ESPAS European Strategy and Policy Analysis System

ESPAS Foresight Papers

What future for democracy in Europe?

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SUMMARY

Democracy is undergoing a global recession, with only a small percentage of the world living in countries that can be described as 'full democracies'. While Europe may still be considered the 'freest region' in the world, it is not immune to this democratic erosion, which occurs largely as a gradual 'hollowing out' rather than an abrupt collapse. After describing current trends in Europe and globally across the key dimensions of democratic quality, this paper takes a systems approach to examine the dynamics of democratic erosion. This approach underscores that democratic decline stems from a complex interplay of underlying conditions such as economic inequality and governance failures, exploited by illiberal actors through various causal pathways. These pathways are centred on the election of leaders who then proceed to hollow out the substantial features of democracy, as well as executive overreach, and societal polarisation – also fuelled by social media and algorithmic amplification. The paper then illustrates key lessons on democratic revival from successful cases of re-democratisation, highlighting key factors – such as the role of a resilient civil society, smart opposition tactics, and sustained efforts to restore democratic norms while addressing societal divisions and delivering tangible outcomes for voters – that are essential for long-term democratic recovery. This is followed by a section drawing attention to the role of narratives and storytelling both to erode and to sustain democracy. Finally, the paper presents a set of strategic choices for the future of democracy in Europe.

Introduction

The first ESPAS Global Trends Report, published in 2012, painted an optimistic picture overall about the future of democracy: driven by the emergence of a global middle class, increased access to education, and the positive impact of the digital revolution, the 'universal spread of human rights and democracy' was seen as a likely outcome, despite the dangers posed by extremism and populism.[1] At that time, however, democracy was already on the back foot. By most counts, **the number of liberal democracies worldwide peaked no later than 2009**.[2] As far back as 2008, US democracy scholar Larry Diamond warned that the world had 'slipped into a democratic recession',[3] as new democracies failed to consolidate, and the quality and stability of democracy declined especially in a relatively small number of strategically important countries.[4] Today, only 6 % of the world's population is estimated to live in a 'full democracy'[5] – down from 8 % at the

time the 2024 ESPAS Global Trends Report was published.[6] The number of autocratic regimes is on the rise, and electoral autocracies in particular account for the largest share of the world's population (46 %).[7]

According to most metrics, Europe is still relatively resilient in the face of democratic erosion. The latest annual report by Freedom House, for example, describes Europe as 'the freest region in the world',[8] and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index 2024[9] comes to a similar conclusion. But even **Europe is not immune to this global trend**, and its democracies face significant challenges from both external influences and internal factors. The 2025 V-Dem report estimates that a gradual democratic decline in Western Europe and North America has taken the region back to levels previously registered in 1983.[10] Europe's democratic practices and values face 'systemic and strategic challenges' from various actors, including foreign authoritarian regimes, and this is especially evident in the significant increase in the number and intensity of hybrid threats aiming to divide and influence European societies.[11]

Democracy deserves protection as a value in itself: indeed, it is one of the foundational values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, as well as part of Europe's common constitutional heritage. **But it also holds instrumental value**. Democracies have been shown empirically to perform better than autocratic regimes across a range of indicators, including the protection of human rights, lower corruption, higher life expectancy, and reduced maternal and infant mortality rates.[12] Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen famously argued that no famine has ever occurred in a democracy,[13] and the theory of democratic peace – the notion that democracies do not fight each other – 'comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations'.[14] Adherence to the **rule of law**, in particular, plays a strong role as a driver of economic prosperity,[15] by promoting innovation and investment.[16] It is also correlated to lower levels of income inequality,[17] even after controlling for GDP per capita. Significantly, however, autocracies are not the worst overall performers: hybrid regimes between democracy and autocracy (so-called 'anocracies') often produce the poorest outcomes[18] – to the point of being at highest risk of civil war.[19]

Whether as an enabler by its presence, or as a threat multiplier by its absence, a genuine democratic revival may profoundly impact our collective **ability to address pressing global challenges** – through government accountability, civic participation, independent media and free information flows, civil society engagement, and institutional learning and innovation. For instance, several studies point to a positive relation between democracy and climate

