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Defending DEMOCRACY in Europe

Addressing the threat of authoritarian populism and reinforcing democratic practice

European Group
on Ethics in Science and
New Technologies

ege

Research and Innovation

European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies

Defending democracy in Europe

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European Group on Ethics
in Science and New Technologies

Statement on

Defending democracy in Europe

Addressing the threat of authoritarian populism and reinforcing democratic practice

Brussels, May 2024

2024 Directorate-General for Research and Innovation

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Democracy is **not merely a formal regime** consisting of periodic free elections. It is committed to **protecting and promoting fundamental rights and values,** as well as **practices of lived democracy.** Our democratic ethos, situated in relations of reciprocity and solidarity among citizens, needs to be **nurtured,** through **dialogue** between politicians and citizens, and by **strong and meaningful participation of citizens** in civic and political life.

Authoritarian populism is incompatible with this conception of democracy. It is characterised by antagonism against civil society organisations, media, and other entities that stand up for the rule of law and the interests of the people and minorities.

SO WHAT IS NEEDED NOW?

- We need an **understanding of identity which is not defined by exclusionary categories** such as territory, nation, ethnicity or religion – but which transcends these, appreciates plurality, and creates a sense of (transnational, European) belonging by building on values and their translation into civic practices.
  This could help to **strengthen people's participation in society** and their **appreciation of the European endeavour.**
- We need a reorientation of Europe to its **social roots** – understood as a commitment to providing a dignified life for everyone, avoiding grave levels of social and economic inequality.
  This would also help to provide **protection against the rise of far-right authoritarianism.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Renewing our understanding of democracy and making **substantive participatory democracy** real, which involves ongoing public consultation and deliberation.

Strong and sufficiently funded **public infrastructures** (for housing, health, education etc.) as a precondition for civic and political engagement.

Support for **European public spaces,** such as (non-commercial) deliberative platforms, including digital social spaces, that encourage citizen involvement in European decision-making.

Active encouragement of **intermediary structures,** including associative democracy – the self-organisation of citizens in grass-roots associations that identify and solve problems at local and regional levels.

Encouragement of a **strong administrative and civic ethos** in public administration that works with civic associations; indeed a transformed interplay between citizens and the existing institutions of decision-making – on the basis of a pluralistic Europe as a community of values.

Analysing how **law,** including legal processes, are at risk of being hollowed out and repurposed by authoritarian populist leaders – and resisting this.

Reinforcing mechanisms that secure and support fact and value-based **collective memory** of our European history; recognising the contribution of the **research community** to strengthen democracy; measuring the **wellbeing of societies** in a more comprehensive sense.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With its priority *A new push for European democracy*, the European Commission has endeavoured to steward a reinforcement of democracy. Essential elements of this have been the European Democracy Action Plan, the Defence of Democracy package, and the Conference on the Future of Europe. In this context, and against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President von der Leyen requested the EGE to develop an Opinion and recommendations on *Democracy in the digital age*, which the EGE issued in June 2023.

Vice-President Dubravka Šuica, having gratefully received the EGE's advice on behalf of the College, invited the EGE to reflect further on the recent rise of authoritarian populism in some Member States and around the world, and to provide the Commission with advice on the threats that this poses to democracy. This second request was formulated in the context of the upcoming elections of the European Parliament and the many other elections taking place in 2024.

Noting that the EGE's call for profound action in the first Opinion spoke deeply to the Commission's concern about the health of democracy, the Vice-President stressed the need to discuss what is necessary for a vivid European civic space, built on common values and respect of fundamental rights, to provide strong possibilities for civic participation. She also asked the EGE to analyse what role processes around the formation of identities, indeed – of a European identity, play in this.

The Statement at hand aims to provide insights on these questions. It begins by tracing the differences between formal and substantive understandings of democracy and shows how authoritarianism is incompatible with, and can best be countered via, the latter. In this context, it also analyses a series of conditions that may support far-right populism and makes the case for participatory democracy, zooming in on how 'associative democracy' can give voice, agency, and power to the people. It then discusses essentialist, exclusivist versus living, entangled, pluralistic understandings of identity, with the latter representing the values of the European project. The Statement concludes with a set of recommendations for policy makers and for all of us.

The EGE's work on democracy is rooted in its Statement on *Values for the Future* (June 2021), issued in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, in which the group throws light on the connections between ethics and fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law, concluding with a recommendation for the EU to maximise opportunities for public participation in policy making. It further builds on the EGE's work in the context of COVID-19 on the role of *Values in times of crisis*, which points to the importance of human dignity and solidarity guiding crisis management, and of processes of deliberation that make values explicit.

All of the people who contributed to the development of this Statement, be it in discussions or in writing, are appreciatively recognised – notably: Toma Sutic, Ingrid Godkin, Dieter Grimm, Katja Reppel, Francisco de la Torre Francia, Anne Mark Nielsen, Mara Silva Almeida, Laura Smillie, Frederico Rocha, Alison Weightman, Kate Bradbury, Meg Kiseleva, Louise Edwards, and Katharine Wright.

1. DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM

Democracy is under threat around the world. A much greater share of the world's population lives in autocracies today than in democracies. In the last decade, their proportion has increased from 48 to 71 per cent (Nord et al. 2024). At the same time, the quality of democracy has been declining in many parts of the world, with freedom of expression being the worst affected component (ibid.). In the European Union specifically, although most citizens believe that democracy is the best system of collective governance, the functioning of representative democracy faces increasing criticism and disengagement (Ingelgom 2023).

Why is this the case? In the literature, various developments are seen as responsible for this, including global crises, political polarisation, and austerity (Georgiadou 2013; Solty 2013; Baier 2016; Salmela & Von Scheve 2017; Eichengreen 2018; Rama & Cordero 2018; Bugaric 2019; Beckfield 2019; Baccini & Sattler 2023). Another development that endangers democracies worldwide is the alarming rise of populism. For many scholars (Popp-Madsen 2020; Bauer & Becker 2020) populism poses one of the biggest current threats to liberal democracies and is the main cause of democratic backsliding. Populism has been characterised as a 'thin' ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017), referring to charismatic politicians who seek power by getting the support of large parts of unaffiliated voters without presenting a clear vision on what they believe constitutes a just society or human flourishing. What is relatively new in recent populist movements is the pitting of large numbers of potential followers not only against an elite that is held responsible for the soaring inequities of the last decades, but also against groups who are even worse off than the groups that are mobilised. Fear and dissatisfaction are directed at immigrants or cultural, religious, minoritised ethnic or other groups, who are portrayed as the source of societal problems. The use of social media plays a key role in these strategies, seen at work in the UK (during Brexit) and in Trump's campaigns in the United States, the main argument being: "The government has become an instrument for redistributing your money to the undeserving" (Hochschild quoted by Weithman 2020) This is bad news for democracy which is premised on civic reciprocity, civic friendship, and basic solidarity among citizens. Moreover, opportunities to effectively address the root causes of soaring inequality are lost in rhetoric.

