

# Time to reset!

# How can we revitalise European democracies?

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## Time to connect the dots: how (not) to defend European democracy

Alice Stollmeyer

Like the climate crisis, the democracy crisis didn't happen overnight. Rather than a single tipping point, democracy dies by a thousand cuts. And until recently, European institutions and democracies stood by and let it happen.

Sure, in the past there were half-hearted efforts to protect the rule of law, elections and press freedom. But the European Commission often failed to do its job as Guardian of the Treaties, and whenever it tried, EU Member States were quick to put on the brakes.

Even worse, European institutions and countries, rather than standing up for our foundational European values, have been giving in to geopolitical pressure, whether from Hungary – Putin's Trojan horse within – or from the Trump II administration.

We can and must do better, before it's too late. But let us first unpick how democracies are pressured from many sides, so that we can better strengthen and defend our democracy.

### Foreign threats to democracy

Authoritarian regimes, in particular Russia and China, are trying to weaken democracies by using "hybrid threats": harmful activities that are planned and carried out with malign intent, aiming to undermine a state or an institution through a variety of (combined) means. These include cyberattacks, information manipulation, economic coercion, strategic corruption, covert political manoeuvring, coercive diplomacy, sabotage of critical infrastructure and threats of military force. Hybrid threats range from relatively light interference through to hybrid warfare. Under President Trump, we now observe worryingly similar practices from the United States.

Hybrid threats aim to restrict democracies' political room for manoeuvre, including by undermining their citizens' sense of security. They are designed to create fear or anxiety and sow distrust towards authorities and groups like migrants, minorities or activists. They target and exploit vulnerabilities inherent in democracies and in the fabric of democratic societies, such as civil liberties and political

rights. By using hybrid threat activities, malign actors seek to deepen divisions in society, undermining social cohesion and trust among citizens and towards their democratic institutions.

## Domestic threats to democracy

But democracies are also under pressure from within. After a wave of democratisation in the late 20th century, since the great recession of 2007–2009 there has been a wave of democratic backsliding: a form of autocratisation, a process of regime change toward authoritarianism in which the exercise of political power becomes less restrained and more arbitrary and repressive. Worldwide, there are now more autocracies than democracies.<sup>1</sup>

Another domestic challenge for democracy is radicalisation, ranging from an individual's process of radicalisation, to a group's process of legitimising the use of violence, to the collective construction of a threatened ideal ("us" against "them"), where others are dehumanised by a process of scapegoating, leading to acts of violence.

Closely related to radicalisation is the rise of the far right. In many countries, including in the European Union, political parties on the extreme right are gaining power. Trailblazer Hungary was followed by Poland and the UK (when it was still an EU member). And now we can see this trend across Europe, even in larger Member States like Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Since the European elections of 2024, the shift to the (far) right can also be observed in the European Parliament.

## Technological threats to democracy

As far back as 2021, a study<sup>2</sup> identified nine trends that were likely to pose digital threats to democracy in the near future: digitally impaired cognition, reality apathy, a weaponised information environment, fragile complex infrastructure, compromised privacy and data, weakened media institutions, increased digital authoritarianism, fractured ideologies and identities, and intensifying monetisation of attention.

Why are these technological trends that impact information – and the way we process it – so dangerous for democracy? As Nobel Prize winner Maria Ressa says<sup>3</sup>: "Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't

have trust. Without all three, we have no shared reality and no democracy. And it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems."

But beyond impacting information, the tech industry is undermining democracy more directly. This is the "tech coup", as described by former Dutch MEP Marietje Schaake.<sup>4</sup> Over the past few decades, under the cover of "innovation", technology companies have successfully resisted regulation and have even begun to seize power from governments themselves. Tech has gone from being heralded as utopian to undermining the pillars of our democracies.

## Connecting the dots

Since at least 2014 we have been witnessing a coup against democracy unfolding across Europe and beyond – driven by a combination of hybrid warfare, the far right, and tech monopolies. Therefore, the mission<sup>5</sup> of Defend Democracy, an independent non-profit organisation, is to strengthen and defend democracy against foreign, domestic and technological threats. These three threats are not separate from one another; they are linked and are reinforcing each other.

Authoritarian regimes are deploying "sharp power" to undermine democracies from within by weaponising social media and digital technologies more broadly (e.g. apps, browsers, AI, etc.). Meanwhile, far-right internet movements have gained popularity and notoriety online and offline.

And unregulated technology has not only become a forceful instrument for autocrats around the world, but also for Big Tech CEOs themselves. The "tech bros" have spent billions to help elect and appease the Trump II administration.