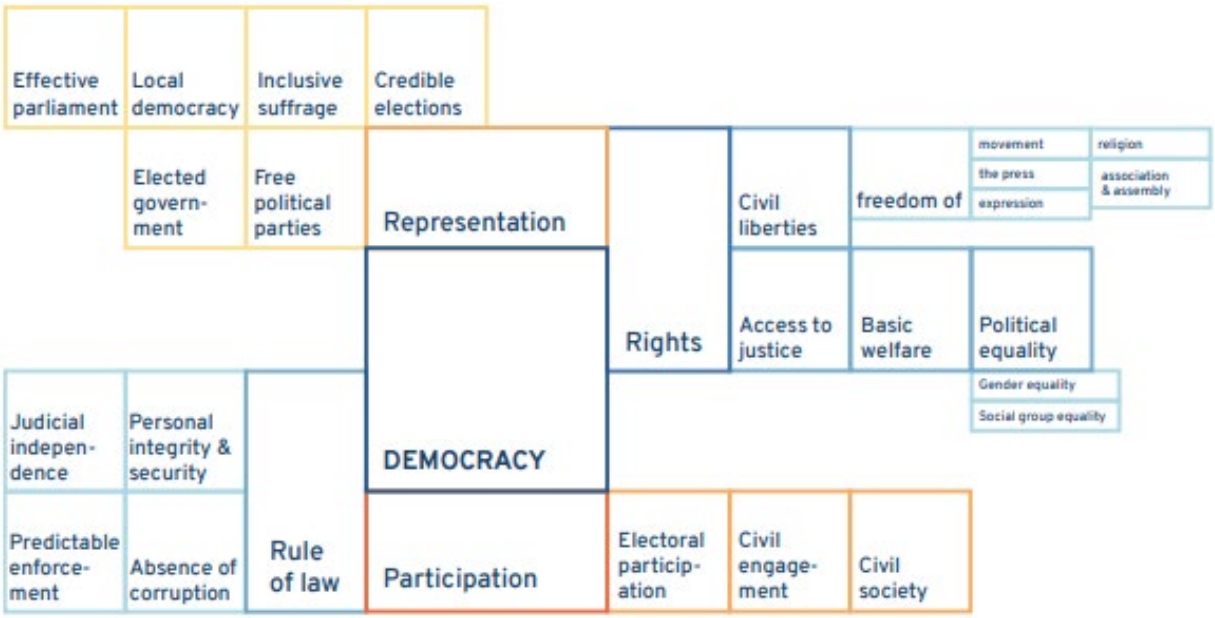
mitigation,[20] and similar claims are often made about democracy's contribution to international development and stability. As highlighted in the European Commission's latest Strategic Foresight Report, democratic robustness is a cornerstone of Europe's long-term resilience.[21] Therefore, understanding and addressing democratic erosion is not merely an academic exercise, but a critical imperative for the future wellbeing and security of Europe and the world.

This ESPAS Foresight Paper seeks to advance this understanding, and to contribute to a continuing line of analysis carried out by ESPAS on this topic ever since its inception. The first section of this paper provides an overview of the **state of democracy in Europe and in the world**, analysing recent trends and examining key indicators – often both symptoms and factors – of democratic health and decline. The following section, on **'how democracy dies'**, explores the dynamics of democratic erosion and backsliding. The third section considers **'how democracy is revived'**, focusing on lessons learned from successful cases of democratic recovery after periods of erosion and backsliding, with the aim of offering insights into effective strategies for democratic revival. The final section acknowledges the crucial role of **narratives and storytelling** in processes of democratic erosion, and proposes constructive approaches for developing more positive counternarratives. This paper concludes with some open questions, as a contribution to future reflections on democracy not only within ESPAS, but also crucially among policymakers and the wider public.

The state of democracy

The share of countries holding regular elections has risen steadily since World War II, with only a slight decrease in recent years. Yet this masks a decline in the number of countries classified as liberal democracies, offset by a rise in electoral democracies – countries with free and fair elections, but weaker protection of other democratic features such as civil liberties or the rule of law – and an even more marked increase in electoral autocracies, where elections are neither free nor fair. As democracy cannot be reduced to elections alone, scholars have developed more comprehensive frameworks to assess its quality. In a seminal work, Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino identified eight key **dimensions of democratic quality**: rule of law, participation, electoral competition, accountability (vertical and horizontal), freedom, equality, and responsiveness. A similar framework employed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) assesses democracy across four aggregate measures: **rule of law, rights, representation, and participation**. The present section employs this simpler

