

Time to reset!

How can we revitalise European democracies?

**Friedrich
Ebert** 
Stiftung

Key Findings of the Brussels Democracy Dialogue 2025

Building a Progressive Vision for a Resilient and Responsive Democracy in the 21st Century

Julian Plottka

“Democracy needs democrats.” The quote ascribed to the first German president and namesake of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung summarises the twofold challenge that democracies are currently facing. First, democracies can only survive if citizens make use of their civic rights and engage in decision-making. Citizens’ trust in democracy and their participation is needed for a vibrant democracy resilient against anti-democratic attacks. Second, democracies need democrats with the courage to actively defend democracies against these attacks from populists and right-wing extremists.

To discuss the causes of democratic backsliding and to develop policy recommendations for winning back citizens to engage in and defend democracy, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung convened policymakers, scientists, think-tankers, trade unionists and civil society activists for the Brussels Democracy Dialogue 2025. They identified four sets of concrete recommendations to revitalise European democracies:

1. **Democrats need to better strategise** and make full use of the instruments at their disposal to fight against right-wing populists and anti-democrats.
2. **Democracies need to be responsive to citizens’ demands** (especially economic demands), but concrete results must be embedded in a wider progressive project for the 21st century to win the culture war against right-wing populists and anti-democrats.
3. The European Union (EU) needs to **scale up its defence against foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)** and address the structural dimension (regulation of very large online platforms) and emotional dimension of FIMI (narratives are not fought with facts).
4. Democrats need to **revitalise democracies and offer a positive vision for civic engagement** instead of merely defending the functioning democracies of the past.

Session 1: How can we get people to care about and defend democracy?

Strategise better to make full use of all instruments

Citizens' disenchantment with democratic systems is attributed to a lack of trust and a gap between citizens and decision-makers. While democrats are criticised for not being responsive to citizens' demands, there is a widely shared belief that populists and strong men deliver better. This is partly due to the fact that their simple explanations are more appealing than complex democratic solutions, which often strike compromises between different interests. However, several populists are indeed better at strategically delivering to key voter groups, giving the impression of being responsive and securing elections this way. Additional strategies are emotional campaigns based on fear and social division. This enables populists and anti-democrats to build a bond with citizens in response to the perceived gap between them and the political system. Citizens' interest in the abstract concept of democracy is limited, whereas they still highly value its component parts, such as freedom, transparency, etc. Hence, for example, the left in Poland was able to mobilise on concrete issues such as corruption within the far-right government. In general, the left's narratives fail to keep up with the times. They are mainly based on rational arguments and disseminated in a top-down approach, whereas they should be more emotional and developed in a grassroots approach in order to mobilise citizens. More concretely, the discussion recommended the following as the next steps to defend democracy:

- **Let the autocrats fail:** Progressive forces should strategically obstruct populist and anti-democratic governments and refrain from cooperating with them. This will destroy the narrative of strong men delivering better.
- **Play hard ball:** Progressive forces should use all instruments available within the boundaries of the constitution to obstruct autocrats. Historically, providing autocrats with the tools to destroy democracy from within has been the biggest mistake.
- **Do not criticise each other:** Democrats tend to fight internally over strategies to tackle antidemocratic forces; instead, all progressive forces need to unite and fight together.
- **Develop emotionally resonant narratives:** Progressive forces should create emotional narratives, which connect democratic values to concrete issues people care about, such as family, community, justice and security. This could involve sharing success stories and humanising autocrats' victims.
- **Combine social welfare and democratic messages:** Progressive forces should use social benefits or econom-

ic incentives to foster loyalty towards the democratic system. To this end, they need to provide benefits to specific target groups detached from democracy and embed them in pro-democratic narratives.

- **Build bottom-up campaign narratives:** The pro-democratic narratives must resonate with citizens. Therefore, they should adopt an inclusive approach to engage citizens, most notably marginalised groups, to (re-)build trust in democratic institutions.

Session 2: How can European democracies deliver better?

Develop a new progressive project delivering to citizens

Many voters seem willing to put economic benefits before democratic norms and principles. The clear lesson from autocrats' success in meeting these demands is that democrats need to address urgent matters such as housing, healthcare and inequality. Economic security is a crucial prerequisite for political participation. Increasing social cohesion is key for rebuilding trust in democratic institutions. Progressive politicians have also propagated neoliberal policies. Some are still hesitant to talk about redistribution. To win back citizens for social-democratic agendas, progressive forces need to be bolder in their messages and policies. Research shows that citizens do not oppose redistribution generally: they are willing to pay taxes, if they are considered fair and if tangible benefits are received, such as a functioning infrastructure. However, simple "deliverism" is a misguided strategy. Trying to weaponise populist and anti-democratic policies for democratic ends has always failed, as illustrated by anti-migration policies, which only benefit populists and extremists. Delivering on citizens' demands is not enough to make anti-democratic sentiment disappear. All policies responding to citizens' demands must be embedded in a new progressive project with a new industrial strategy at its heart. This strategy should address the social issues of the gig economy and regard technological development as an opportunity and not a threat to job creation. More specifically, the discussion recommended the following steps to defend democracy:

- **Reclaim the language of redistribution:** Progressive forces should advocate a just redistribution agenda and link it to democracy. It should include a fair taxation agenda, where citizens contribute according to their economic power. The system should be fair and transparent, offering citizens tangible benefits in return for their contributions.
- **Make affordable housing a priority:** Progressive forces need to provide affordable housing for all EU citizens, especially young people and vulnerable groups. Public housing policies should include broader urban develop-

ment and anti-gentrification strategies to support social cohesion and avoid social segregation.

