



D4.1: The No demos thesis and EU-level representative disconnect

WP4 - A governance disconnect

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	The No demos thesis and EU-level representative disconnect – theoretical debate	4
2.1	What is meant by democratic people and how to situate that in the representative ecology?	5
2.2	What does the no demos thesis claim?	6
2.3	The representative disconnect versus the no demos thesis	8
2.4	Scaling up democracy to the European level or rescaling democracy?	9
2.5	Is demoicracy a strategy for redirection?	10
3	A “weak demos” in Europe?	12
3.1	Analytical framework and expectations: absence or weakness?	13
3.2	Data and methodology	14
3.3	Empirical patterns	15
3.3.1	Attachment to Europe	15
3.3.2	Preferences on European integration	16
3.3.3	Trust in EU institutions	17
3.3.4	The Europeanism Index	18
3.4	What drives Europeanism?	19
4	Citizens-centred reforms in the EP debates. Contingent demos in sight?	20
4.1	European demos and representative disconnect. Conceptual frames of analysing political discourse	22
4.2	Data and methodological remarks	23
4.3	Main actors debating citizens’ participation.	24
4.4	Citizens’ participation and inclusion in debates following the CoFoE	26
4.4.1	Representative disconnect and parliaments	26
4.4.2	Citizens’ oriented reforms and reconnection strategies	28
4.4.3	Redirection strategies and democratic innovations	29
4.4.4	On creating European demos in the EP	30
4.5	Citizens and protection of democracy in a context of hybrid warfare	31
5	Conclusions	36
	References	38
	ANNEX 1. List of analysed debates in the European Parliament	41

1 Introduction

REDIRECT key conceptual contribution is representative disconnect that is allowing a diagnosis of three types of disconnect between citizens and political actors: (i) directly regarding the institutions and practices of intermediation (*intermediation disconnect*); (ii) involving practices of governance and accountability (*governance disconnect*); (iii) and related to the political behaviour and attitudes towards politics/democracy by citizens and political elites (*affective disconnect*). **Working package 4 (WP4) A governance disconnect** focuses on the governance disconnect and presupposes that the representative disconnect manifests itself in weakened governing responsiveness and governing capacity. A significant source of the disconnect is the uneven pattern of rescaling governance, which privileges executive and expert bodies over representative-democratic bodies and political parties. The key aim of WP4 is to clarify what constitutes a systemic governing disconnect and provide a discussion of conditions of rescaling governance for managing the governance disconnect.

This document constitutes **Deliverable D4.1: Report on the no demos thesis and EU-level representative disconnect** of the REDIRECT project. The report is the outcome of **Task 4.2. Conditions of rescaling governance for a representative democratic disconnect** (Lead: UIO). Within this part of the project, the aim was to assess the ‘no demos thesis’ which claims that the EU is unfit for democracy because it lacks a European democratic people. Second, how serious is the mismatch between the issues that are decided at the EU level and the European Parliament’s ability to influence decision-making. Finally, to what extent does the expectations – capability gap (the mismatch between citizens’ expectations and the EU’s actual ability to carry out actions) constitute a representative disconnect? Empirical data in this task is based on analysis of documents and institutional performance, input from citizens and mass surveys about their expectations towards the EU; and analysis of political discourse in the European Parliament (EP).

The presented report begins with a detailed examination of the theoretical debates on the representative disconnect in governance terms at the EU level. It is conducted through a critical assessment of the discussion claiming that the EU needs a demos to establish a fully-fledged democratic system. The theoretical part is followed by two empirical perspectives. Firstly, we provide an analysis of whether European citizens exhibit the attitudinal foundations of a shared political community, engaging empirically with the long-standing “no demos thesis”. Using cross-national survey data from eight countries conducted within REDIRECT in 2025, we assess multiple dimensions of European identification and support for the European Union, combining descriptive patterns with a composite Europeanism index and regression models that account for sociodemographics, ideology, and country-level differences. The second empirical part examines the opinions of political actors in EP plenary debates, focusing on the reforms needed (and how) to increase citizens’ role in EU decision-making, in both direct and indirect ways. Empirically, it is based on debates related to the Conference on the Future of Europe that were held in the last few years in the EP (2020-2022) as well as debates on the Defence of Democracy Package (2023) and the European Democracy Shield (2025) that dominated the discussions in the EP following the Russian full-scale war against Ukraine. The selected debates

were analysed covering the relevant aspects of the debate on no demos specifically focusing on reconnection and redirection strategies as specified by our REDIRECT project.

2 The No demos thesis and EU-level representative disconnect – theoretical debate

John Erik Fossum, Christopher Lord

The purpose of the report is to examine the ‘no demos thesis’ and consider that up against the notion of representative disconnect. The ‘no demos thesis’ claims that the EU is unfit for democracy because it lacks a European demos or people. If we translate that to REDIRECT’s emphasis on representative disconnect, the most obvious conclusion is that a political system that lacks a people also suffers from a representative disconnect.

There is no doubt a strong overlap between a situation marked by the absence of a democratic people, and one marked by a representative disconnect, but there is no perfect correspondence between the two. We can imagine the following scenarios: A polity without a properly developed demos can still have a system of representation. The obverse is far less likely, especially since modern democracy *is* representative democracy (Plotke 1997; Urbinati 2008). A polity with a democratic people will therefore also have a system of democratic representation. What these systems will look like hinges to a large extent on what we mean by a democratic people.

As will be shown below, the normative and political debate on democratic people revolves not only around the representative system (citizenship, parties, and parliament), but the representative ecology, in other words “a web of practices and relations interacting and influencing each other (often contingently)” (Castiglione 2024a, 20). This web consists of several layers or circles, with the core institutions of representative democracy (parties, parliaments and citizens’ rights) at the heart and supported by the range of government institutions, civil society, and the system of communication (media and public sphere). What is interesting is that a significant portion of this debate has associated ‘no demos’ with elements that are in the outer circles of the representative ecology. Or, to put it differently, the more the core requirements for a democratic people are situated in the broader socio-economic, cultural and historical context that democratic institutions and arrangements are embedded in, the more attention we need to pay to the relationship between demos and representative disconnect because the implication is that the representative system is not enough for carrying or sustaining democracy. That, of course, has direct bearings on how we understand democracy: is it ultimately based on a common (political) culture, or is it foremostly situated in law and political institutions? That in turn matters a lot to how easy or how hard it is to establish a viable democracy in a multilevel, multicultural and multilingual entity such as the EU.