The EGE has previously proposed that Europe embrace a pluralistic and substantive conception of democracy (EGE, Opinion on Democracy in the Digital Age, 2023). Such a 'thick' conception of democracy goes beyond a set of formal democratic mechanisms such as voting, fair elections and aggregation of individual preferences. Building on our previous work on this topic, in this Statement we provide a more elaborate view on what it takes to protect a strong democratic culture and reinvigorate our European democratic societies. The 'thick' notion of democracy that we propose requires a free, respectful, and pluralistic civic space, understood as "the environment that enables people and groups – or 'civic space actors' – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life in their societies" (UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, 2020, p. 3). The UN further notes that a "vibrant civic space requires an open, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals, whether online or offline. Any restrictions on such a space must comply with international human rights law" (ibid.).

In this Statement, we will make the argument that authoritarian forms of populism, in which the rule of law and democratic institutions more broadly are denounced as representing the interests of 'the elites', are incompatible with the thick conception of democracy we have espoused. We will discuss some of the causes for the growth of authoritarian populism, in particular recent experiences of austerity and the (real and perceived) gap between citizens and processes of public decision-making; and explore means by which they may be addressed. Making the case for a 'thick' understanding of European identity, we will end with recommendations for the strengthening of a pluralistic European civic space, of a shared understanding of a European identity on the basis of fundamental rights and values, and their importance in creating and sustaining a robust democracy.

1.1. Two dimensions of democracy

There are various ways to classify democracies (see e.g. Dahl 1971; Lijphart 1999; Przeworski & Limongi 1993). We will focus here on two dimensions that are key in the context of responding to populism. The first is the distinction between formal and substantive conceptions of democracy[1] Formal conceptions focus on the externally visible characteristics of democracies, such as the holding of free elections, or the existence of institutions that embody the separation of powers, whereas substantive understandings of democracy emphasise fundamental rights and values that underpin democratic institutions and processes, such as dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, and social justice. The second dimension that is relevant in the context of populism relates to the distinction between monistic and pluralistic democracies. Monistic understandings of democracy seek to establish and implement the supposed will of 'the people', where 'the people' are seen as a monolithic entity. By contrast, pluralistic conceptions of democracy emphasise the pluralism and diversity which make up the people – the 'demos' – and view the interplay and deliberation of a broad range of voices and perspectives as a good to be protected. As noted, in our previous Opinion on Democracy in the Digital Age (EGE, 2023) we espoused a 'thick' conception of democracy that views democracy not merely as a political regime but also "as a set of values that shape human behaviour and form the foundation of society" (ibid., p. 5). Such a 'thick' understanding of democracy corresponds with substantive and pluralistic conceptions (see Table 1).

[1] We gratefully acknowledge helpful conversations with Dieter Grimm on this aspect.

	The essence of democracy is:	Ideal role of citizens' voices:	Compatible with populism?
'Thin' democracy:	*Formal institutions*	*Monistic (looking for the one, 'true' will of 'the people')*	*Yes, with most forms of populism*
'Thick' democracy:	*Substantive values, rights, and practices, as well as the institutions that articulate and protect them*	*Pluralistic (accommodating a diversity of views and lifestyles)*	*Not with authoritarian populism (see below)*

Table 1: Different definitions of democracy. Highlighted in grey is the 'thick' understanding of democracy that we have promoted in our previous Opinion (EGE, Opinion on Democracy in the Digital Age, 2023).

1.2. Populism: A threat for democracies?

Not all political action that responds to public protests or grievances is necessarily populist. According to a widely accepted definition, populism is a 'thin' ideology revolving around the pitting of 'the people' against 'the elites' (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017), often privileging the alleged 'will of the people' above everything else (see also Bugaric 2019; Mansbridge & Macedo 2019). The thin definition of populism does not imply, however, that all existing forms of populism are ideologically neutral. In practice, they are not. 'Thin' populist dynamics attach themselves to other, substantive, ideologies. In the words of democratic theorist Bojan Bugaric (2019, p. 50), "populism should not be considered in isolation from its host ideology". If populism attaches itself to egalitarian, social justice driven programmes that support pluralism against an economic elite, or a gentry, such 'emancipatory populism' (Canovan 1999, Dix 1985, Rodrik 2018a, b, Bugaric 2019, Norris & Inglehart 2019, Rodrik 2021) can, scholars argue, have positive effects on democracies.

Much more frequent, however, are authoritarian forms of populism, which are also anti-pluralist (see also Müller 2017). An important difference between emancipatory and authoritarian populism can be drawn along the lines of who they include in the notions of 'the people' and 'the elites': While emancipatory populism tends to define 'the people' according to their economic power (e.g. people in paid and precarious employment, or everyone without significant wealth), authoritarian populism typically uses ethnic or other nativist labels (see also Rosanvallon 2008, p. 266). Similarly, while emancipatory populism tends to mobilise against elites that are defined in economic terms (business owners, 'capitalists'), authoritarian populism mobilises indiscriminately against big business alongside democratically elected political leaders and representatives of independent media. In fact, authoritarian populism is characterised by pronounced antagonism against civil society organisations, media, and other entities that represent and stand up for the rule of law. In extreme forms of authoritarian and (other) far-right populism, the rule of law and democratic institutions more broadly are denounced as representing the interests of 'the elites'. In this manner, in an ironic and perverted turn, democracy itself is portrayed as the enemy of 'the people'. The so-called Korneuburg Oath of

Austrofascism (1930) is an illustration of how authoritarian populism justifies the usurpation of power by a strong leader on behalf of 'the people':

> "We demand of every comrade: undaunted faith in the fatherland, untiring zeal in service, and passionate love of his native land. We are determined to take over the state and to remould it and its economy in the interests of the whole Volk. [...] We repudiate western parliamentary democracy and the party state! [...] Let every comrade realize and proclaim that he [...] is prepared to offer up his blood and his possessions, and that he recognises three forces only: Faith in God, his own unbending will, [and] the commands of his [leader]." (reproduced in the translation of Jedlicka 1966, p. 138-139)

This quote includes at least two characteristics that, still today, make authoritarian populism dangerous to pluralistic and substantive democracies. First, authoritarian populists build and exploit a tension between emphasising people's individual and independent judgement on the one hand (calling on people to assert their "own unbending will" in contrast, for example, to trusting the narratives of human rights advocates and independent journalists) and the "will of the leader" on the other. It is assumed, although not spelled out, that if a conflict between people's judgement and the will of the leader arises, the former has to concede to the latter. Second, authoritarian populists undermine democratic institutions and principles in diverse ways. On the one hand, they do this through direct attacks on these institutions and principles, framing them as the enemy of 'the people'. These attacks typically involve direct breaches of the democratic constitutional order and open, explicit infringement of legal-democratic principles such as the rule of law. On the other hand, authoritarian populists manipulate the content and form of liberal law for illiberal ends – they (mis)appropriate it (De Búrca & Young 2023). Put differently, authoritarian populists subvert legal-democratic orders and principles from within: they 'bend' rather than 'breach' these orders and principles. They do so, for example, by complying with the letter of the law or its procedural norms while violating its liberal-democratic spirit (Pirro & Stanley 2022), or by using language about the protection of human rights in ways designed to undo or reverse existing commitments (De Búrca & Young 2023). Together, these different forms of attack involving the use, abuse, and non-use of law and legal processes have been described as 'autocratic legalism' (Scheppele 2018), 'abusive constitutionalism' (Landau 2013), and 'constitutional retrogression' (Huq & Ginsburg 2018).