- **Invest in high-quality public goods:** Progressive forces should prioritise the improvement of public goods provided to citizens. Citizens must enjoy high-quality public infrastructure and a functioning state to (re-)build trust in the state.
- **Protect and regulate platform work:** Progressive forces must ensure that all workers enjoy the same level of protection, rights and income opportunities. Unequal working conditions for platform work prevent citizens from engaging in democratic decision-making.
- **Empower labour unions:** Progressive forces must support trade union organisations and strengthen democratic co-determination in companies, which are crucial for safeguarding the collective interests of workers and employees.
- **Embed the measures in a new progressive project:** These concrete measures should be embedded in a new progressive vision for work and welfare in the 21st century. It should include a new industrial agenda, linking job creation through green and digital transitions with democratic participation, fair working conditions and social safeguards.

Session 3: The European Democracy Shield and the struggle against radical right disinformation

Scale up defence against FIMI

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is a major threat to democracies as malign foreign actors and right-wing extremists join forces. The far right is using the latest online and media tools, including AI, to spread disinformation and to manipulate voters. For third-country actors, such as Russia, FIMI has become a crucial element of their war strategies. This is only possible as very large online platforms, owned by tech oligarchs with a political agenda, enable anti-democratic forces with the digital tools to pursue effective campaigns. The design of these platforms, including recommendation systems, virality loops and opaque moderation, systematically amplifies extremist content, while legal regulations are only reluctantly enforced. The Digital Service Act is a good start, but companies are reluctant to control FIMI or even enforce existing legal rules. Therefore, the structural aspects of very large online platforms need to be addressed. FIMI does not import new political polarisation into democracies, but exploits existing tensions within societies. These campaigns are only effective when they can fuel pre-existing culture wars. As a countermeasure, fact-checking has a limited impact, as these campaigns use misinformation

to fuel emotions, which cannot be countered with rational arguments. To address these challenges, the discussion made the following concrete recommendations:

- **Regulate online platforms and enforce the rules:** The EU should close the existing enforcement gap and systematically sanction non-compliance, resisting pressure from foreign companies. The platforms must become more transparent, most notably with recommendation systems being an opt-in, rather than an opt-out, feature. The rules should be the same both on- and offline.
- **Build a European digital infrastructure:** The EU should end its dependence on US- and Chinese-owned very large online platforms and AI technology. To become strategically autonomous, it should build its own digital infrastructure, which should also become part of its new industrial strategy.
- **Hybrid warfare requires a hybrid response:** The EU should understand FIMI as an element of hybrid warfare and invest in digital defence as much as in traditional weapons. All member states should establish well-funded anti-FIMI situation centres, which can effectively take countermeasures against hybrid warfare.
- **Fund high-quality media:** The business models of high-quality media are no longer sustainable. However, reliable information is a public good and a crucial prerequisite for the functioning of democracies. Therefore, the EU should establish sustainable funding for high-quality media, granting every citizen access to reliable information.
- **Invest more in media literacy:** Media literacy must become a priority in both formal and non-formal education. Funding should be increased for projects raising awareness of FIMI and the risks of social media, as well as for programmes that improve media literacy and fact-checking.

Session 4: Rethinking (social) democracy: where can we find a new democratic vision?

Revitalise democracies with a positive vision for civic engagement

The world is currently facing a wave of democratic regression, which has now reached Europe and the USA. However, anti-democratic actors claim to be democrats themselves and to solve the deficits of existing democracies. This universal claim of everyone being a democrat has hollowed out the concept of democracy, making it difficult for citizens to understand its essence. This requires not just educational efforts to teach citizens the definition of democracy, but a positive vision of what democracy means for the individual. This vision should, however, follow the American philosopher John Dewey's

recommendation not to cure the ills of democracy by more of the same, but develop it further. Accordingly, a progressive vision of democracy has to further develop existing democracies by making them more inclusive and offering new avenues for civic engagement. This is especially crucial for the EU's political system, where representative democracy in a transnational political system still faces major deficits which need to be addressed. To do so, the discussion made the following concrete recommendations:

- **Invest in civic education:** Progressive forces should increase the funding for civic education. Citizen education must be improved on all levels, with a special focus on current challenges to democracy, as discussed before. These should also make use of new dissemination channels on social media to reach additional target groups.
- **Develop new instruments for civic engagement:** Currently, new forms of political participation seek to involve more citizens and strengthen grassroots-level participation. Progressive forces should therefore reform existing representative democracies and add complementary instruments of civic engagement.
- **Enhance the EU's democratic legitimacy:** The transnational character of EU democracy is still underdeveloped. To strengthen this cross-border dimension, progressive forces should support transnational lists and the concept of "Spitzenkandidaten" to enhance the legitimacy of European elections and encourage further reforms.
- **Promote economic democracy:** Civic participation is not limited to the political sphere. Progressive forces should therefore promote democracy and civic participation in other areas of life, most notably in the workplace, where the role of trade unions needs to be reinforced.
- **Develop inclusive patriotism:** Right-wing extremists are promoting negative patriotism. To reach people outside their own constituencies, progressive forces should reclaim national symbols and develop inclusive patriotism based on pluralism, diversity, solidarity, freedom and political and workers' rights.
- **Leading, not following:** Progressives should develop bold new ideas to reimagine European democracies and move forward.

About the author

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