This theoretical discussion has two main parts. The first part clarifies the relationship between the no demos thesis and the representative disconnect. That requires first spelling out what is generally meant by a democratic people, and how a democratic people will come about. Further,

we need to clarify what is meant by a representative disconnect. Doing that helps us to clarify the relationship between the no demos thesis and the representative disconnect.

The second part focuses on the EU and examines the contention that the EU lacks a democratic people. That is because the no demos thesis has been discussed with explicit reference to the EU. We discuss what aspects of the representative ecology the EU debate focuses on and what forms of representative disconnect mark the EU. Is the main problem for the EU a lack of a democratic people or forms of representative disconnect? The answer depends both on what we mean by democratic people and how that comes about.

2.1 What is meant by democratic people and how to situate that in the representative ecology?

The no demos thesis brings up the question of what more precisely is meant by democratic people: what the core requirements are, what differentiates one people from another, and what kind of boundaries do and should separate them. Many analysts have underlined the need for a democratic people to be situated in a common national identity and a shared language and that this community has a strong embeddedness in the past. This line of reasoning equates people-forming with state formation and nation-building, and in many ways forms the ‘master narrative’.

One important aspect of this master narrative is that normative and democratic theory has placed far more emphasis on constitution making, the establishment of the system of rule, than it has on people-forming, as such (Näsström 2007). Several factors help account for that. One is that people-forming has - and this is at the heart of the master narrative, which is closely associated with the rise of the sovereign nation-state - generally been seen as the product of state formation. The state’s accumulation and concentration of coercive, extractive and border-controlling powers enabled it to define and delimit the people through systems of border controls and rules governing entry and exit (Bartolini 2007; Rokkan 1975). The development of nation-state democracy enabled the people to understand themselves as the authors of the laws that they were subject to (Habermas 1996); hence popular sovereignty. The modern nation state has been justified and structured on the tenet of a territorial correspondence between the reach of popular and state sovereignty.

It is hardly surprising that this historical account has had such purchase, not only in practical politics but also well into democratic theory. It is in many ways buttressed by the so-called paradox of democracy or what has also been referred to as the ‘demos paradox’. That is “the idea that the composition of a demos could never secure democratic legitimacy because the composition of a demos cannot itself be democratically decided” (Maltais et al. 2019, 435). The conundrum, that democracy lacks the mechanisms for ensuring that the democratic people, is decided in a democratic manner, has come to plague normative theory. The problem is not only that all must consent to being part of the people; it is also necessary to establish whose consent is necessary to make such a decision in the first place. That leads to an endless regress. As Näsström (2007, 630) notes, “the vote on the proper constitution of the people is caught in a vicious circle. The vote does not concede legitimacy to the people. It presupposes it. It indirectly takes for granted

what it sets out to decide, namely, who properly belongs to the people". This problem has made many analysts bracket the problem of the legitimacy of the people and de facto left this to historical contingency. The problem with that is that it has opened up scope for autocratisation, where people do not decide this question among themselves but rather confer authority on a power structure that they then cannot properly control (the Hobbesian situation).

Näsström's (2007, 42) alternative is to argue instead that "the constitution of the people raises a claim for legitimacy", and is a matter of constant debate and contestation because there is no conclusive answer. The issue is, therefore, a constant and ongoing search for the appropriate way of constituting the people. Democracy is reflexive; people formation must be the same. These observations matter for how we approach the no demos thesis in the EU context.

2.2 What does the no demos thesis claim?

The no demos thesis is generally traced back to several articles in the mid-1990s (Grimm 1995; Kielmannsegg 1996; Weiler 1995). Joseph Weiler attributes it to the German Constitutional Court's Maastricht decision, and especially its Rapporteur, Paul Kirchhof. Weiler distinguishes between a hard and a soft version. The hard version that he attributes to Kirchhof he cites as follows: "The people of a polity, the Volk, its demos is a concept which has a subjective – socio-psychological – component which is rooted in objective, organic conditions. Both the subjective and the objective can be observed empirically in a way which would enable us, on the basis of observation and analysis, to determine that, for example, there is no European Volk. The subjective manifestations of peoplehood, of the demos, are to be found in a sense of social cohesion, shared destiny and collective self-identity which, in turn, result in (and deserve) loyalty. These subjective manifestations have thus both a descriptive and a normative element. The subjective manifestations are a result of, but are also conditioned on, some, though not necessarily all, of the following objective elements: common language, common history, common cultural habits and sensibilities and – this is dealt with more discretely since the twelve years of National-Socialism – common ethnic origin, common religion." (Weiler 1995, 225-226). It is important to underline that especially in this hard version, a "parliament is... an institution of democracy not only because it provides a mechanism for representation and majority voting, but because it represents the Volk, the nation, the demos from which derive the authority and legitimacy of its decisions" (Weiler 1995, 228).

The softer account of the no demos thesis is more similar to what Dieter Grimm argued in his article "Does Europe Need a Constitution?" Grimm's line of reasoning starts with the authority structure but proceeds to the societal substrate, where he notes that "the biggest obstacle to Europeanisation of the political substructure, [such as party system, social associations and media] on which the functioning of a democratic system and the performance of a parliament depends: language. Communication is bound up with language and linguistically mediated experience and interpretation of the world. Information and participation as basic conditions of democratic existence are mediated through language" (Grimm 1995, 295).

Arguably, before the rise of right-wing populism, which subscribes to the hard no demos version and often with reference to religion, with stress on Europe's Christian heritage, it was the

soft version that predominated. That can be seen for instance in how Thomas Risse (2014, 1207) presents the no demos thesis: “(t)he claim rests on the assumption that there are substantial social and cultural prerequisites for democracy to work. The more a polity engages in re-distributive policies, the more it needs to be built on these prerequisites. This is what is usually called a ‘demos’ – a strong sense of community and loyalty among a political group. The EU is unlikely to create such an imagined community and, thus, the pre-political social and cultural prerequisites for a democratic polity are missing beyond the nation-state in the EU”.