Figure 1 – Key dimensions of democracy

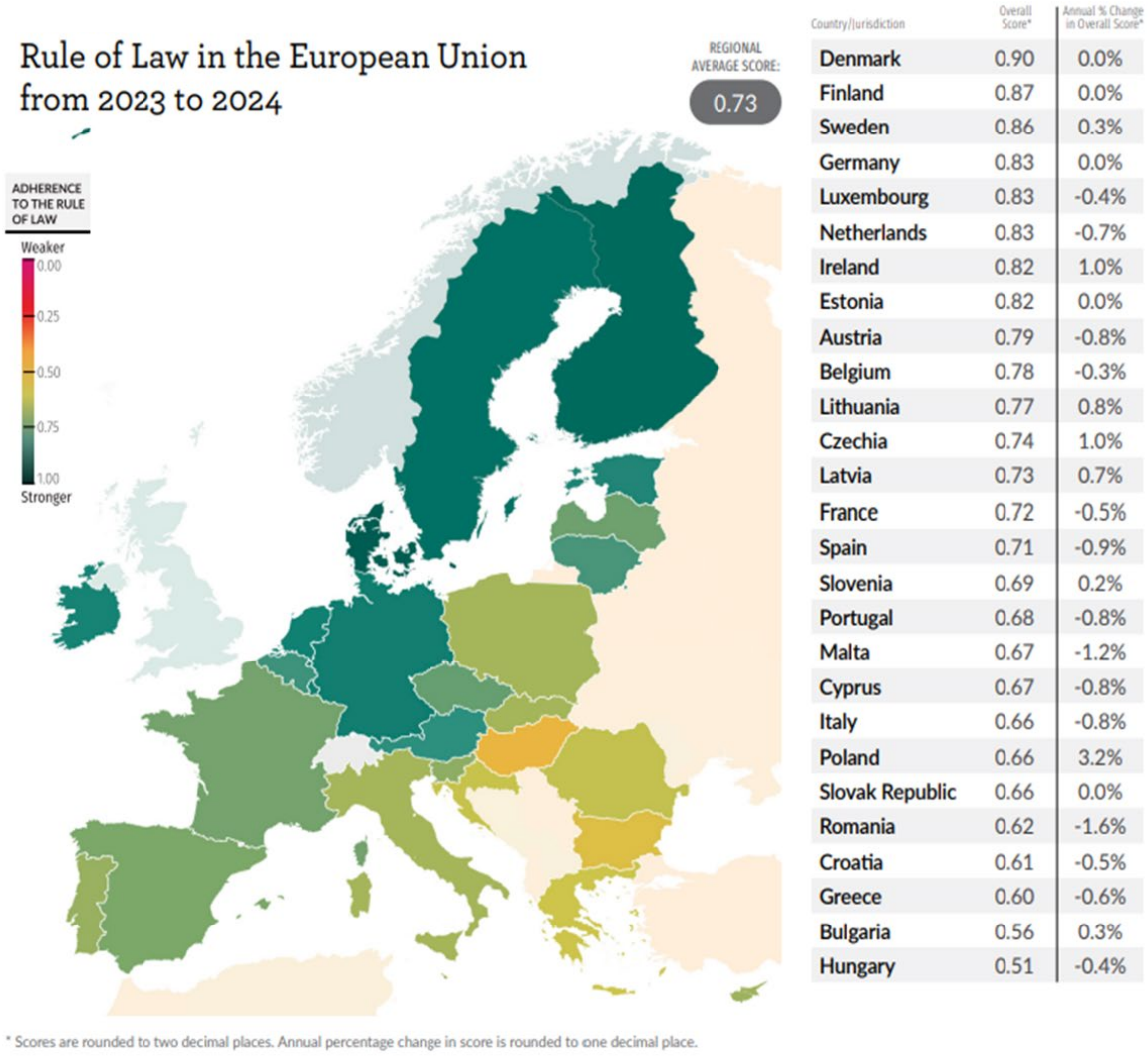


Source: International IDEA, 2023.

framework to provide a more granular picture of current trends and indicators of democratic health, both globally and particularly in Europe.

The **rule of law** is arguably 'the base upon which every other dimension of democratic quality rests', encompassing dimensions such as judicial independence, predictability of legal enforcement, and low levels of corruption and political violence. It is all the more troubling, then, that the rule of law is the democratic feature which has suffered the largest decline in recent years. The Rule of Law Index of the World Justice Project (WJP) shows a global decline over the past decade, which became especially widespread during the Covid-19 pandemic and has continued at a slower rate ever since. Although the European Union remains a stronghold of the rule of law relative to global averages, historical data collected by WJP since 2015 shows an overall decline in at least a third of Member States. This is consistent with the mixed picture painted by the European Commission's annual rule of law reports, which continue to highlight significant shortcomings, despite the progressive implementation of the Commission's recommendations. As higher levels of rule of law are often associated with the ability to change governments through elections, the critical importance of this dimension of democratic governance cannot be overstated.

Figure 2 – Rule of law in the EU from 2023 to 2024



Country/Jurisdiction	Overall Score*	Annual % Change in Overall Score*
Denmark	0.90	0.0%
Finland	0.87	0.0%
Sweden	0.86	0.3%
Germany	0.83	0.0%
Luxembourg	0.83	-0.4%
Netherlands	0.83	-0.7%
Ireland	0.82	1.0%
Estonia	0.82	0.0%
Austria	0.79	-0.8%
Belgium	0.78	-0.3%
Lithuania	0.77	0.8%
Czechia	0.74	1.0%
Latvia	0.73	0.7%
France	0.72	-0.5%
Spain	0.71	-0.9%
Slovenia	0.69	0.2%
Portugal	0.68	-0.8%
Malta	0.67	-1.2%
Cyprus	0.67	-0.8%
Italy	0.66	-0.8%
Poland	0.66	3.2%
Slovak Republic	0.66	0.0%
Romania	0.62	-1.6%
Croatia	0.61	-0.5%
Greece	0.60	-0.6%
Bulgaria	0.56	0.3%
Hungary	0.51	-0.4%

* Scores are rounded to two decimal places. Annual percentage change in score is rounded to one decimal place.