1.3. What authoritarian populism does to democracies

Overall, two scenarios need to be distinguished (Mansbridge & Macedo 2019): Authoritarian populist opposition can strengthen democratic regimes if the democratic rulers draw the right conclusions from the rise of populist support – for example by engaging seriously with substantive concerns raised. Authoritarian populists in government, however, have been found to be eroding institutional, cultural, and legal constraints on the executive's power to dismantle fundamental values and rights (Allred, Hawkins & Ruth 2015, Houle & Kenny 2018).

Mapping different types of populism against the two dimensions of democracy that we highlighted in Table 1, we can conclude that emancipatory forms of populism that do not attack the institutions and spirit of democracy, and do not hollow out respect for fundamental rights and values, can be compatible with democracy. They can even strengthen democratic processes if ruling elites who have been captured by corporate interests, for example, are challenged instead to foreground the needs of the wider population. Authoritarian forms of populism, however, are incompatible with the 'thick' – namely pluralistic and substantive – conception of democracy that the EGE has endorsed in its earlier Opinion (EGE, Opinion on Democracy in the Digital Age, 2023). A 'thick' understanding of democracy, we argue, is the only version of democracy that can protect itself from the various forces that threaten to eradicate it, from outside and from within. This is the case because formal and monistic understandings of democracy allow for democratically legitimate mechanisms and institutions to act as a vehicle for practices and values that erode what many people consider the soul of liberal and pluralistic democracies: namely fundamental values and rights, and the practices and institutions that articulate and protect them. In other words, 'thin' (formal and monistic) forms of democracy run the risk of undermining the conditions for their own existence, whereas 'thick' forms of democracy are sustained by citizens' commitment to fundamental rights and values that underpin democratic institutions and processes.

When protecting and strengthening democracies, we need to attend not only to the vertical relationship between citizens and the state, but also to the horizontal relationship from person to person. As James Kloppenberg argued, democracy has always been grafted upon a democratic ethos that is situated in relations of reciprocity and solidarity among citizens (Kloppenberg, 2016). In this view a democratic ethos is supported by a particular conception of the moral motivation of citizens, which John Rawls referred to as 'reciprocity' – where kindness is met with kindness. If democracy is viewed as being only about elections and formal rules and mechanics of checks and balances on political power, this essential underlying ethos tends to be forgotten (see also Waldron, 2016). How can this ethos of democracy and its associated virtues be regained and reinforced? For 'thick' democracies, authoritarian populism is a threat. How can we act against it?

2. FIGHTING THE CAUSES OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

2.1. Renewing a commitment to 'social Europe'

Some studies find a correlation between austerity and the rise of authoritarian populism (see also Rodríguez-Pose, Terrero-Dávila & Lee 2023a,b). As Bojan Bugaric notes (Bugaric 2019, see also Beckfield 2019, Eichengreen 2018):

> "The ruling parties' obsession with fiscal austerity and supply-side policies of privatization, deregulation, and liberalization effectively triggered a 'lost decade' of economic stagnation, rising unemployment, increasing poverty, and dwindling EU solidarity that paved the way for the poisonous ultranationalism now on the rise" (Bugaric 2019, p. 51-52).

Referring to Dani Rodrik (2018b), Bugaric also notes that "the economic anxiety and distributional struggles exacerbated by globalization" (Bugaric 2019, p. 43) create the basis for the rise of the kind of populism that is so detrimental to (pluralistic and substantive) democracies. "What Europe needs more than anything", Bugaric concludes, "is a new anti-austerity coalition focused on growth and social justice" (ibid., p. 53).

The link between austerity measures and the rise of authoritarian populism is a topic of considerable debate and research in political and economic fields, with the exact pathways being unclear. Some mechanisms, however, seem plausible. Austerity measures typically involve government cutbacks in spending, particularly in areas like social services, healthcare, and education. These cutbacks can lead to economic hardship for many citizens, particularly those in lower and middle-income brackets. When large segments of the population experience financial stress accompanied by often substantial impacts on their quality of life, there can be growing discontent with the status quo. Moreover, as austerity often follows financial crises and is sometimes imposed by external entities (like the International Monetary Fund or the European Union), it can lead to a loss of trust in traditional political parties and institutions. People may be easily persuaded that their government is no longer representing their interests but is instead catering to financial interests of rich people or corporations. McKay, Jennings and Stoker (2023, p. 1), for example, found that "clear majorities see government as biased towards rich areas and capital cities, while around half of respondents perceive bias against rural areas."

Authoritarian populist leaders often capitalise on this discontent. They typically position themselves as outside the traditional political establishment and promise to overturn the status quo. Their rhetoric often includes promises to end austerity measures, restore economic stability, and prioritise the needs of the 'ordinary' citizen. This message often resonates strongly with those who feel left behind or ignored by mainstream politics (e.g. Mudde 2007, 2014). Similarly, authoritarian populists tend to ignore climate change and environmental degradation, in order to pass over the cost associated with actions required to address them. This, again, typically comes at the cost of the people (often those already disadvantaged) who are most immediately, and most negatively affected by all crises – which is why they are also referred to as 'frontline communities' (Partida 2021; see also EGE

Statement on Values in times of crisis, 2022; EGE Statement on European solidarity and the protection of fundamental rights in the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020; EGE-GCSA Join Opinion on Joint Opinion Improving pandemic preparedness and management, 2020).

Austerity is an ideology that assumes that the state, like a private household, needs to consolidate its finances by bringing in more money than it spends. Its origins date back to the second half of the 20th century. As a governmental programme it was adopted by some states after the banking crisis in 2008. While it rightly places emphasis on the need for productive spending, it misses two crucial points. First, states are not private households. The money that states spend is not 'gone' – it is with the people who spend it on goods and services and thus create economic demand, or with schools, hospitals, and other public infrastructures that create educational, health-related or other value. Second, when the state neglects basic needs of people, this can become very expensive in the long run, as increases in child poverty, ill health and disability, and crime are often the consequence (Keeton 1984; Berger & Waldfogel (OECD) 2011; Bourguignon 2018). In fact, studies have shown that austerity programmes often undermine their own stated goals of cost saving (e.g. Konzelmann 2012; Nuti 2013; Schui 2014; Alesina, Favero & i Giavazzi 2019).

Against this backdrop, it seems that a reorientation of Europe to its social roots – understood as a commitment to providing a dignified life for everyone, and to avoiding grave levels of social and economic injustice – would also provide a protection against the rise of authoritarianism. This is in line with the thick conception of democracy as proposed by the EGE, as one that builds on social welfare and equity as democracy's own pre-conditions (see also EGE Opinion on Democracy in the digital age, 2023).