Grimm’s argument was not only that these conditions were missing; he further claimed that they cannot be created – at least in the foreseeable future – in the complex, multilevel, multilingual, multinational and multicultural European Union. It follows that it is not meaningful to parliamentarise the EU further, nor to develop a democratic constitution, because the basic societal substrate is lacking. Here we see that the constitution of Europe’s representative ecology is what not only constrains Europe’s representative system, but the argument is taken a step further: measures to reduce the representative disconnect through developing a proper European Parliament that is on a par with national parliaments in power and accountability and developing a fully-fledged European party system will have pathological effects. In that sense the hard and soft versions of the no demos thesis come together in underlining the difficulties involved in developing a European-level representative democracy worthy of its name.

If we then proceed to consider this position on the no demos thesis up against the normative debate on demos briefly cited above, we find that Grimm’s argument is two-pronged. The EU is a type of entity that is incapable of developing a democratic people, and a democratic people requires a level of common communicative skills and communicative interaction that the EU is not able to acquire in the foreseeable future.

But if there is no normatively valid response to how a people can be developed democratically what does that imply for the no demos thesis? Is there a categorical difference between the EU and the nation-state when neither can assure a democratic process of developing a democratic people? The empirical record offers little to go on. If we look at Rokkan’s (1975) stages of state formation and nation-building (penetration, standardisation, equalisation, and redistribution), democratisation (mainly lumped under the heading of equalisation) came well after the establishment of the state and its formal monopoly of violence, and, generally speaking, as a response to this power accumulation and concentration.

State formation as such therefore offers no assurance that democracy will ensue. Democracy relies on beneficial historical conditions, elite acquiescence, and popular will and mobilisation. In addition, when talking about the state and the state system, we need to keep in mind national democracy’s Achilles heel, the absence of democracy between states. Insofar as the EU represents a systematic attempt at reconciling national modes of democracy with transnational democracy the EU is a democratic experiment rather than a democratic dead-end. If so, we should recall Näsström’s (2007) point that the constitution of the people entails making a claim to legitimacy. The question of people-forming cannot be settled at any one given point in time, it is an ongoing process. A critical issue that applies to the EU is whether the EU can come up with a workable model of democracy that citizens will consent to. Since the EU is a political ex-

periment, finding an answer requires a distinct combination of normative imagination, political will and contestation, and institutional design.

2.3 The representative disconnect versus the no demos thesis

The question we are interested in is where and how to situate the no demos thesis in relation to the representative disconnect. For that we need to start by outlining what we mean by the representative disconnect and thereafter compare and contrast that with the no demos thesis. Representative disconnect can be defined as “(a) multidimensional phenomenon of regression of the demos-kratos linkage involving institutional, behavioural and affective components, which risks undermining the trust in and legitimacy of the overall system of democratic representation” (Castiglione 2024b). The representative connect is: dynamic; interactionist; and multidirectional. There are three core manifestations of the representative disconnect.

The first is an intermediation disconnect, which revolves around citizens’ rights, political parties and parliaments; media (conventional and social); and civil society. That includes such factors as declining participation in the democratic process, and disengagement from public debate. An intermediation disconnect can also manifest itself in various forms of deconstruction of representation, such as when parties and parliaments cease to be a process of dynamic representation in which claims to represent are made, accepted, rejected and tested. The second is a governance and accountability disconnect, which revolves around political leadership; public administration; and courts. The third and final is an affective disconnect which pertains to citizens’ trust in governing and disaffection with governing and their identification. This can also manifest itself in alienation and anomie, as well as fatalism (Levitsky et al. 2025).

If we hold these three forms of representative disconnect up against the no demos thesis, we see that the main gist of the no demos thesis is a combination of a) an intermediation disconnect, and type c) an affective disconnect. The elements of the intermediation disconnect are not equally weighted. As we saw especially in the hard version of the no demos thesis, presented above, for a parliament to serve democracy it cannot simply function to authorize, instruct and hold government to account but must serve as the symbolic embodiment of the people. The implication is that the absence of the conditions listed under a) and c) entails that a) the institutional intermediation disconnect, and b) the governance and accountability disconnect, will increase the more the EU institutionally integrates. Grimm’s position is that the lack of proper intermediation structures combined with very high linguistic diversity and the relative absence of a European public sphere are sufficient to claim that the EU is unsuited for a democratic constitution.

This concludes the analysis of part one, which has unpacked the relationship between the no demos thesis and the representative disconnect, including how the no demos thesis understands the relationship between the different manifestations of the representative disconnect.

2.4 Scaling up democracy to the European level or rescaling democracy?

In this second part, we direct the focus on the EU. From a REDIRECT perspective it is interesting to note that whereas the no demos thesis is sensitive to the representative ecology – if anything it is situated in the broader ecology more than in the institutions of the representative system – it does not touch on any of the possible democratic reforms that REDIRECT operates with beyond the core institutions of the representative system. REDIRECT labels such forms of redirection, which refers to measures to rectify disconnects through developing new and innovative ways of operating democratically, such as through deliberative bodies. Such reforms are precisely ways of rethinking representation or combining representation with new and innovative forms of deliberation and participation, in other words, new ways of conceptualising representative ecology or how representative system is embedded in the wider ecology.

The no demos thesis does not touch on any of that and instead focuses on and dismisses the prospects for what REDIRECT refers to as reconnection, which refers to efforts to rectify disconnects in the structure of representation, that is in the nature and functioning of the key representative institutions, namely, parliaments and parties. The no demos thesis underlines that there are aspects of the ecology of nation-state representative democracy that cannot (at least in the foreseeable future) be entrenched at the EU-level. Based on that it argues that all efforts at reconnection will fail, nay such efforts will exacerbate the problems at both EU and national level.

We cannot get a good grasp of this position without exposing its underlying assumption. It is squarely placed in the master narrative of nation-state democracy. It follows that this line of reasoning is based on a distinct approach to EU integration and what type of polity the EU is (or should become), namely what we term a scaling up approach (Fossum and Lord 2025), or the assumption that democracy at the EU-level will have to be scaled up by means of using national level democracy as the appropriate benchmark, so that such a process will end up replicating national democracy at the EU-level. Since the EU is neither a state nor has the realm of competence that we associate with a state, such a copying exercise is bound to fail.

