participatory democracy, where citizens share power and decisions with the other institutions, such as the European Parliament.

Despite the limitations of this first exercise, it has shown that EU decision-makers have understood that citizens need to be better included in decision-making outside of elections; and that it would help reflect the diverse perspectives within the Union. As a result, citizens’ assemblies have emerged as a promising mechanism for deeper engagement which are likely to continue in the new mandate. However, without a robust

public sphere, the effectiveness of these assemblies risks becoming mere window dressing, leading to continued feelings of disenfranchisement.

### **Safeguarding democratic standards in the EU**

Populists have a “thin” definition of democracy [according to Jan-Werner Müller](#), which means that elections are seen as the only true factor to count in democracy. Other areas - such as media freedom, party pluralism, an independent civil society and the separation of powers with an independent judiciary are seen as secondary. However, these factors play a hugely important role to ensure resilient democracies across the EU.

This is why the EU will have to better safeguard the basic values enshrined in Article 2 TEU, for instance by widening the use of the rule of law conditionality mechanism and being systematic with infringement procedures when member states do not comply with EU law. Additionally the EU should continue on its pathway to counter disinformation and foreign interference, without shrinking the space for independent civil society within the EU that works to keep democratic standards. The same holds for the EU’s endeavours to strengthen media pluralism, for instance with the European Media Freedom Act.

### **Investing in civic education and media literacy**

Strengthening democracy at the citizens and grassroots level is essential to foster a renewed sense of ownership and responsibility for citizens. The British riots in August 2024 were fueled by misinformation and illustrate the dangerous consequences of a misinformed electorate.

Civic education and media literacy programmes play a pivotal role in this process. They help to equip citizens with the tools necessary to engage in difficult conversations and navigate conflicts in a non-violent way. In addition, they would allow citizens to discern reliable information sources. Civic education remains a controversial topic, especially as governments and citizens in Central and Eastern Europe have in mind the former Communist countries “state education” programmes, which dictated what they should believe. However, programmes encouraging a more nuanced appreciation of democratic principles among citizens and strengthening their critical thinking would be useful.

Targeted programmes for young people can also help cultivate a generation of informed citizens who value diverse perspectives and engage in constructive debates. Lifelong learning initiatives can further ensure that all demographic groups feel included in the democratic process.

## **EU Treaty reforms vs. incremental steps**

Another widely discussed issue was the possibility of Treaty reforms in the coming years. While Germany and France seemed rather inclined, and the European Parliament having published its Art. 48 report, the political context seems not propice to open a process of Treaty reforms. Despite the lacking political dynamic, two things could be done: First, prepare for Treaty reforms anyway, as sometimes the political window of opportunity can quickly appear. Second, there are several steps that can be taken to improve EU decision-making within the current context of the Treaties. In particular, the decision on the NextGenerationEU package in 2020 was clearly born out of political necessity - and the institutions found a way to make sure that the European Commission could have new borrowing powers on the financial market in order to help member states get out of the Covid-19 economic slump.

Another issue that was discussed during the sessions was the need to reform EU citizenship law. The EU's freedom of movement has allowed EU citizens to move freely from one country to the other - but without necessarily granting them the rights to participate in elections in their country of residence (only for communal elections). This potentially leads to feelings of exclusion and disenfranchisement, especially as in certain countries citizens do not have the same access to voting rights, which are still governed under national laws. These inequalities in terms of voting rights underscore the need for reforms in EU citizenship law, in order to better reflect the realities of a mobile population.

## **Improving and holding accountable national political parties**

Another important topic of discussion was the need for national political parties - in the democratic spectrum - to step up their game. First, these organisations should make sure to better engage and represent certain electorates, especially non-voters and those more likely to vote for the far right. For instance, the German Social-Democrats divested from the German states in the East, whereas the far-right Alternative for Germany made sure to be in marketplaces and to seek proximity with the voters.

Second, the independence of political parties from vested interests was reiterated, especially in view of the Qatargate scandal in the European Parliament. Public funding was seen as critical to allow for a level playing field and truly independent parties, as opposed to reliance on private financing, sometimes also from abroad, with shady links to authoritarian regimes. National political parties need to ensure that their candidates represent the interests of their constituents first and foremost. Finally, the discussants also mentioned that they would prefer to move away from leader-centric models of parties built around certain political figures, and go back to more policy-oriented and ideological cleavages.

## Conclusion: Democracy as a practice

Above anything else, building trust in democratic institutions is paramount for the future of the EU. Citizens must feel an emotional bond to democracy, recognising it as a safeguard for their rights and interests. The fears that drive support for far-right movements often stem from anxieties about the future, particularly regarding economic stability and social cohesion. Addressing these fears through transparent governance and community engagement could help re-establish faith in democratic processes. Another crucial aspect to restore trust will be for decision-makers - both in government and in opposition, at national and at EU level - to propose positive perspectives on the future rather than a defence of the status quo vs. a regressive vision of renewed nationalism.



Democracy in the EU is a unique feature, and remains incomparable to democratic structures at the national level. While this is a known fact, many suggest to reform EU democracy and to transform the EU into a political system based on such national governance models. However, any fundamental changes should take into account the specific nature of the EU's multilevel political system; and keep in mind that the EU's system is directly affected by changes in democratic structures at national level, for the better and for the worse.

Generally, both the EU and its member states should back participatory approaches to engage citizens meaningfully, consolidate and extend instruments that safeguard democracy and invest in civic education and media literacy much more forcefully. This will allow the EU to remain a resilient and responsive political system in the future. This path forward requires collective effort, and most importantly a commitment to viewing democracy not merely as a system of governance but as practice.