2.2. Strengthening a broad variety of democratic practices

Another important factor in the rise of authoritarian populism is what is often perceived to be a gap between decision-making processes and the direct representation and participation of citizens. Populist leaders often claim that ordinary citizens have lost their voice in modern democratic systems, and view this as a sign that the promises of democracy as a system of collective self-rule are being usurped. This is typically explained in terms of decision-making elites and institutions – be these political or economic – intentionally ignoring the needs of the people. While this elite conspiracy is certainly too simplistic, the claim that ordinary citizens' ability to influence policy is limited (perhaps more so today than in earlier decades), is not entirely unfounded, and is easily instrumentalised by populist leaders. In the context of a large bureaucratic system such as the EU, and in light of the complexity and global nature of challenges facing societies today such as the climate crisis, such criticisms should not be dismissed outright as 'populist'. Indeed, EU decision-making, especially that by unelected bodies such as the European Commission and the European Central Bank, can be criticised as lacking transparency and accountability to the electorate. Furthermore, the expanding but still limited competences of the European Parliament can raise concerns about a lack of genuine democratic oversight and influence by EU citizens over policies that

directly affect them (De Búrca 2020; Seubert 2023). Although research thus far does not show straightforward links between a democratic deficit in the EU and the rise of authoritarian populism, it is important to address democratic deficits where they do exist and further explore the complex interplay of the developments at stake. This can improve the trustworthiness of democratic institutions, weaken the appeal of authoritarian populism, and make good on the inclusive and representative ideals of thick democracy.

One solution that is frequently proposed in this context is sortition, which refers to the use of a random selection process to appoint people to public office (e.g. Parker 2011; Stone 2011; Van Reybrouck 2016; Fishkin 2018). Sortition is seen by some authors as an effective way to address various democratic deficits commonly observed in electoral political systems, such as enhancing representativeness, or reducing partisanship and polarisation: By removing the competitive element of elections, sortition can lead to the formation of decision-making bodies that are more focused on deliberation and consensus rather than on party loyalty and opposition. Sortition could also help to claw back corruption and regulatory capture, in the sense of the 'capture' of regulators by large corporations and other economically powerful actors. Some authors also believe that sortition can improve the quality of decision making, as with a more diverse group of people in decision-making roles there can be a wider range of perspectives and experiences brought to the table, potentially leading to more innovative and effective solutions. Additionally, because sortition can reduce the influence of special interest groups, decisions might better reflect the general interest. At the same time, concerns have been raised about the lack of expertise of randomly selected people, and the lack of accountability of people who have not been formally elected. Moreover, the concept of sortition might be difficult for those for whom democratic legitimacy is strongly tied to electoral processes. Finally, the sortition system could be vulnerable to manipulation. Given these potential drawbacks (Fishkin & Laslett 2008; Rosanvallon 2011), many advocates of sortition suggest using it in conjunction with traditional electoral systems, rather than replacing them entirely. This approach can help mitigate some of the risks while still harnessing the benefits of incorporating more randomly selected citizen bodies into the governance structure.

Another solution that is promoted to address democratic deficits, and particularly the shortcomings of representative democracy, are deliberative and collaborative digital platforms that can make it easier for a wider range of people to participate in political discussions and decisions (Errandonea 2023). The development and use of such digital tools to enrich democratic deliberation is a very welcome development. However, such tools are not sufficient to address the ailments of representative democracy. People who stop showing up for elections do so not because voting has become too onerous, but because they are increasingly disillusioned about their ability to effectively influence decisions that affect their lives (e.g. De Tullio 2021).[2]

[2] In Europe, Zilinsky (2019) found that younger people are generally more satisfied with democracy than older citizens, and that satisfaction with democracy has actually increased among Europeans of all ages. Other studies find evidence of a growing number of *democrats in name only*, particularly among the young generation (Wuttke, Gavras & Schoen 2022). Moreover, in countries hit hard by the Eurozone crisis younger people have been found to be increasingly EU-sceptical (Lauterbach & De Vries 2020).

Democracy as a system of collective self-rule is guided by the ideals that everyone is able to influence decisions that significantly affect their lives, and that there is the freedom and a reasonable possibility to participate in collective judgement on the issues at hand (Warren 2001, 60; see Goodin 2007). Fair and free elections are a necessary condition to reach these ideals, but they are not sufficient. For example, without substantive deliberation and the access of citizens to good information, voting becomes an empty ritual. The same is true if people feel that their vote does not affect key decisions made about economic affairs: an example is the setting of interest rates which is, in many countries, exempt from meaningful democratic control, even though interest rates have huge implications on people's lives and economic inequalities. When citizens feel that, via their vote, they have no say over things that matter, they disengage from formal democratic processes. This does not mean that they are becoming less 'political' – but their political activity then moves to other places.

Two conclusions follow from this. First, it is very important to ensure that people, via their vote, have control over things that matter – meaning, in turn, that important economic affairs need to be moved back to the domain of democratic decision making (e.g. Cumbers 2012; McGaughey 2020). Second, the spaces in which other political activity takes place should not be seen as 'outside' democracy, but instead as an important part of the democratic domain. Activity within such spaces is also known as 'associative democracy'.

2.3. Associative democracy

The notion of 'associative democracy' refers to democratic practices that rest on a moral vision of a good society to be achieved by citizens who interact freely and, in the process, enhance their own political capacity and that of society at large (McPherson, 1977, 60; Wagenaar 2023). In this view, associations, such as grass roots community organisations, contribute to the social integration of citizens, act as an interface between the individual and political decision makers, and play an important role in the provision of services, in particular in the social sector (Freise & Hallmann 2014). According to the conception of associative democracy, groups and associations of citizens actively participate in governance and societal decision-making with a sense of responsibility towards the broader community and a willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise. The state's role is to ensure conditions which are favourable for this, and to help maintain balance and prevent dominance of certain groups. Bas van Bavel (2022) has shown on the basis of historical economic analysis that such associations have acted as strong mitigators of regressive taxes and rampant inequity in important periods of European history. They can help to improve prosperity and economic growth (ibid.).

The first half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of all kinds of cooperatives, funds and unions. However, these systems of self-organisation got caught between market and state at the end of the last century. As they matured, they had to navigate a complex space defined by the external pressures of both the market economy and state policies. While some cooperative movements were initially formed with a degree of independence from state control, over time, governmental policies and regulations came to limit their operations – e.g. by imposing regulatory burdens that complicate the cooperative model, or state support that co-opts or dilutes their autonomous character. Navigating these

challenges often meant that cooperatives had to drift from their original ideals and to adopt more conventional business practices to remain viable in the market or to align with governmental agendas to secure legal and financial support.

At this time, having learned the lessons of the past, a revival of (support for) civil associations would be timely. Free associations could counteract the corrosive effects of the dominance of the market model of electoral liberal democracy, where citizens are seen as 'consumers' of political 'choices' and politicians as 'suppliers' competing for the vote (Macpherson 1977, p. 76). Associative democracy could also be seen as a middle ground between free-market individualism and centralised state control (see Hirst 2001, in Hirst & Bader, 2001), especially where there was the political will to devolve power to voluntary associations (Jones & Marsden 2010).

One of the strengths of (formal or informal) associations of citizens is that they realise the ideal of giving everyone the possibility of participating in collective judgement at the level where it is best informed and counts most. For example, a citizen group which produces green energy will have hands-on experience with the practical contingencies of the green energy transition, will have reflected on the climate crises, has built support in the community for the cause of sustainable energy use, might have experienced pushback from corporate energy providers and/or the state, and so on. As the example makes clear, such associations also have decision making power within their civic sphere. Associations can get things done; they can realise their goals within a geographically or domain-specific sphere (Wagenaar 2019). This decision-making power is crucial to the idea and practice of associational democracy. In other words, civic associations can address pressing societal and environmental issues that individuals on their own cannot solve. This is what makes them suitable partners for public agencies. Civic associations by themselves do not have the power to govern society. But they are important subsidiary structures that are necessary to connect public administration and business to the people.