There are three key problems with this analytical strategy. First is that it assumes that the only viable conception of democracy at the EU-level is one that replicates national democracy. But insofar as an important aspect of EU integration is that of democratising interstate relations, we cannot assume that the EU's model of democracy will replicate national democracy. Second and related to that is that the process of establishing democracy at the EU-level cannot simply be one of scaling up national democracy because the establishment of the EU as a supranational entity has transformed national democracy. The EU-level is not a separate governing level but is rather quite inter-imbricated in the member states (akin to what Wessels (1997) terms fusion, and where the European administrative space is akin to what Egeberg and Trondal (2009) have referred to as two-hatted administrations). With national democracy transformed through inter-imbrication with EU institutions, we need to understand both how national democracy is transformed and operates and what EU-level democracy looks like and how it operates. These observations underline the third problem which is that we cannot confine the analysis to reconnection strategies which Grimm (1995) does. We need to address the scope for redirection

because the challenge facing Europe is not scaling up but how best to ensure a proper rescaling of democracy which is explicitly tied to how democracy works across levels of governing, in the multilevel EU configuration.

The implication for our analytical scheme is that a strategy of reconnection is basically about scaling up national democracy to the EU-level, whereas the strategy of redirection is associated with rescaling democracy across levels in Europe. The fact that the EU integration process transforms national democracy is key to the link between redirection and rescaling. The no demos debate has not touched on the redirection – rescaling link.

In the next and final section we turn to demoicracy, which was explicitly developed “to appropriate and subvert the no-demos thesis, as a response to proposals for creating the missing ‘demos’” (Nicolaidis 2012, 250).

2.5 Is demoicracy a strategy for redirection?

The notion of demoicracy is succinctly stated as follows: “If democracy is the role of the entire people, a demoicracy is a polity ruled by a plurality of peoples who govern together but not as one” (Nicolaidis 2015, 138). To elaborate, demoicracy is defined as follows: “European demoicracy is a Union of peoples, understood both as states and as citizens, who govern together but not as one. It represents a third way against two alternatives which both equate democracy with a single demos: as a demoicracy-in-the-making, the EU is neither a Union of democratic states as ‘sovereignists’ would have it, nor a Union-as-a-democratic state *to be* as ‘federalists’ would have it. A Union-as-demoicracy should remain an open-ended process of transformation which seeks to accommodate the tensions inherent in the pursuit of radical mutual opening between separate peoples” (Nicolaidis 2012, 254).

Nicolaidis’ position resonates well with Weiler’s (1999) notion of constitutional tolerance, which is steeped in constitutional pluralism. Further efforts at spelling out the normative principles of demoicracy are found in the works of Francis Cheneval and Richard Bellamy. Cheneval and Schimmelfennig (2013) present four core principles of demoicracy.

- Principle 1: Sovereignty of the Statespeoples’ *pouvoir constituent* regarding Entry, Exit and Basic Rules of the Political Order of Multilateral Democracy
- Principle 2: Non-discrimination of Statespeoples and Citizens
- Principle 3: Equal Legislative Rights of Citizens and Statespeoples
- Principle 4: Supremacy of Multilateral Law and Participatory Jurisprudence

The gist of these principles is that the peoples of the member states or here referred to as statespeople retain ultimate control of the system (*Kompetenz-Kompetenz*); hence each has veto on constitutional change. Each member state must respect the principle of non-discrimination. Third is co-determination between the EP and national parliaments (with the EP representing EU citizens and national parliaments statespeoples). Fourth is that the EU is supposed to be an autonomous legal order. Richard Bellamy summarises this in a succinct manner: “first, domestic democratic institutions must ensure political authority within a state is under their equal

influence and control; and second, the state must be part of an association of democratic states in which the rules governing their mutual relations are under the equal influence and control of the elected representatives of those states" (Bellamy 2019, 4).

If we consider this notion of demoicracy up against Nasström's notion of the democratic demos as unfinished or in constant transformation, then we can on the one hand say that it recognises the EU's distinct character. All analysts underline that it is an attempt to find a via media between the state and international organisation without recourse to the state form. The more this intermediary situation is sought embedded in distinct normative principles, the more the effort is one of justifying status quo.

With regard to representation, the main thrust in those works here cited is to fashion representative arrangements in ways to ensure that the demoicratic principles are maintained. As such the weight is on a distinct form of reconnection rather than redirection. A position that emphasises deliberative transnationalism of a more explicit redirection bent is found in the works of James Bohman (2007) and Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel (1997).

A key problem in the demoicratic position is that it highlights horizontal dynamics associated with states and societies opening up to each other rather than vertical dynamics associated with the formation of a unified polity that governs a given territory across all relevant functional domains (cf. Rokkan 1975). But it is far from clear that this is reflected in the institutional system at the EU-level which is supposed to be such designed as to reconcile the vertical and horizontal dynamics. As the EU integrates with a key dynamic being that member states open themselves up to each other more and more issues require EU coordination and regulation. Then the likelihood of member states resorting to national veto increases with rising demands for differentiation. The EU must resort to legal and institutional differentiation rather than fiscal and other measures due to its limited repertoire of policy instruments. The point is that such a demoicratic structure is bound to increase the pressure for differentiation.

Another structural and logical challenge is that the demoicratic position also ultimately conceives of the EU as a collection of member states bound together through joint institutions at the EU-level. What is lost in this ultimately intergovernmental mind-frame is that the EU is a two-level system where the member states have entered into binding obligations to each other and operate through institutions that form a distinct member state governing level (Fossum 2021). EU politics is as in federal systems an interaction between levels of governing as much as a configuration where individual member states relate to each other through the EU-level. Once we recognise that the member states form part of a distinct level of governing, we see that the notion that each is a distinct statespeople becomes highly problematic. Democracy is accordingly based on two sets of ambiguities in representative terms: one is how to reconcile the role of citizens with that of states, the other is how to reconcile the fact that states are both highly inter-imbricated and operate as individual, distinct collectives.

Summing up thus far we see that whereas the EU has a democratic deficit, the no demos thesis especially in its hard version situates the main obstacles in the broader ecology of lack of common language, common history, common cultural habits or even common religion. Even the

softer version is more concerned with the societal substrate than the representative system as such. This makes for a rather static rendition of reality, where the potential for legal and institutional change is insufficiently addressed. The EU exhibits that clearly since it is not a simple matter of scaling up democracy from the member state level to the EU-level; given that the EU integration process has already altered national democracy. The EU represents a challenge of rescaling not merely one of scaling up. That underlines the experimental and dynamic nature of contemporary Europe, which of course also has bearings on narrative constructions and contestations. As scholars noted: “Europe turns out to be a narrative laboratory in which narrative plots are struggling with each other. These narrative struggles offer elements for the reconstitution of a European “we” beyond the model of a national “we” as told in comic or romantic stories” (Eder and Carlson 2020, 110).