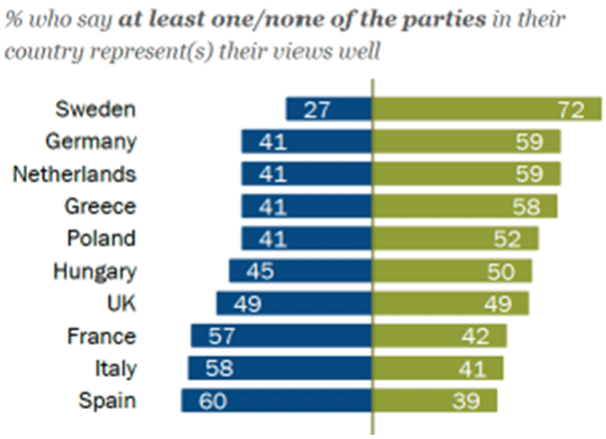
Source: 'Rule of Law Index 2024 Insights', World Justice Project, p. 38.

The dimension of **rights** encompasses civil liberties as well as socio-economic rights, including basic welfare and equality, which may be necessary to allow effective political participation. Global freedom has been in sustained decline for nearly two decades, with Freedom House reporting 19 consecutive years of deterioration by 2024.[22] **Freedom of expression**, in particular, has witnessed the sharpest decline over the last 10 years, deteriorating in almost a quarter of all countries across all regions of the world, while improving in only eight countries.[23] This includes critical aspects such as the safety of journalists, the public's ability to discuss political issues, and freedom of academic and cultural expression. Within the European Union, most Member States are now considered at 'medium risk' for media freedom and pluralism, with few exceptions at both ends of the spectrum.[24] The integrity of

information is further undermined by sensationalised media coverage, coupled with the spread of disinformation and misinformation amplified by digital technology.[25] **Economic equality** is also among the rights that have seen the sharpest decline globally in recent years, according to International IDEA.[26] Within Europe, a 2024 UBS report found that wealth inequality had generally risen in most of Eastern Europe between 2008 and 2023, while the data for Western Europe was more mixed.[27] Further data shows a contraction of the middle class in almost two thirds of Member States between 2007 and 2022.[28]

Representation is an aggregate measure based on essential aspects of democratic governance, such as the presence of free and fair elections, political freedom, parliamentary oversight, and constraints on the executive. In the 2024 electoral year, the global score for representation fell to its lowest level since 2001, despite reporting the strongest performance among the four dimensions tracked by International IDEA.[29] Recent **declines in election fairness and effective parliamentary oversight** are particularly concerning, and they have taken place across all regions, in both low- and high-performing democracies. Understandably, election fairness is especially a problem in 'grey-zone' regimes, situated between electoral democracy and autocracy. But forms of electoral manipulation such as gerrymandering or voter suppression are also a rising concern in advanced democracies, along with undisclosed campaign donations ('dark money'),[30] including from foreign actors. The decline of representation is also marked by the **deterioration of public debate** and 'deliberation' – the extent to which public reasoning is inclusive and respectful of opposition and pluralism, and based on rational argumentation.[31] Finally, it is reflected in a **growing dissatisfaction with traditional party systems**: with few national exceptions, over 40 % of survey respondents in EU Member States reported that they do not feel represented by any political party – and this is especially true for those at the centre of the ideological spectrum.[32]

Figure 3 – Percentage of survey respondents who say none of the parties vs. at least one party in their country represent(s) their views well



Source: Pew Research Center, 2024.

These dimensions of democratic quality are not merely additive, but are rather characterised by overlaps and interdependences – and sometimes trade-offs.[33] In many cases, they can be seen as

both causes and symptoms of a broad trend of democratic decline, both in Europe and globally. They also support the argument that democracy – in most cases and certainly in Europe – is not threatened by antidemocratic forces seeking regime change and abrupt reversals, but rather by a gradual and incremental process of hollowing out:[34] democracy does not die suddenly, but faces a slow agony. The next section examines the specific dynamics of this democratic erosion.