In other words, civic associations should not be seen as acting outside, or acting against, democratic institutions or processes. They cannot, and should not, supplant the aggregate institutions of the state. Instead, they play an important subsidiary role. Certain state functions can be effectively devolved to civic associations (Hirst 1994, Cohen and Rogers 1995). The role of the state in this respect is to protect and support civic associations. Parliamentary and executive rule would still be necessary to debate large questions of national or international import (such as state budget allocations, social security, security, global trade, participation in transnational institutions, major national infrastructure projects). In other areas, associations can be key actors which are organised in domain-specific confederations, in which the confederate board participates in national institutions (Bookchin 1990). This is hardly a new idea: variations of it have been widely practised in various corporate arrangements in continental European states. For example, the over 500 citizen care initiatives that have emerged in the Netherlands over the last decade are represented by an umbrella organisation that now has a voice in national policy making (see Bourgon 2011 and De Souza Briggs 2008 for more examples).

Some forms of associative democracy can help to better connect state and civil society in policy making and implementation. One classic example is the Porto Alegre participatory budgeting initiative. The initiative cleverly merged political decision making at municipal level on the one hand and centralised coordination on the other so that the city budget was representative both of the priorities of the city

districts and larger interests of the city. Participatory budgeting has been widely implemented across the world, often in watered-down versions. The singular success of the Porto Alegre initiative seems to depend on the city's unique political makeup. The city had a longstanding socialist administration; in cities with different political leadership participatory budgeting was much less successful (Avritzer, 2009).

Another approach is to infuse public administration with large doses of deliberation. This approach is promising as it has proven to be able to resolve policy impasse and conflict and generate creative solutions for difficult, evolving policy problems (Forester 2009; Innes & Booher 2010; Curato et al. 2017). In Ireland, twice in recent history a citizens' assembly was appointed to deliberate major constitutional questions, both times leading to a referendum and the successful passing of reforms for marriage equality in the first case (in 2015) and abortion rights in the second case (in 2018). This "linking of deliberative democracy (mini-publics) and direct democracy (referendums)" has been described as exemplary and as a model for how constitutional deliberation may be systematised (Farrell, Suiter & Harris 2019).[3]

Furthermore, associative democracy also fulfils another important function, namely the monitoring of power elites. Civic associations hold governments and businesses accountable and pressure them to act on unacceptable social ills and urgent problems. They influence the political agenda. Without civic associations we would not have had a divest and #keepitintheground movement. At the moment social movements are the main actors in creating the necessary urgency in fighting global warming. They are a key element in what the democratic theorist John Keane calls 'monitory democracy'. He describes it as a new phase in the development of democracy, "a 'post-parliamentary' politics defined by the rapid growth of many

[3] The European Commission has, in recent years, strongly promoted and further developed infrastructures of participatory and deliberative democracy at both the EU and Member State level: through the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Citizen Engagement platform and the December 2023 Recommendation to the Member States on citizen participation.

The Centre for Participatory and Deliberative Democracy of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) has also supported this work, including via the establishment of a community of practice platform around participatory and deliberative democracy, its Enlightenment 2.0 programme and the resulting reports (with an additional report on public communication and democracy in preparation), as well as its work on evidence-informed policy making.

Horizon Europe, the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, established in its legal basis a specific 'intervention area' on democracy and governance. Under this programmed area, and over its first three years (2021-2023), Horizon Europe has funded over 70 research projects with more than €200M. The 2024 call will add 30 more projects and around €100M. The complete list of ongoing projects is available via CORDIS and a selection of previous projects as well as relevant publications is available here.

The European Research Council (ERC) grants have mobilised funding for research on relevant democracy-related issues. The recent report *Mapping ERC Frontier Research: Democracy* brings together the contributions from ERC-funded curiosity-driven research on the complex challenges facing democratic systems today and presents project highlights in six thematic areas: democratic governance and political representation; elections and voting; citizen engagement; human rights and rule of law; disinformation, fake news, and social media; and polarisation, populism, and authoritarianism.

different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms" (Keane 2009, p. 688; see also Keane 2011).

3. STRENGTHENING EUROPEAN IDENTITY: TOWARDS A 'THICK' UNDERSTANDING OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

As Evelyn Ruppert and Stephan Scheel argue (Ruppert & Scheel 2021, p. 6; see also Balibar 2003, Barry & Walters 2003, Shore 2000; Tava & Quenivet 2023):

> "answers to the question of legitimacy are not to be found in grand political statements by major figures or theories of how Europe can be made into a new political entity. Rather than attempting to address an imaginary demos or conjuring it up in proclamations about a European identity, critical scholars have shown it is through specific practices such as laws, regulations, customs, histories, and institutions that Europe is enacted and continuously remade." (Ruppert & Scheel 2021, p. 6)

As these authors argue "the EU is brought into being via myriad practices" (Ruppert & Scheel 2021, p. 6; see also Kohlrausch & Trischler 2014). The notion of a 'European identity' is as multifaceted and complex as these practices. The remarks of the mediaeval historian Johan Huizinga (1924/1955, p. 228) in his The Waning of the Middle Ages about understanding cultures in general may also be applicable to European identity: he argues that the most telling characteristics are not those that are explicitly discussed in learned books or mentioned by commentators, but the things that are taken for granted by everyone and are the foundation of all that is being said and done.

The idea of building a European identity goes back to Erasmus of Rotterdam. It was fuelled further by Immanuel Kant's ideas about federalism, and the cosmopolitanism of the European Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the question both of the existence of a European identity, and what it might consist of, has remained open (Beck & Grande, 2007; Kaina & Karolewski, 2013; Onghena, 2016).

The European Union project has given new life to the debate around these questions. Initially, at the very beginning of the European Union project, this was framed mainly in the form of the question: 'Is there a European identity?' Later, as the project evolved from its original conception as an economic community to a community of citizens, especially since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the question has tended to be rephrased as 'what does it mean to be European?' In the last decade or so, especially since the financial crisis of 2007 and the multitude of crises that followed (economic, social, health), the European project has begun to be challenged, and with it the notion of a European identity. The question has, then, become 'does a European identity still exist?'

In national and European politics, questioning the possibility of a European identity has also become a means of disputing its existence, of dismantling it. It has played an important role in promoting protectionist and nationalist trends and has been mobilised by far-right populist movements seeking to weaken the European Union as a civic and cultural entity.

In this context, turning the question 'does a European identity still exist?' into whether such a European identity is possible at all, reflects a growing protectionist and nationalist trend, which advocates closed societies, excluding diversity and returning to discriminatory, intolerant, presumably homogenous societies, often driven by far-right populist movements. By questioning the possibility of a European identity, these movements are aiming to break up the European Union and to erode democracy. We argue that European identity and democracy are inseparable, and both are strong pillars of the European Union. Regardless of where one stands regarding the value of a European identity, it seems clear that strengthening a European identity cannot singlehandedly solve the problems of democratic backsliding or abolish other threats to our democracies. We believe that it can, however, contribute to broadening and enhancing people's participation in society, promoting greater proximity between citizens and those in power (legislative and executive powers), and thus helping protect societies against the rise of populism and other antidemocratic developments.