The EU experience also raises in a different light the issue of the relationship between representative democracy and deliberative bodies. The critical issue is not simply one of how deliberative and representative arrangements co-exist or what is the best mix but rather the following: to what extent or at all can deliberative bodies such as the Conference for the Future of Europe or the Commission’s deliberative undertakings compensate for democratic defects in the institutionalised structure of representation?

3 A “weak demos” in Europe?

Marco Improta, Elisabetta Mannoni, Sergio Martini, Paolo Marzi, Luca Verzichelli

Whether the EU has developed a political community strong enough to support democratic governance is a question that continues to animate debates in political science. As presented above, the well-known “no demos thesis” (e.g., Risse 2014) argues that the EU lacks a cohesive people capable of legitimising authority at the supranational level. In its strongest version, the thesis claims that democratic decision-making cannot function without a unified demos and that such a demos cannot emerge in the EU because Europeans do not share a sufficiently common identity, history or political culture.

Over the past two decades, however, research on European identity has painted a more nuanced picture that deserves careful attention. Many scholars indeed argue that political communities are not necessarily built on exclusive national identities but can rest on multiple and overlapping forms of belonging. Fligstein et al. (2012) in this regard show that factors such as cross border mobility and market integration have proved successful in encouraging the rise of a European identity that coexists with national attachments rather than replacing them. Other contributions observe that European identity is often civic in character (e.g. Guibernau 2011), mostly relying on shared values like democratic norms.

In this empirical part of the report, we seek to tackle these questions, asking, in a data-driven fashion, whether a European demos exists. In addition, we focus on what kind of demos can realistically emerge in a setting characterised by national diversity like the EU. Following this interpretation, the relevant empirical question is whether European citizens display attitudes that point toward a political community, even if in a modest or uneven form. In this chapter, we

address this question using original citizen survey data from eight countries collected within the REDIRECT project. We examine identity, trust and preferences on integration, construct a multidimensional Europeanism Index and analyse the factors that may influence, *inter alia*, support for the EU.

Our results indicate that the strongest version of the no demos thesis is not supported by the evidence. A European demos does exist, although it is weak, context-dependent, stratified and far from uniform. These patterns confirm the idea of a layered political community that is present, yet fragile, and whose contours vary significantly across groups and countries.

The analysis is organised into four parts. We first outline the analytical framework that guides the analysis. We then describe the data and methodological approach, including the construction of the Europeanism Index. The empirical section follows, examining attachment to Europe, preferences on integration, trust in EU institutions and the individual level determinants of Europeanism. The chapter concludes by summarising the main empirical patterns.

3.1 Analytical framework and expectations: absence or weakness?

The analytical framework of this chapter is grounded in the main theoretical debates on European identity and democratic legitimacy presented in the introduction. The no demos thesis provides the benchmark. In its strong form, as anticipated, this thesis argues that a functioning European democratic system requires a unified political people that shares a common identity and a sense of collective purpose. According to this view, Europe may lack such a demos and therefore cannot sustain democratic governance at the supranational level. If this argument accurately described the empirical reality, we would expect to observe three main patterns in public opinion.

First, citizens should display very low attachment to Europe when compared to national, regional and local identities. National identity would remain the primary and almost exclusive source of political belonging, with Europe occupying only a marginal role. Second, orientations toward European integration should appear highly polarised, since, in the absence of shared identity, discussions (or contestations) about integration would crystallise around opposing visions, with little room for moderation. Third, we would expect widespread distrust in EU institutions. If citizens do not perceive the EU as a legitimate political community, they should have little confidence in its representative and executive bodies.

A different set of expectations follows from our own approach, which does not treat the European political community as either fully present or entirely missing. Instead, we argue that a demos can exist in a *weak form*, even if it lacks the intensity typically associated with national political communities. In this perspective, European identification does not need to override national or local identities, since individuals can hold several layers of belonging that are activated under different circumstances. A weak demos is therefore still a demos, although it should be marked by modest levels of attachment, uneven distribution across countries and social groups and a relatively low degree of symbolic resonance. If such weak demos is in place, we would expect modest (but somehow detectable) attachment to Europe, generally moder-

ate views on the future of integration, soft yet meaningful trust in EU institutions and stable, structured relationships between individual characteristics and European orientations.

These expectations guide our empirical analysis and reflect our view that the European political community is not absent but still developing in a potentially incremental, layered fashion. If this second interpretation is correct, the empirical expectations differ substantially. We should observe modest but non negligible attachment to Europe, since a layered identity structure implies the presence of multiple levels of belonging. Preferences on European integration should be moderate rather than polarised, with a concentration of opinions in the central categories of the integration scale. Trust in EU institutions should be soft but meaningfully present, especially when national institutions are perceived as less effective or responsive.

We believe that the comparison between these two sets of expectations offers a direct way to test whether the empirical reality follows more closely the strong no demos thesis or with the idea of a layered and evolving European (weak) demos.

3.2 Data and methodology

We rely on the REDIRECT 2025 citizen survey (see D2.3 and D2.4), which includes nationally representative samples from Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland and the United Kingdom. The survey covers a broad range of political attitudes, including trust in institutions, identification with different political communities and preferences on the future of European integration. This dataset provides a rare opportunity to compare these orientations across diverse political and institutional contexts.

Our analysis proceeds in three main steps¹. First, we generate a set of descriptive indicators that summarise the average levels of trust in EU institutions, attachment to Europe and views on integration in each country. Second, we construct a composite Europeanism Index that aggregates the attitudinal dimensions of European orientation into a single scale that ranges from 0 to 1. Third, we estimate regression models with country fixed effects in order to examine the individual level determinants of Europeanism. Before conducting the descriptive analysis, we carried out careful cleaning of the variables related to trust in the European Parliament and European Commission, attachment to Europe and preferences regarding integration².

We then turned to the construction of the Europeanism Index. Each component variable was rescaled to a 0 to 1 range in order to place them on a comparable metric. Attachment to Europe (originally on a 1 to 4 scale), preferences on integration (0 to 10 scale) and trust in both the European Parliament and the European Commission (each on a 0 to 10 scale) were standardised and then averaged at the respondent level. The resulting index captures the (broad) structure of European orientations more effectively than any single item, since it combines identity, trust and integration preferences into a single multidimensional measure. Finally, we estimated a

¹Relevant replication materials (e.g., do files) for the sake of transparency and accessibility of the analyses can be requested to marco.improta@unisi.it.