How democracy dies

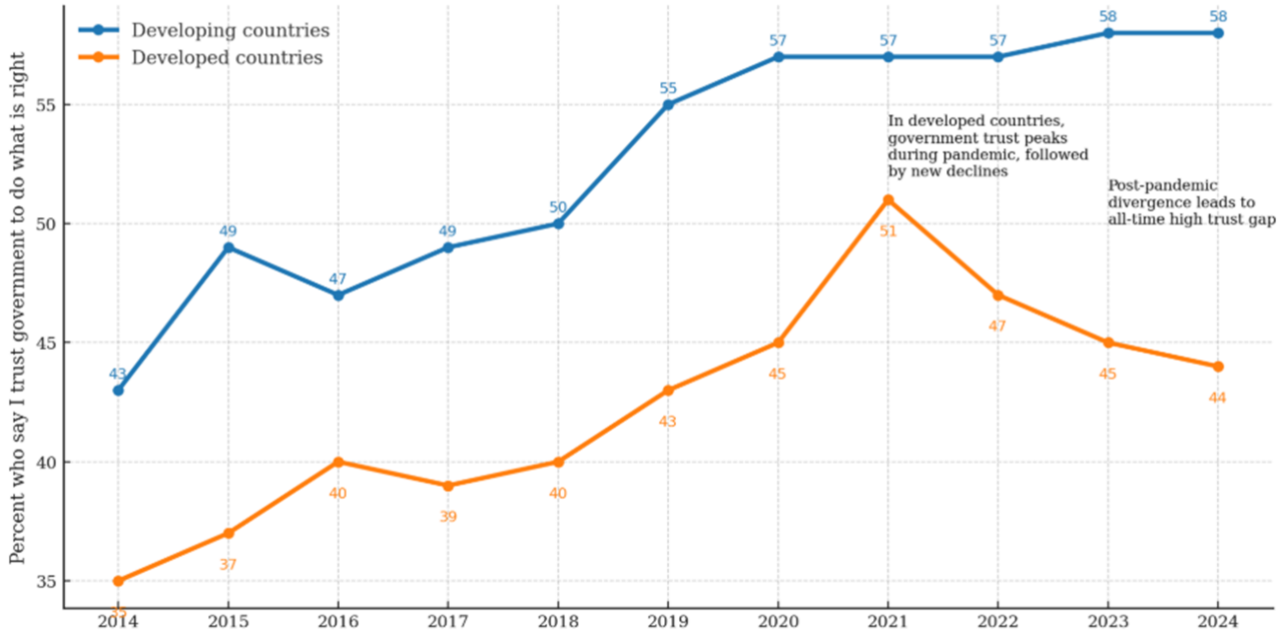
As stated above, many of the symptoms of democratic decline are also part of its causes, which is a sign of the systemic nature of the problem. While a growing body of literature on democratic backsliding[35] has identified a large number of 'core drivers and facilitating factors',[36] a recent contribution by the Lowy Institute[37] goes perhaps further than most in embracing a systemic approach to illustrate the dynamics of democratic erosion, focusing on the interplay of three elements: (1) underlying conditions, that provide opportunities to (2) political actors, who exploit them to further their anti-democratic agendas, through (3) causal pathways that enable these conditions and actors to hollow out democracy.

Figure 4 – Systems map of democratic erosion

Source: Lowy Institute, 2025.

The **conditions** that create fertile ground for democratic erosion in Europe are diverse and interconnected. Strong cross-national evidence points to **rising economic inequality**[38] as a critical factor, for its potential to widen real or perceived gaps in political influence, and to erode public faith in the ability of democratic institutions to deliver tangible outcomes. For example, as far back as 2012 Amartya Sen wrote about a 'crisis of European democracy' engendered by an 'austerity policy, combined with the rigidities of Europe's monetary union (in the absence of fiscal union)', which exacerbated public disaffection and played 'into the hands of extremists on both ends of the political spectrum'.[39] Crucially, economic dissatisfaction is often intertwined with **polarisation**, which populist actors exploit by framing politics as a struggle of 'the pure people' against the elites[40] and directing citizens' anger towards a perceived 'internal enemy', thereby setting the conditions for citizens to justify or overlook a hollowing-out of the substantive elements of democracy.[41] Citizen apathy, disillusionment, and the **normalisation of authoritarian values** further reinforce this dynamic. Declining trust in government, parties, and institutions, coupled with a lack of political education, further enables authoritarian power grabs. Lastly, a **fractured and polluted information environment**, shaped by disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), further polarises society and undermines trust in elections and democratic discourse.

Figure 5 – Percentage of survey respondents who say they trust their government to do what is right, in developed and developing countries



Source: 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Analysis: Trust and Government

In this context, it is difficult to overstate the impact of **social media and algorithmic amplification** on polarisation and on the erosion of information integrity. The 'engineers of chaos' – as so poignantly described by Giuliano da Empoli – rely on the multiplication of anger and frustration by algorithms,[42] designed to maximise user engagement, which may sometimes act as 'radicalisation pipelines'[43] channelling users towards echo chambers of more and more extreme content. A **polarised citizenry**, as mentioned above, can find democracy 'dispensable'[44] and accept or even support the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, especially when framed by demagogic actors as a necessary response to a 'failing system'. One may indeed wonder whether it is more than coincidence that the current trend of democratic decline began around the same time (2009) as Facebook introduced its 'like' button.

The impact of social media is all the more evident when compared with the societal role of traditional media. Whereas traditional media acted as **gatekeepers and intermediaries** between political actors and their audiences, social media allow for a direct and unmediated style of communication that better suits a populist approach to politics. And while traditional media played a unifying role, creating **a shared reality**[45] to serve as a basis for constructive argument, social media contribute to fracturing the information landscape, creating an environment in which falsehoods spread considerably faster than truthful news[46] and in which individuals can be profiled and targeted with customised digital stimuli – as the Cambridge Analytica scandal brought to light.