3.1. Two dimensions of European identity

Europe is a space shared by different peoples and nations, with a rich diversity (also within societies) in its histories, cultures, religions, and languages, characterised by relations of both strife and peaceful co-existence. Europe is indeed not restricted to being a geographical concept, just as European identity is not restricted to defining a physical cohabitation in that space.

Broadly speaking, collective identities refer to the identification of individuals with larger groups based on (what they perceive to be) shared characteristics, experiences, or affiliations. These identities are formed through complex social and psychological processes. Even when collective identities form around labels such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, political beliefs, or shared historical experiences, they always need to be continually nurtured and cultivated, for example through rituals and public celebrations of selected elements of collective histories.

European identity can be understood as having two dimensions. The first is of a political, legal and administrative nature and translates into the notion of citizenship, i.e. a set of rights and duties arising from being a citizen of a Member State of the European Union. This is a formal identity, legally attributed or recognised, and certified by a public document. A second dimension pertains to people's experience of 'being European'. It emerges through shared experiences and manifests in a feeling of togetherness, a sense of community. It refers to the sharing of values and principles of action that shape our relationships to other people as well as to institutions. This is a substantive identity, embodied in a common way of life in the sense that it is bound by the same norms, such as respect for human rights. As any identity, it is a model of community life that is constructed, chosen and cultivated by each individual and collectively. This is not, of course, to say that the values concerned, such as justice, solidarity and freedom, are specific to any particular region, but rather that collective experiences within a region shape the pre-eminence given to particular universal values within its collective identity.

In other words, while the first dimension of European identity is synonymous with citizenship (formal), the second is a way of being, behaving and relating to others (substantive). The two can exist separately: on the one hand, a citizen of a Member State is automatically a European citizen and this citizenship can also be granted to a person moving to an EU Member State, without either of them necessarily identifying with European values; on the other hand, some people actively choose to live within the European Union because they share, and identify with, its collective values, even without (yet) having European citizenship. Both dimensions are essential for a broad and comprehensive understanding of European identity, and they are also mutually related: the strength of the former depends on the existence of the latter, and the experience of the latter is protected by the former. In other words, citizenship as a legal membership of a society is strengthened by the feeling of belonging that encourages participation in community life; and the development of a shared co-existence is protected and can be nourished by its political and legal framework.

3.2. The reciprocal strengthening of a thick understanding of democracy and a thick understanding of identity

In analogy to conceptions of thin and thick democracy, the formal understanding of identity underpins what we can call a 'thin' identity. A 'thick' understanding of European identity, in contrast, consists of a sense of belonging to a European community, grounded in a set of fundamental shared values. Along with respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, we highlight those that contribute most to social cohesion, including: equality for all; appreciation of diversity; equity in the distribution of social goods; and solidarity with those who need it most. Sharing these values, respecting everyone's dignity and being inspired by the conviction that together we are able to contribute to a better society, to the common good, leads to a feeling of being a part of this community. This experience of being part of a community, this feeling of belonging can generate both a strong sense of pride and the acceptance of responsibility: pride in the norms and institutions that uphold them, such as the rule of law and human rights; and responsibility to be an active participant in building society.

A thick understanding of European identity needs to further highlight the role of historical events, historiography and common memory in shaping and consolidating our values. Respect for human dignity, human rights, equality, social solidarity, tolerance, etc. changes over time, and has strongly developed in Europe through the shared experience of several traumatic conflicts, which included the terrors of 'ethnic cleansing', totalitarian regimes, and international wars, as well as its colonial past. Put differently, our values reflect and respond to the common historical memory of Europe's people. As such, these values form a core component of European identity, and they need to be rearticulated in EU initiatives and policies.

	The essence of		The ideal		Compatible with populism?
	democracy	identity	role of citizens' voice	of a living identity	
'Thin' democracy and identity	Formal institutions	Formal status (citizenship)	Monistic (looking for the one, 'true' will of 'the people')	Set of rights and duties	Yes, with most forms of populism
'Thick' democracy and identity	Substantive values, rights, and practices, as well as the institutions that articulate and protect them	Substantive belonging (sense of togetherness, of community)	Pluralistic (accommodating a diversity of views and lifestyles)	Participation in community life on the basis of shared values	Not with authoritarian populism

Table 2: Different definitions of democracy and of identity and how 'thick' conceptualisations come together

Understood in this way, identity and democracy can mutually strengthen one another. The greater a person's identification with a community defined by its set of values, the greater their willingness to be involved in its governance. We always invest in what we belong to, in what we feel is ours and is our right, and in our power, to shape. And the greater a role someone plays in the governance of their community, the greater their sense of identification with that community. Just as the more we get involved, the more we feel that we belong to it.

3.3. Barriers to strengthening a European identity

Currently, we cannot say that the majority of people in Europe experience and enact such a 'thick' European identity; Brexit is only one of the most visible examples suggesting the opposite. At the same time, the feared post-Brexit fragmentation of the European Union has not occurred. On the contrary, studies indicate that the sense of being European has intensified (e.g. Malik, 2018). What this has shown, however, is that European identity is highly dependent on events not directly related to it: internal, such as the various national decisions made by member states, like Brexit; or external, such as events taking place in the world and affecting Europe directly (for example, the increase in the number of people moving to Europe) or indirectly (for example, the war in Ukraine and the energy or food price crisis).

One of the main barriers in the construction and tightening of European identity has been the unclear relationship between European citizenship and national citizenship, perhaps due to the ancillary or supplemental character of European citizenship in relation to national citizenship. European citizenship, in its legal form, is "derived"

from national citizenship (Lacroix 2021) in that it is legally contingent upon being a citizen of one of the EU member states. This means that there is no standalone European citizenship independent of national citizenship. This arrangement is outlined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which defines European citizenship as an additional status to national citizenship. This structure reflects the EU's foundational principle of "unity in diversity," which respects the unique cultures, languages, and political systems of its member states while fostering a common identity and legal framework at the European level.

The dependency of European citizenship on national citizenship, however, also raises questions about inclusivity and the political integration of the EU. It can lead to complex situations in areas like rights entitlements, political participation, and the conceptualization of citizenship beyond the nation-state. Critics argue that this might limit the depth of political integration and the development of a standalone European identity that transcends national boundaries (see Lacroix 2021). Moreover, while political advocates framed the introduction of European citizenship as a paradigm shift, in practice it may lack some characteristics of democratic and social citizenship in the traditions of the Member States (Seubert 2023), such as a broader and more direct involvement of citizens in European governance. After all, only the members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the people. In recognition of the limited scope for direct citizen participation in European institutions, initiatives such as Europe for Citizens, the EU's programme for funding projects that "encourage citizens to participate and engage in democracy at the EU level" and "help the public understand the EU's history, values and diversity",[4] have been successively creating mechanisms and channels to increase the possibilities for citizens to effectively intervene in public policies.