²For instance, values corresponding to “Don’t know” or “Prefer not to answer” were removed. The same applies for other non-scientifically meaningful responses. We also removed “speeders” (i.e. respondents who completed very fast) from the examination. However, we conducted robustness tests including such categories in subsequent analyses, and our main results are confirmed.

series of regression models on this multidimensional index to examine the determinants of Europeanism.

All in all, we believe this approach can be helpful to combine detailed descriptive evidence with modelling of individual level attitudes. In this way, we can capture both the country level differences that affect the European demos and the structured individual level patterns that may sustain it. This blend of descriptive and explanatory analysis is essential for understanding whether the European political community is entirely missing or present in a weaker, more stratified form.

3.3 Empirical patterns

3.3.1 Attachment to Europe

The first element we consider is how strongly citizens feel attached to Europe. Interestingly, even a founding country such as France, often considered symbolically central to the European project, exhibits comparatively low levels of attachment to Europe. Countries like Hungary, Norway, and Poland show an above average attachment, whereas Belgium, the UK, and France are below average. Italy and Germany finally are close to the average attachment.

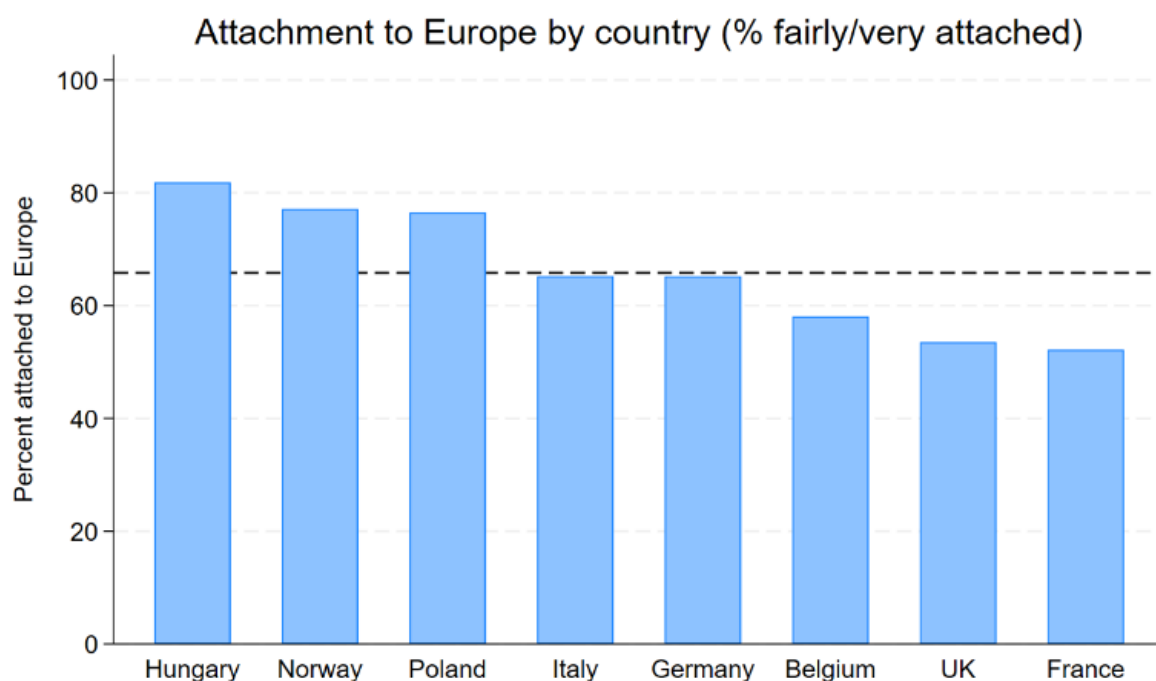


Figure 1: Attachment to Europe

The finding related to Hungary is particularly notable. For many Hungarian citizens, Europe carries a specific meaning influenced by the country's post-communist transition (e.g., Göncz and Lengyel 2021), its long-standing search for external guarantees of political stability and, at times, the perception of the EU as a counterbalance to domestic power. The same interpretation can be reasonably extended to the Polish case.

Moving to Figure 2, Across the eight countries included in the survey, respondents express some