Critically, the existence of such facilitating conditions is not sufficient to explain democratic erosion. Democratic erosion can only happen if these conditions are exploited by **actors** with both the will and capacity to advance anti-democratic agendas. In other words, 'democratic backsliding is **a strategy, not an accident**'.[47] In most cases, however, those actors would be elected because they are 'promising to reform democracy, not dismantle it'.[48]

The interaction of these conditions and actors can give rise to dynamics of democratic erosion through several **causal pathways**. The Lowy Institute (see Figure 4 above) identifies five pathways in particular, leading to (1) gain and consolidation of power by anti-democratic actors; (2) weakening of balancing institutions, guardrails and norms; (3) entrenched division; (4) loss of faith in democracy; and (5) political violence. These pathways are interconnected, forming a complex system where changes in one area can amplify erosion in others. The interconnections between the different pathways seem to coalesce in particular around three **key systemic nodes**: (1) the election of anti-democratic candidates; (2) executive aggrandisement; and (3) polarisation. These

interconnections can often form feedback loops, so that different factors reinforce each other and accelerate the decline of democratic systems. While the dynamics of polarisation have been mentioned above, it may be worth exploring the role of leaders and executive aggrandisement further.

At the core of nearly all pathways lies the **election of leaders who proceed to undermine and hollow out democratic systems**. This can happen as a result of **grievance-centred electoral strategies**, appealing to popular frustration to justify a break with the current system.[49] Grievances may often be linked to economic conditions, but not only: they may equally appeal to fears of racial, religious or ethnic marginalisation, crime, corruption, or simply anti-elite sentiment. In some cases these grievances are widely and openly shared, while in others they may fester, initially seen as taboos but increasingly normalised by these political entrepreneurs. Crucially, these grievances must be linked to a perceived failure of democratic institutions and norms, either by their very nature (e.g. frustration against elites or minority rights) or through artful narrative-building and political manoeuvring. Other cases, however, may see the emergence of **'opportunistic authoritarians'**[50] who campaign on more conventional platforms, and turn against democracy only once in power. This dynamic is more common in countries with very weak institutions and democratic traditions.

Executive aggrandisement is also a pivotal node in the dynamics of democratic erosion, which occurs when 'elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces as well as non-political administrations and independent agencies to challenge executive preferences'.[51] This results in a dismantling of horizontal accountability mechanisms, often carried out by purging civil servants, reducing judicial independence, refusing to submit to parliamentary oversight, or defunding and undermining the independence of regulatory agencies. It is also strongly linked to **corruption**, as government resources may be used to fund extensive patronage networks.[52] The process often involves **repression of opposition and civil society**,[53] as well as independent media. In extreme instances, repression can escalate to **political violence**, and political violence itself can be used as a pretext to justify further expansion of executive power.

This already complex landscape is further complicated in the European Union, not only because of the diversity of its Member States, but also because of the nature of the Union itself. Even without entering into old debates on the existence of a 'democratic deficit', questions have been raised about how the EU's extensive 'depoliticisation' of policymaking affects democratic representation and responsiveness, especially in the realm of economic policy –

including fiscal and monetary policymaking.[54] Scholars have also identified a 'policy dilemma' faced by the EU in choosing how to deal with democratic backsliding, as 'too little action could undermine the EU from within', whereas 'too much could cause the EU to split'.[55]

How democracy is revived

The systemic dynamics of democratic erosion paint a bleak picture of how different elements can converge to gradually dismantle a democracy. But there is no inevitability to this process: feedback loops can be broken, and even a moribund democracy can be revived. Alongside the global trend of democratic recession, a crucial counter-trend can also be observed: cases of successful democratic revival, sometimes termed 'democratic bounce-backs'.[56] These cases, though relatively rare and still at an early stage, offer invaluable lessons for re-democratisation, which presents distinct opportunities and risks compared to initial democratisation processes.[57] Together, they offer a hopeful path to understand how democracies can be not just defended, but actively revitalised in the face of persistent challenges.

A primary set of lessons can be drawn from experiences where democratic forces succeeded at the ballot box. Through a comparative analysis of recent cases, scholars identified two core factors: firstly, 'the **resilience of civil society** and its ability to inform citizens about the damage being done to democracy'; and secondly, **smart opposition tactics** in 'forging coalitions and broadening their appeal beyond traditional supporters'.[58] Effective voter mobilisation has proved essential, and was achieved not only by countering tactics such as voter suppression or disinformation, but also in some cases by simplifying the campaign platform and focusing it on particularly sensitive issues, even framing the election in part 'as a referendum on democracy itself'.[59]

Secondly, successful cases of democratic revival are a reminder of the difficulty of triggering 'durable re-democratisation processes'.[60] Sustained recovery requires **systematic efforts to restore democratic norms and institutions**, along four main priorities.[61] The first and most basic one consists in re-establishing democratic behaviour at the top of the system, ceasing practices and messaging that erode democratic institutions. Along with this, recovery efforts require the restoration of the media, civil society and political freedoms. Anti-corruption efforts can also play a significant role, both through investigations, and through a strengthening of guardrails to prevent future backsliding. The fourth element is the reform of key governmental institutions: in addition to undoing changes implemented by their autocratic predecessors, re-democratising leaders have also sought to further bolster their countries' democratic institutions.