Despite such attempts to increase direct participation at EU level, in recent years, European integration has continued to be criticised and at times undermined by right-wing populist parties and other political forces that are hostile to European integration. The problem here is not only that the types of national identities that these parties promote are often defined in nativist terms and thus incompatible with an inclusive European identity, but also that authoritarian populism contributes to 'Europe' being associated with negative things such as increased insecurity linked with the increase in immigration, and the weakening of authority linked with the strengthening of minority rights. Furthermore, as concerns about economic hardship and levels of migration have increasingly come to dominate public debate and election campaigns, authoritarian populist parties have succeeded in channelling these fears into opposition to EU integration, and scapegoating EU policy as the cause of these problems.

The enlargement of European integration is portrayed by many authoritarian populist forces as a threat to the strengthening of national identities that these parties defend. For example, right-wing populists have critiqued the alleged top-down process of EU integration, the transfer of policy-making authority from Member States to the EU, and a perceived pro-European decision-making elite in their own countries and in Brussels.

[4] See the Europe for Citizens website.

3.4. Towards a doubly inclusive and a multi-layered European identity

We suggest that European identity can be built and strengthened through two strands of inclusivity: internally, i.e. within the European area and among European citizens; and externally, i.e. as a community of values that welcomes and integrates diversity and promotes its values beyond its geographical borders.

Externally, it is important that the EU asserts its identity as a community built on respect for human rights and fundamental values. As such, it is heterogeneous but united by the sharing of these values and the pursuit of justice and solidarity, welcoming differences and promoting their integration. In the form of diversity, differences can contribute to the development and improvement of societies. They can make them more creative and innovative by valuing different ideas and experiences, which in turn leads to better problem-solving (Page 2008), and thus, more resilience (Linkov, Trump & Kiker 2022).

Internally, within the EU, it is important to emphasise that national citizenship does not compete with European citizenship, just as what is sometimes called regional citizenship (in the sense of belonging to, and taking pride in, the region in which one was born and/or lives, and within 'a Europe of Regions') does not compete with national citizenship. It is to be expected that feelings of belonging are stronger at local levels due to greater proximity. But in a globalised and connected world, physical proximity is not the only kind of closeness, and not the only reference point for relations and solidarity. Besides, it has become clear that, in the face of the successive crises that have hit Europe, the union of Member States makes each one stronger, as has been seen in the fight against Covid-19.

Ideally, every European citizen should feel that they can hold multiple identities, including regional or local, national, and European. This concept of multiple identities has been studied in depth and different terminology has been applied, such as 'layered identities', 'hybrid identities', 'entangled identities' and many others (Straubhaar 2008; Zimmerbauer, Suutari & Saartenoja 2012). Such an entangled understanding of identity fits with the 'thick' understanding of democracy that we have been promoting, in which members recognise themselves in, and feel a sense of belonging to, more than one community or group. It clashes with the conception of a strong national identity, promoted by nativist populism (Aichholzer, Kritzinger & Plescia 2021). Such a layered understanding of identity is also what enables a person to affiliate themselves with a particular region or group, a specific nation, and the EU at the same time. These multiple identities do not have to compete with each other, as is sometimes assumed. They can and do co-exist, become salient at different times and in different contexts, and can intersect in important ways. They are cumulative and complementary, and they sometimes even reinforce each other. They can also change over time.

3.5. A new narrative of European identity

This multifaceted, thick conception of identity needs robust narratives built upon an inclusive sense of belonging. Stories and narratives about a group's historical memory, struggles, achievements, and goals help members make sense of their group identities and their significance.

The political scientist and anthropologist Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1983) famously argued that nations are 'imagined communities' insofar as their members, despite often not knowing each other, *imagine* belonging to the same collective entity. Communities do not just exist: They are always socially constructed – with shared narratives, rituals, and symbols that turn a group of people into a 'community of fate' (Grimm 2023) and that hold collective memories and identities in place. Our choice of words to describe and characterise them, the ideas or arguments that aggregate the facts and substantiate the interpretations, the values highlighted as framing the realities and the feelings and emotions that we add, that is, the narratives we interweave, are paramount. They are needed to meaningfully bind together citizens who do not know each other in person.

Anti-democratic regimes and many authoritarian populist leaders know well the value of identity narratives and are skilful in the art of appropriating and retelling identity narratives. They have been successful in constructing and bolstering nationalist identities through emotional appeals to 'primordial' bonds, rituals and symbols, to 'traditional ways of life' and by promoting beliefs about perceived threats to these, whether from immigrants, elites or through various other conspiracy theories. While identities can be based on a concept of the community that stresses 'ethnic' or other nativist forms of unity, alleged common descent and cultural homogeneity, as is often the case in right-wing populist discourses, they need not be constructed in such exclusionary ways (Dowds & Young 1996; Mounk 2018; Illouz 2023). They can, instead, be constructed in ways that highlight the values of diversity, tolerance and openness as that which defines them. Pluralism, in the form of respect for a broad range of identities, languages, and practices as long as they conform to respect for human and civil rights, strengthens rather than detracts from a shared European identity. Similarly, while identities can emphasise a blind allegiance and a surrendering of one's will to a leader, as we are increasingly seeing in regimes which slide from democracy and rule of law to authoritarianism, they can also emphasise a critical and questioning attitude towards authorities, underpinned by information, high levels of political involvement and trust in the institutions that protect diversity, tolerance and openness (Schatz, Staub & Lavine, 1999). Such an identity would be based in a civic consciousness more than in an 'ethnicised' one. It entails that, not despite but because of the supra-national nature of the EU, it is possible to foster inspiring and democratic counter-narratives that help to forge a European identity which is defined by inclusive values and the institutions that uphold them, and that these benefit *all* European citizens. This is the thick identity that should be paired with a thick understanding of democracy.

4. DEMOCRACY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Demographic changes can also have effects on democracy, directly or indirectly. For example, they can lead to tensions and concerns regarding the affordability of social security arrangements (e.g. pensions) as well as labour shortages. The gradual population decline experienced by some EU Member States (Italy, Greece, Romania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Croatia, etc.) can affect economic activity – especially when the decline is a consequence of the "brain drain" phenomenon that deprives the economy of highly skilled labour – and lead to new issues that, if left unaddressed by politicians and policy makers, will affect voting and other forms of political engagement. For example, the concentration of the population in large urban centres and the abandonment of rural areas may in the long-term lead to a shortage of essential foodstuffs and even environmental problems (due to the allocation of land to industrial activity). It is also likely to imply social inequalities to the detriment of those who choose to live in rural communities, where it is no longer considered important to create the necessary infrastructure for transport, healthcare, education, etc.

Solutions may lie in policies that take account of, and respond to, the diverse impacts of demographic changes, including on democracy. As our democracies build on inclusivity, diversity and equity, maintaining them also means ensuring respectful and meaningful integration of potentially or actually disadvantaged demographic groups. It also means fiercely countering attempts that abuse demographic changes and the vulnerable position of some to generate narrations of scapegoating that only do harm to our societies. And it means reacting to demographic developments that have the potential of detrimentally impacting democracy (and the realisation of the values sustaining it) in the future, by means of foresight, prevention and mitigation.