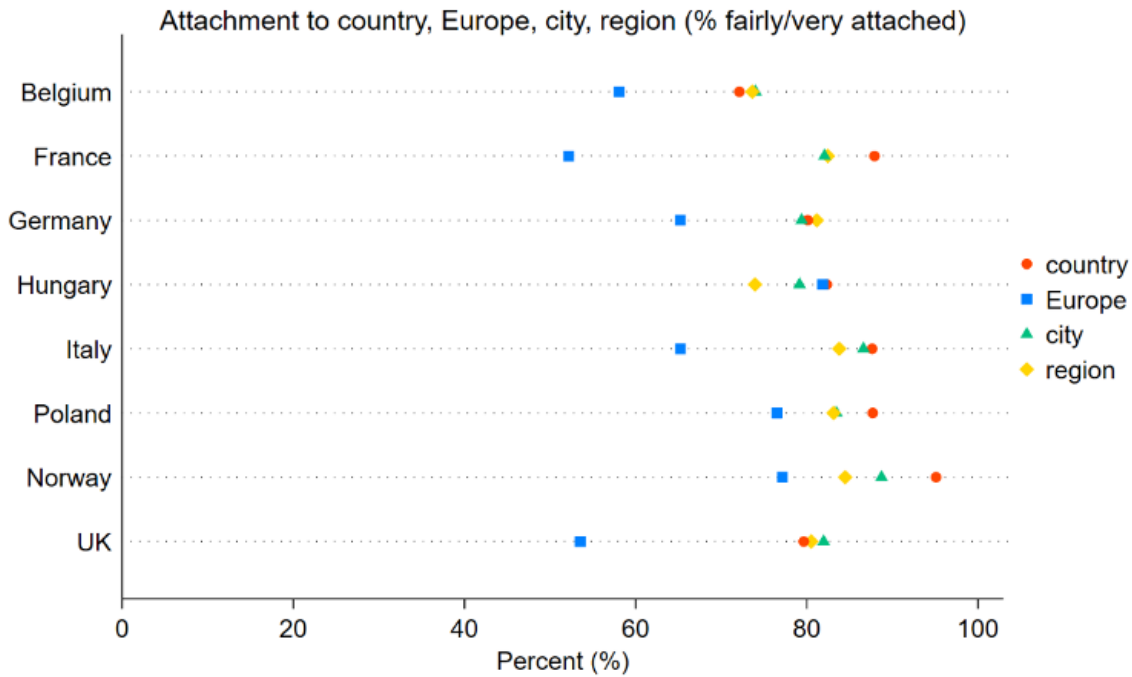


Figure 2: Attachment to country, Europe, city, region

degree of attachment, although this sentiment is noticeably weaker than the ties they report toward their national, regional or local communities. In most countries, Europe occupies the lowest position in the hierarchy of identity objects, which suggests that European belonging, while present, is not the primary lens through which individuals view their political community. It seems that citizens generally feel closest to the levels of government that are most familiar and most deeply rooted in their political experience. National identities (countries) occupy the top of the hierarchy indeed. Europe, instead, tends to appear as the most distant layer of identity. Hungary, however, represents a notable exception. In the Hungarian case, attachment to Europe does not consistently fall at the bottom of the scale. In some instances, it even surpasses regional and local attachments, and the decline from national to European identity is less steep than in any of the other countries. For other countries, the distance between attachment to Europe and attachment to other entities is impressive: for instance, observing the country-Europe distance in France and the city-Europe distance in the United Kingdom, we can have an interesting picture on how such citizens prove detached from the Europe vis-à-vis other identifiers.

3.3.2 Preferences on European integration

Another interesting picture emerges when we examine how citizens position themselves on the question of European integration (Figure 3). Respondents were asked to place their views on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 represents the idea that "European integration has already gone too far" and 10 represents the view that "European integration should be pushed further".

Across all countries, most people cluster toward the middle of this scale. Very few respondents choose extreme positions. This pattern suggests that, in general, public opinion on integration

is moderate rather than polarised. Citizens do not appear deeply divided between those who want to reverse the integration process and those who want to accelerate it dramatically. Instead, they tend to express more incremental preferences. We interpret these descriptive findings as European citizens holding cautious views, but without rejecting or embracing the European project altogether.

From Figure 3, it appears that European attitudes are not characterised by radical opposition or enthusiastic endorsement. Instead, they reflect the presence of a weak but stable orientation toward Europe.

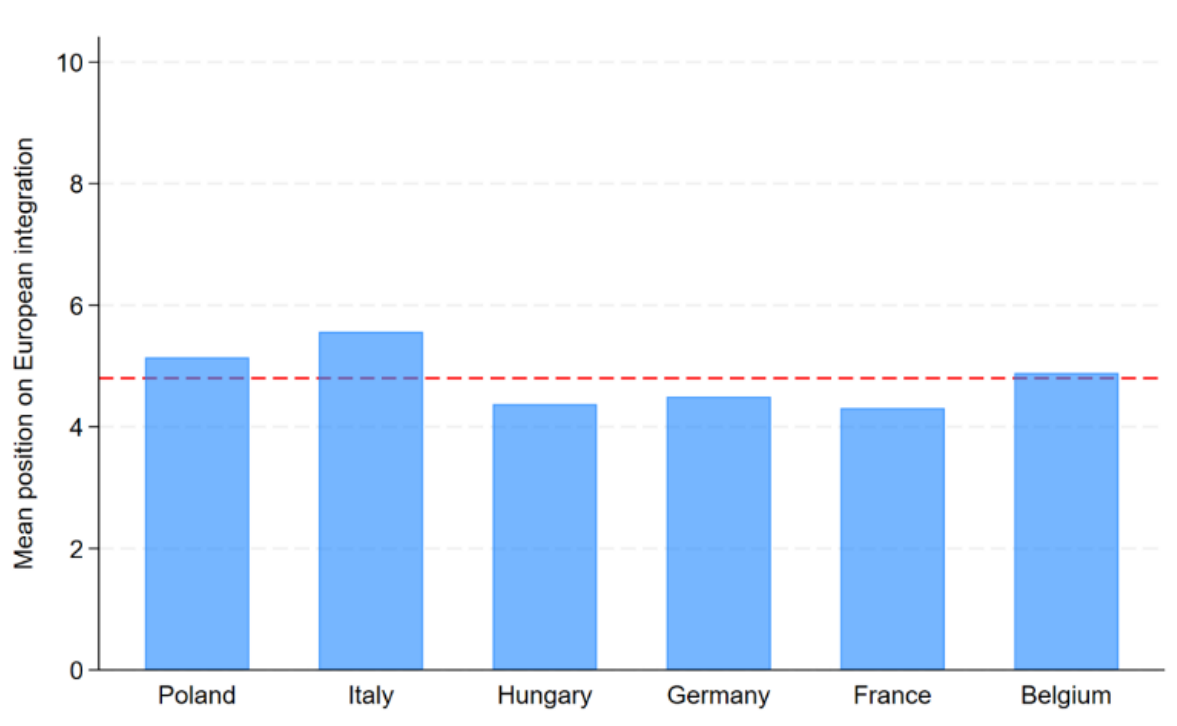


Figure 3: European integration preferences

3.3.3 Trust in EU institutions

Trust in EU institutions provides another important perspective through which to assess the presence or absence of a European demos. The comparative figures on trust in the European Parliament and the European Commission (Figure 4) reveal a pattern that is neither dismissive nor enthusiastic. Average trust levels vis-à-vis Europe hover around the middle of the 0 to 10 scale, suggesting what can be described as soft but recognizable confidence. Citizens do not distrust these institutions outright, yet they also do not invest in them the same degree of trust commonly associated with national democratic bodies in well-established systems.

What is particularly interesting is the variation across countries. Italy, Poland and Hungary display higher trust in EU institutions than in their own national political institutions. The same applies, although more mildly, in the comparison, for instance, between French governments and EU institutions. This suggests that, in contexts where citizens are frustrated with domestic governance, the EU may even function as an indirect source of political “reassurance”. In some

countries, the EU may be perceived as an anchor that provides a safeguard against domestic turbulence.