As French President Emmanuel Macron says: "We have been incredibly naive in entrusting our democratic space to [American and Chinese] social networks, whose interests are not at all the survival or proper functioning of our democracies."<sup>6</sup>

## Shielding European democracy?

Yet the biggest danger to democracy is not any single one of these foreign, domestic or technological threats. Rather, it is the convergence of these three reinforcing trends that

1 V-Dem Institute (2025). Press Release: Restrictions to freedom of expression as democracy loses ground. Available at: <https://v-dem.net/news/press-release-restrictions-to-freedom-of-expression-as-democracy-loses-ground/> [Accessed 9 Feb. 2026].

2 Wehsener, A., Zakem, V. and Miller, M.N. (2021). Future Digital Threats to Democracy – Trends and Drivers. Institute for Security and Technology. Available at: <https://securityandtechnology.org/virtual-library/reports/future-digital-threats-to-democracy-trends-and-drivers/> [Accessed 9 Feb. 2026].

3 Ressa, M. (2021). The Nobel Peace Prize 2021. NobelPrize.org. Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2021/ressa/lecture/>.

4 Schaake, M. (2024). The Tech Coup. Princeton University Press.

5 Defend Democracy (no date). "Mission". Defend Democracy. Available at: <https://defenddemocracy.eu/about/mission/> [Accessed 9 Feb. 2026].

6 Defend Democracy (2025). "Europeans, let's wake up!". Defend Democracy. Available at: <https://defenddemocracy.eu/macron-democracy-tech/> [Accessed 9 Feb. 2026].

jeopardises our democracy, and even our security. Given this convergence, will the proposed European Democracy Shield actually shield democracy?

While in theory the Commission's democracy package complements the EU's internal security strategy, defence strategy and preparedness strategy – aiming to form a coherent ecosystem of efforts to strengthen and sustain our democratic resilience – in practice the Democracy Shield falls short of what its name suggests it will do.

First, there is a gap between the serious threats and the limited operational measures that are proposed: voluntary coordination rather than firm obligations or enforcement tools.

Second, the Shield overemphasises external threats, allowing it to sidestep uncomfortable issues within the EU itself. This limits its ability to address the full spectrum of vulnerabilities.

Third, the Shield fails to confront the systemic risks posed by platform algorithms and digital business models. It proposes no new obligations for platforms – despite the possibility of enforcing risk mitigation measures under EU digital legislation.

## Yesterday's war

Neither does the Shield link its diagnosis to the “strategic autonomy” and “tech sovereignty” that top the EU's political agenda these days. Why doesn't the package connect the dots of the EU's stated priorities of democracy, security and sovereignty? Is it lobby power from the Big Tech companies, or even (un)diplomatic pressure from the United States?

Democracies should have shifted their focus from content moderation to the governance of digital platform design years ago. And as soon as Elon Musk bought Twitter (in October 2022), they should have known and acted on the risk of hostile ownership of critical infrastructure for our democracy and security. As social media platforms have started their terminal decline, our battle can no longer be against their content, nor only against their design, but for what comes next: the transition from our information ecosystem being dominated by social media platforms to one dominated by artificial intelligence.

Instead, the Shield is still fighting yesterday's war with soft measures like factchecking, media literacy and more coordination. While these may be useful, they are insufficient to counter systemic drivers of “old” information manipulation and are wholly unprepared to tackle AI. So let's not pretend that the Shield, nor its proposed “European Centre for Democratic Resilience” will protect us from Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), let alone from hybrid threats. And they certainly won't shield democracy from the three converging trends that threaten its existence.

## Never let a good crisis go to waste

Sadly, we must conclude that the EU is still doing too little to defend our democracies against foreign interference, to prevent further polarisation and erosion of democracy “at home” and to protect our democracies from technological challenges. Worse, it doesn't seem to acknowledge that these threats are interconnected and are now converging.

The writing has been on the wall for more than a decade. Now that Putin, Trump and “tech bros” seem to share similar goals, how many more wake-up calls do we need? Are we going to “wait and see” until, one by one, all European democracies are captured? Or will we heed the frog's warning that we must jump out of the warming water before we are boiled alive?

## About the author

**Alice Stollmeyer** is Founder & Executive Director of Defend Democracy, a nonpartisan NGO defending democracy from foreign, domestic and technological threats. Alice has a background in social studies of science, technology and society. A former policy adviser, she now works at the geopolitical nexus of democracy, security and technology. Besides leading Defend Democracy, Alice is on the Steering Group of the Netherlands Democracy Coalition and she is an associated expert of the Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre.

## About Brussels Democracy Dialogue

The Brussels Democracy Dialogue (BDD) is a high-level platform for exchanging progressive ideas and proposals to address the many challenges facing democracies today. Organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, it was originally held in Hambach, Germany, as the Hambach Democracy Dialogue (HDD). Since 2024, the conference has taken place in Brussels, bringing together around 100 progressive democracy experts from politics, academia, trade unions, and civil society across Europe and beyond. Its aim is to challenge our established explanations and to offer new and innovative solutions that enable progressive actors to successfully confront the recent global trend of democratic backsliding and to defend social democracy.

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