CONCLUSION

Democracy is under threat around the world. A much greater share of the world's population lives in autocracies today than in democracies. In the last decade, their proportion has increased further. At the same time, the quality of democracy has also been declining in many parts of the world.

In particular, substantive and pluralistic conceptions of democracy have come under pressure and require reinforcement. In such 'thick' understandings, democracy is not merely a formal regime consisting of periodic free elections but is committed to protecting and promoting fundamental rights and values, as well as practices of lived democracy. What is needed now is strategic action to counter the erosion of democratic institutions and practices and to protect and improve the quality of democracy in the European Union as the model of socio-political organisation that best protects individuals and improves the well-being of communities.

Against this backdrop, the EGE considers that:

- Democracy cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be nurtured: on the one hand by political powers in a closer dialogue with the people, and on the other by citizens in a strong and meaningful participation in civic and political life;

- Authoritarian forms of populism pose one of the biggest threats to 'thick' democracies, and are strongly associated with democratic backsliding. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge how far-right populist parties exploit legitimate grievances which need to be recognised and addressed by democratic governments, including existing democratic deficits, current and future demographic pressures, and economic hardship. This is not just in order to protect democracy in the EU, but also in order to improve it;

- Notions of identity and democracy are reciprocal in that a thick understanding of democracy, as a set of values, is underpinned by and requires a thick understanding of identity: as a sense of community based on shared values and shared institutions, which protect and enact these values.

Furthermore, the EGE calls for:

- the acknowledgment that European identity has two essential dimensions. The first is a formal identity, legally attributed or recognised, and certified by a public document, that is of a political, legal and administrative nature and which is described as citizenship, i.e. a set of rights and duties arising from being a citizen of a Member State of the European Union. The second is a substantive identity, embodied in shared values and principles, such as respect for human rights, emerging through shared (historical) experiences, and accompanied by a feeling of togetherness, a sense of community,

recognising that pluralism is at the heart of European identity. Each of these dimensions calls for specific but concurring actions;

- the strengthening of citizenship, which in turn requires a broader and more direct involvement of citizens in governance at all levels. This should be done by harnessing associative, participatory and deliberative democracy and by creating mechanisms and channels to increase the possibilities for citizens to effectively intervene in public policies that affect them and their communities;

- the acknowledgement that strengthening a common sense of belonging requires a commitment to pluralism within the framework of human rights. A plurality of views and perspectives can contribute to a richer and more informed public debate about issues that matter, and to more resilient societies;

- an ongoing commitment to the values that reflect and respond to the history of Europe's people. As such, these values need to form a core component of a European identity and the basis of our democracy, and they need to be more integrated and revitalised both in EU initiatives and policies, and in the civic space.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On this basis, the EGE recommends:

1. That policy makers and relevant organisations at all levels **apply a substantive understanding of democracy and support the substantive values, rights, and practices that underpin such a 'thick' democracy**. This also requires education, training, information, etc. The EGE calls for funding to be made available for ongoing public consultation and deliberation on the best ways of reaching these goals.

2. That policy makers at all levels **commit to strong and sufficiently funded public infrastructures** (education, health, water, energy, public transport, security, culture and care). This is not only essential to ensure the wellbeing of people and communities, particularly in the face of the demographic changes that our societies are undergoing, and as a way to earn the trust of citizens, but also as a precondition for civic and political engagement – and thus for associative democracy.

3. As noted in our previous *Opinion on Democracy in the Digital Age*, that policy makers and funders at EU and national levels fund and otherwise **support (non-commercial) European public spaces**, including the development and protection of deliberative platforms as well as digital social platforms that are in public ownership or under democratic control.

4. **A strong focus on the design, support, and development of intermediary structures in democratic, policy and administrative theory and practice in the coming years**. Democracy does not only consist of periodic and free elections, but also of lived practice in between elections. Associative democracy – understood as the self-organisation of citizens for the purpose of assessing, identifying and solving problems at local and regional levels – is one of these lived practices. It represents a developmental form of democracy in which people not only address collective problems but also develop democratic skills, such as listening and deliberating in mutual respect. The EGE calls upon policy makers at all levels to recognise intermediary structures, such as forms of associative democracy, as an essential component of flourishing democracies, and to actively facilitate and protect civic associations. These associations should be involved in governance throughout the EU, and decision making should be devolved to them or associate them, where this is meaningfully possible.

5. That policy makers at all levels should **recognise how much democratic decision making can take place at the mundane level of the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of laws and policies**. Public administration agencies and administrators should adhere to a strong administrative and civic ethos that is comfortable with working in open, collaborative relationships with civic associations. Such an administrative, civic ethos could be formulated at the European level, as a guide to leadership and related training at the European, national and local levels.

6. That policy makers at all levels **take seriously the interplay between law and authoritarian populism**. Authoritarian populist leaders' use of law, as a shield, a sword or both, is not new, but we should not assume that today's democracy-destroying uses of law are identical to their historical counterparts. The EGE calls for analysis of the ways in which law, including legal processes, are at risk of being hollowed out and repurposed by authoritarian populist leaders, and equally how such risks can be managed and resisted, including through law itself.

7. Valuing and deepening collective memory, a memory of facts and values, as integral to substantive and pluralistic forms of democracy. Without collective memory, our democracies are easy prey for various forms of non-democratic movements. We recommend that more be done, at all levels of society, and specifically aimed at all age groups, from the education of school-aged children and youth upwards, to counteract the creation and exploitation of false memories as well as forgetting what should not be forgotten, e.g. the harms of rights-violating laws, policies, and practices and the benefits of rights-respecting ones. The EGE calls upon the European Union and Member States to **reinforce mechanisms that secure and support fact and value-based collective memory.**

8. That **all members of the research community consider the potential contribution of their work to strengthening democracy, in Europe and beyond**. Research funders can encourage this by explicitly inviting an impact analysis at the research proposal and reporting stage, in analogy to considerations funders often require on issues such as equality of opportunity or sustainability. In addition, grant schemes focusing on democracy reaching out to a broad range of disciplines can continue to encourage innovative approaches and effective interdisciplinary collaborations.

9. That, to achieve the optimum level of quality of life for all, economic indicators should not be interpreted dogmatically, but in conjunction with the conditions of people's real lives, particularly those of the most vulnerable members of society. This may require the **creation of new metrics measuring the wellbeing of societies in a more comprehensive sense**. The EGE further considers it imperative for policy makers to **create the conditions for the smooth integration of migrants into the European economy and society**. In this context, solidarity measures must be taken between Member States, both to combat the modern slave trade and to ensure a balanced settlement of migrants throughout the EU.

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Recent years have seen a wave of far-right populism gaining momentum in many countries. In this Statement, the EGE analyses how this puts democracy at risk. It formulates a substantive understanding of democracy that does not limit it to elections, but makes real the values and rights it is based upon.

The EGE further reflects on how understandings of identity that are not defined by exclusionary categories but encompass plurality can contribute to people's appreciation of the European endeavour and strengthen their participation in society. It highlights the need for a reorientation of Europe to its social roots as key for countering the rise of authoritarianism.

On this basis, the EGE proposes a series of recommendations for a democratic and vibrant European civic space.

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