

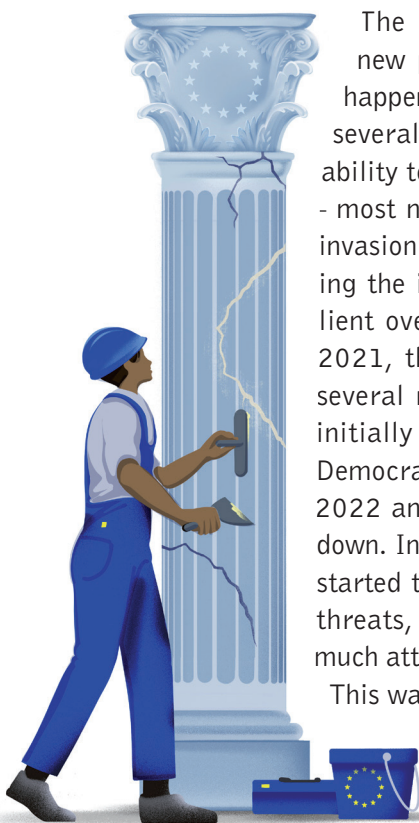
Executive summary

# From democratic resilience to democratic security

## A post-2024 democracy agenda for the EU

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**In 2019, the newly elected president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, decided to establish a democracy portfolio with a direct Vice-President in charge of it. While democracy had been enshrined in the EU Treaties for quite some time, the topic was not seen as a policy field that the EU had to work on beforehand. However, in view of the rapid democratic backsliding across EU Member States, the Commission proposed an ambitious agenda. Looking back at the 2019-2024 mandate, the Commission managed to deliver on many of its proposals; and it went further than initially planned in the 2019 political guidelines.**



The successful adoption of new policies and instruments happened in a context in which several crises affected the EU's ability to focus on this policy field - most notably Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine - despite making the issue potentially more salient overall. Between 2019 and 2021, the Commission proposed several new pieces of legislation, initially set out in the European Democracy Action Plan. Between 2022 and 2024, the pace slowed down. In addition, the Commission started to focus mostly on foreign threats, all the while not paying much attention to domestic threats.

This was particularly the case for the Defence of Democracy package, which was not adopted before the June 2024

European elections, and was criticised by civil society and European parliamentarians alike. Additionally, the state of democracy in Europe further degraded between 2019 and 2024 and anti-democratic forces gained ground. Against this backdrop, the pace of EU legislation to defend democracy can be seen as largely insufficient to counter the speed of the backsliding, which is intentionally undertaken by certain political actors, domestic and foreign, with the objective to

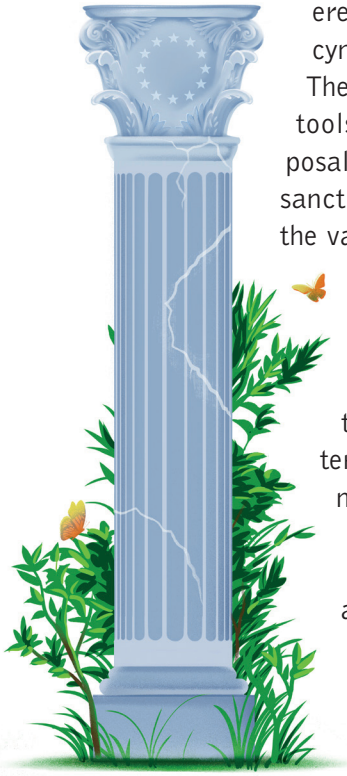
achieve state capture, fragment societies and weaken the EU. Based on the 2024 political guidelines and mission letters to the new Commissioners, the EU's approach towards democracy seems to have shifted from a focus on democratic resilience towards democratic security. While this slightly changed approach is understandable in view of the threats, such as disinformation and foreign interference, the EU institutions will have to double, or even triple, their efforts to ensure that democracies are protected from both authoritarian decision-makers within the EU and from third countries' interference, which undermine democratic processes in Europe.

To do so, the EU should consider strengthening democracy as a strategic policy field, relevant for citizens' well-being, for a striving European economy and for national security. In the next mandate, the European Commission should propose an ambitious democracy agenda, which focuses on all aspects of democracy: rule of law, media freedom, disinformation, anti-corruption, electoral integrity, and aspects of accountability and transparency in EU institutions, as well as improving citizen participation at EU level and investing in civic education. While all these aspects are mentioned in the existing official documents at the beginning of the mandate, it remains to be seen whether the Commission will follow up on this discourse with ambitious initiatives, or whether it will consist mostly of political announcements. Based on the assessment of the new political guidelines and mission-letters for the new Commissioners, it looks like the EU plans to

focus mostly on external threats to democracy – election meddling and online disinformation – rather than the domestic threats stemming from far-right parties and organisations in their ecosystems, such as the ‘Identitarian Movement’.

After a thorough examination of the EU’s 2019-2024 democracy agenda, this study presents recommendations for the next legislative cycle. First and foremost, democracy should under no circumstances be considered an obstacle for effective policy-making and crisis management.

The Commission should use all the tools and instruments at its disposal to safeguard democracy and sanction those who do not respect the values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), while ensuring full compliance and enforcement of its own legislation in the field, for instance to counter disinformation. It also should more systematically assess and regularly review its response to democratic backsliding to avoid a weaponisation of its own legislation, ensure appropriate funding is allocated to this policy field and ensure alignment of all EU legisla-



tion with democratic standards, especially in the field of migration and asylum policy. The planned European Democracy Shield should try to respond to both domestic and foreign threats alike.

In addition, the EU will have to get its own house in order after the Qatargate scandal, and ensure that democratic standards are upheld with higher accountability and transparency rules in all the institutions. In particular, the European Council and the Council of the EU should stop politically instrumentalising EU values by viewing them as bargaining chips to reach political agreements in other policy fields, such as foreign and defence policy. Lastly, the EU institutions should improve the EU’s internal governance on democracy, both within their own administration and in the inter-institutional relations. In particular, the EU institutions will have to be more strategic and streamlined in their way of tackling the issue – for instance by establishing a task force for democracy within the Secretariat General of the European Commission, and/or ensuring that the new Executive Vice-President in charge of democracy has sufficient leverage to ‘mainstream’ democracy within all EU policy fields. In particular, EU Member States that are still considered stable democracies, such as France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and Sweden, should support the EU’s efforts in safeguarding what has been one of the biggest achievements of the past centuries and allowed European countries to live in peace together, namely democracy.

## Overview of recommendations

1. Democracy should not be considered as an obstacle in the way of effective decision-making and crisis management.
2. The EU institutions should make full use of existing powers and instruments to protect and sustain democracy.
3. The European Commission should ensure full compliance and enforcement of its own legislation in the field of democracy.
4. The EU institutions should systematically assess and regularly review their response to democratic backsliding and avoid a weaponisation of their own legislation.
5. The EU should consider democracy a public good and invest in it.
6. The European Commission should ensure alignment of all EU legislation with EU values.
7. The EU institutions should ensure that democratic standards are respected within the EU institutions and decision-making processes.
8. The EU should stop politically instrumentalising EU values.
9. The EU institutions should improve their internal governance on democracy.