Beyond institutional reforms, long-lasting democratic recovery is only achievable by **addressing societal divisions and rebuilding public trust**, by promoting societal reconciliation and addressing popular grievances. The logic is clear: without addressing the underlying conditions that facilitated the rise to power of autocratic leaders in the first place, democracy is prone to relapse – especially when the defeated 'autocratisers' remain politically active.[62] In fact, showing 'immediate and tangible gains from the political re-opening' may be even more important in instances of re-democratisation, as citizens are 'likely to be less starry-eyed about democracy than in an initial [democratic] transition, and may look for concrete benefits from a turnaround'.[63] This conclusion resonates with a recent study led by Nobel Prize laureate Daron Acemoglu, providing empirical evidence that – over the long term – individuals' support for democracy is strongly correlated with exposure to democracies that succeed in delivering economic growth, peace and political stability, and public goods.[64]

Successful cases of democratic recovery also shed light on the **challenges that re-democratisation processes often need to overcome**.[65] In most cases, democratising leaders may face pushback from former ruling forces and their supporters, which contributes to maintaining a high level of political polarisation. Additionally, some institutional reforms – while necessary to re-democratise systems of governance that were distorted by the previous governments – may be legally complex and present the new leaders with difficult choices. In some cases, these choices may even paradoxically present a risk of triggering further democratic erosion, and push the new government beyond the 'appropriate boundaries for corrective pro-democratic reforms'. Finally, the new leadership may face difficult trade-offs between focusing on democratic reforms carrying uncertain political rewards, and addressing other pressing socioeconomic needs.

Finally, it is important to remember that, while pro-democracy advocates are learning from past experience and developing their playbook, would-be autocrats are doing the same.[66] This points to **a need for continuous democratic innovation**, and for the view that – while democratic erosion is indeed a process that starts from the top[67] – democratic resilience is a long-term project that requires a bottom-up approach. Measures to promote a thriving space for civil society, as well as meaningful and structured **consultation of civil society organisations (CSOs)**, can greatly contribute to democratic resilience by increasing the legitimacy of public authority,[68] promoting European values,[69] and providing citizens with an additional channel to participate in policymaking at an early stage – a notion also found in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union.[70] Effective civic education[71] is also likely to play a key role. Some scholars have argued that **democracy**

and education appear to be in a dialectic relationship[72] whereby one influences the other, leading them to argue for the need to reform youth education systems 'beyond the teaching of civics in a siloed course' and addressing 'the multiple levers which shape the everyday experiences of students in schools'.[73] In this context, **social media regulation** may also play a role: as argued by political scientist and civil war expert Barbara Walter, 'take away the social media bullhorn and you turn down the volume on bullies, conspiracy theorists, bots, trolls, disinformation machines, hate mongers, and enemies of democracy'.[74]

Just like democratic erosion is a complex phenomenon characterised by the interaction of several factors and actors, democratic revival also needs a multifaceted strategy adapted to different local contexts: a 'constellation of mutually reinforcing factors' rather than a 'silver bullet'.[75]

Crafting better narratives

The findings in this paper reflect the broad academic consensus that democratic erosion is in many ways a leader-driven project. However, they also point to ways citizens can contribute to democracy's decline or, conversely, to its renewal. From this point of view, **the power of narratives and storytelling emerges as both a challenge and a vital tool** in shaping the future of democracy. Narratives are not merely rhetorical flourishes. They are foundational to how people understand democracy and its alternatives. Actors seeking to undermine democratic institutions often build powerful stories: which feed nostalgia about an idealised past, eliciting fear and anxiety for its loss, and anger at its betrayal; but also stories that offer epistemic clarity, as well as a sense of pride and hope in strong leadership.[76] To counter democratic erosion, pro-democracy forces must work with equal narrative force: positive stories to confront falsehoods and articulate a compelling vision of democracy, emphasising its inclusiveness, adaptability, responsiveness, and capability to deliver both moral legitimacy and material performance.

Metaphors can play a significant role, for both their illustrative and emotional potential. When public discourse is dominated by negative or conflictual imagery – for example, linked to semantic domains such as war and fighting[77] – even more positive metaphors used by pro-democracy actors risk being coopted into similar narratives. For example, the metaphor of the EU as a garden surrounded by a jungle has been criticised for carrying colonialist and exclusionary overtones, and reinforcing neo-conservative narratives.[78] Pro-democracy forces could endeavour instead to reframe these narratives, and tell a better story about democracy itself.

In a recent article, 'Power, Performance, and Legitimacy', Larry Diamond offers a possible analytical backbone for this narrative work.[79] Accordingly, it could be argued that strong narrative must show that democracy has ***power***: the ability to defend the rule of law, human rights, and free institutions – even in the face of violent aggression. Also, it must demonstrate ***performance***: the concrete capacity to deliver economic opportunity, security, public goods, and transparent governance. And it must reinforce ***legitimacy***: the sense among citizens that democracy – meaning substantive democracy, as embodied inter alia in the European model of society – is morally right, responsive, representative, and just. Arguably, narratives that address only the last of these dimensions are vulnerable to attack, as perceived failures in performance or weaknesses in power could be used in turn to argue that democracy lacks legitimacy. Pro-democracy narratives need to engage all three.

Participants in a recent ESPAS foresight workshop explored several **avenues to reframe common narratives and metaphors** in a way that could support pro-democratic sentiment. For example, it was suggested that the metaphor of a garden could be used to suggest a notion of flourishing through collective responsibility, inviting citizens to engage in the maintenance and growth of their democratic systems through inclusive civic participation at all levels of governance, ensuring that democracy remains responsive to the evolving needs of society. Similarly, discourses that present politics as a fight could be reframed to embrace confrontation as an essential part of society: rather than reducing democracy to a zero-sum game of winners and losers, better narratives could frame conflict and competition, as well as collaboration, as inherent and productive aspects of democratic life, thereby normalising disagreement and contesting the image of pluralism as a source of disorder or moral decay. Democratic leaders could also focus on how democracy can help to fix the basics: telling concrete stories of small but visible improvements, for example in everyday public services and civic spaces. Local and regional authorities, in particular, could play a special role as 'messengers' of these pro-democratic narratives, as they embody the level of governance that is closest to the citizens. These narratives could in turn help to reinforce the perception of the political system's performance and ability to deliver both 'democracy and proper drains'.[80]

Against a 'vertical' and 'pyramidal' understanding of politics that often seems to implicitly underlie populist and anti-elitist discourses, it was also suggested that a better narrative could frame democracy as a web or a network in which leaders are accountable, citizens are empowered, and power is distributed and responsive. A more 'horizontal' framing of democracy could help to bridge this perceived distance between leaders and citizens. While the erosion of

democracy is a complex and ongoing process, the narratives we create and embrace can shape its future trajectory. The strategic use of positive counter-narratives – emphasising participation, pluralism, and the tangible benefits of democratic governance – can help pro-democracy forces to turn the tide against democratic erosion and build a more resilient, responsive, and inclusive democracy for the future.

Strategic choices

The EU has already stepped up its efforts to protect democracy in response to the increasing threats to democratic values and practices in Europe, by developing a range of legislative and non-legislative instruments.[81] For example, measures such as the EU hybrid toolbox, the European Media Freedom Act, and the anti-SLAPP directive can contribute to tackling specific threats, while the Digital Services Act (DSA) has started to address the issue of algorithmic amplification. More initiatives have been announced, such as the establishment of a European Democracy Shield to defend against the rise in information manipulation and disinformation, and the creation of a European Centre for Democratic Resilience to 'bring together … expertise and capacity across Member States and neighbouring countries'.[82] While such measures aim to strengthen democracy's defences against immediate threats, the broader analysis in this paper points to deeper questions for policymakers to consider – questions that concern long-term strategic choices for the future of democracy in Europe.

The first of these choices concerns the nature of Europe's democratic vision. In a recent publication, Giuliano da Empoli has criticised European democrats for failing to present an adequate 'theory of happiness' (*théorie du bonheur*).[83] Indeed, democracies depend not only on institutions, but also on the capacity to articulate a credible promise of progress – a 'dream' – that strengthens trust among citizens and projects soft power abroad. When that promise falters amid slower growth, rising perceptions of inequality, and global economic competition, citizens' confidence in democratic governance may erode. The 2024 ESPAS Global Trends report, for example, proposed the idea of a new social contract as a basis for democratic renewal in times of uncertainty and transitions.[84]

> What form could a modern democratic 'European dream' take to restore public confidence and inspire both citizens and international publics?

Secondly, the EU faces difficult choices and trade-offs in addressing democratic backsliding, among both current and future Member States. The instruments currently at its disposal vary in terms of effectiveness, legal complexity, and potential for political backlash. The choice of measures involves balancing the need to protect common values with the risks of internal division and institutional deadlock – potentially more so in view of future enlargements.

How can the EU best design and implement measures that uphold democratic standards while preserving unity and institutional effectiveness?

Thirdly, addressing the underlying factors of democratic erosion requires attention to be paid both to immediate vulnerabilities and to longer-term structural conditions. Measures such as countering disinformation and protecting electoral integrity could be most effective if combined with broader efforts, for example to reduce socio-economic inequality, promote civic education, or strengthen civil society. As argued above, the conditions that facilitate democratic erosion interact in a complex system of adverse feedback loops and vicious circles.

Which combinations of targeted interventions and structural reforms offer the best chance of reversing these dynamics? What could be the most effective levers in this regard?

Finally, critiques arguing that the EU has contributed to a 'depoliticisation' of policymaking[85] raise important questions about the balance between technocratic efficiency and democratic accountability. While reducing political influence over certain policy areas can arguably lead to enhanced stability and coherence, it can also create a perception of distance between decision-makers and citizens. This dynamic may point to a need to maintain the advantages of expert-based governance while strengthening mechanisms of accountability and public scrutiny.

Should the EU explore ways of recalibrating the balance between technocratic governance and democratic legitimacy? If so, how and to what extent?

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AN INTER-INSTITUTIONAL EU PROJECT

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