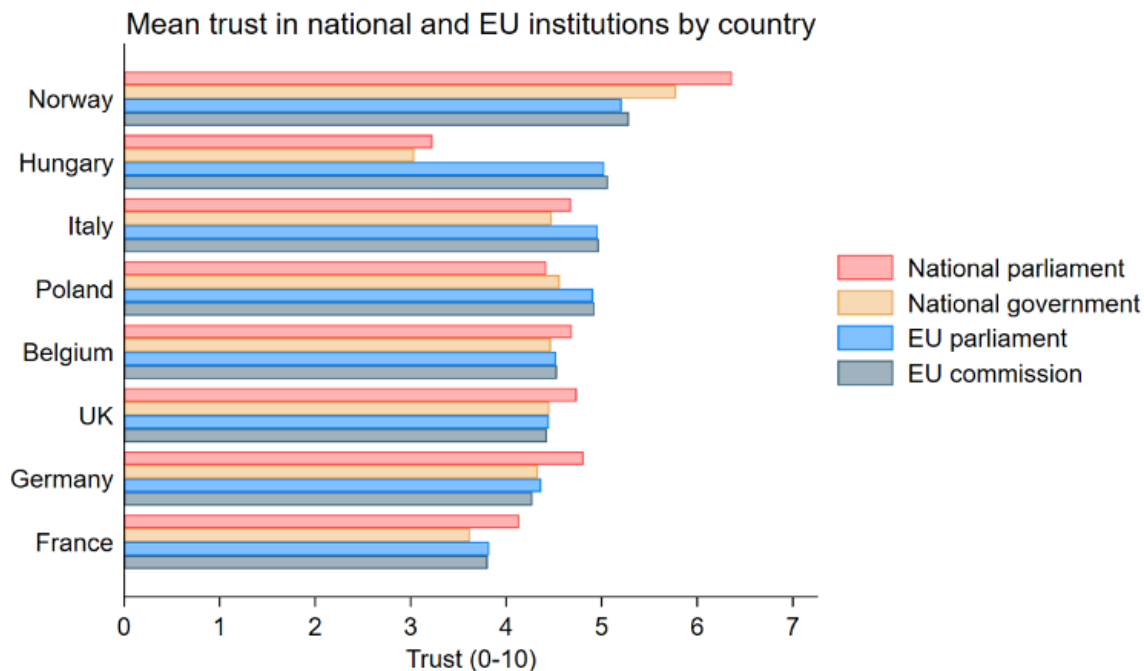


Figure 4: Trust in institutions

In contrast, countries with longer histories of state centred political legitimacy, such as Germany, show lower trust in the European institutions, especially the Commission. This lower level is notable, especially given Germany’s foundational role in the EU’s creation and leading role precisely in the Von der Leyen Commission.

Across the eight countries, overall, the presented picture is characterised by moderate trust, which may fit squarely within our notion of a “weak” demos. Trust is not absent, it is present but measured.

3.3.4 The Europeanism Index

While each component of European orientation offers valuable insights, the Europeanism Index allows us to view these dimensions together. Because the index combines attachment to Europe, support for further integration and trust in both the European Parliament and the European Commission (all rescaled to a 0 to 1 metric), it captures the comprehensive structure of European attitudes in a single measure.

The distribution of the index across countries displays a “familiar” pattern (Figure 5). Italy, Poland, Hungary and Norway obtain relatively higher average values, suggesting that in these contexts the different facets of Europeanism reinforce one another. In contrast, countries like France, Germany and the United Kingdom confirm the trend we discussed so far. Again, these findings show that historical proximity to the origins of the European project (in the case of Germany and France) does not necessarily translate into stronger contemporary Eu-

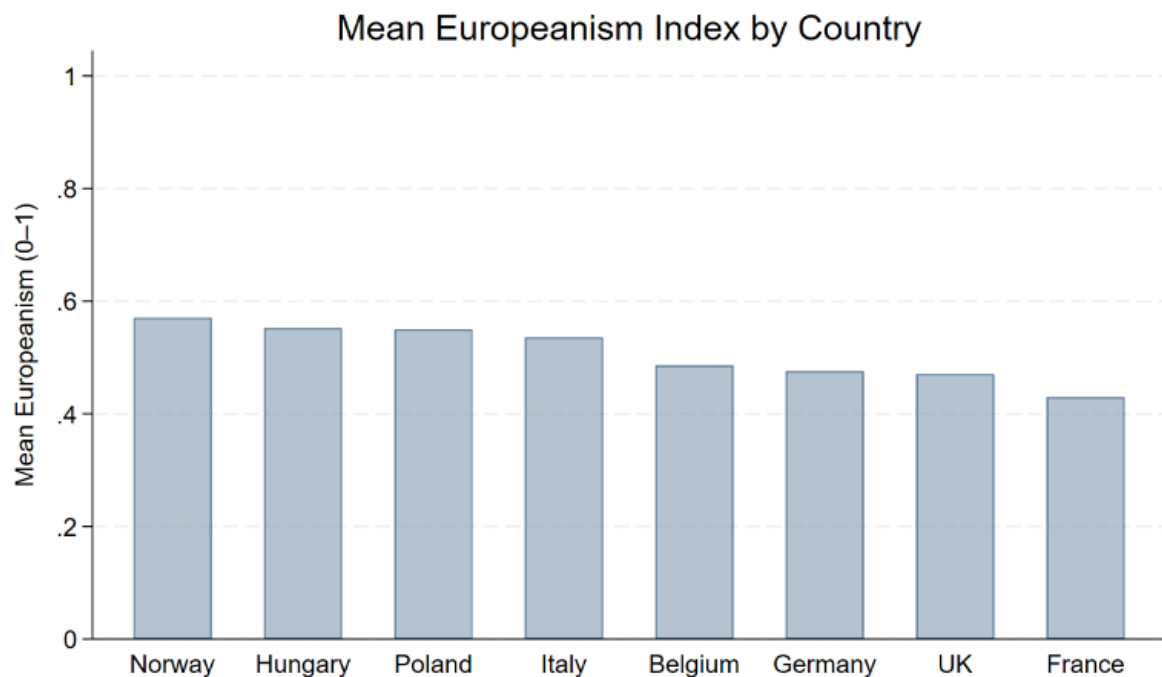


Figure 5: Europeanism index

ropeanism.

The cross-national results of the index may again confirm the idea of weak but still visible demos. The index rarely reaches high values, which means that a fully consolidated sense of European political community remains distant. Yet the index also does not collapse toward zero. Europeanism exists in a moderate form, present enough to matter but not strong enough to shape political identities and preferences in a uniform way. This balance between presence and limitation is the clearest empirical representation of our concept.

3.4 What drives Europeanism?

To understand how European attitudes vary across individuals, we estimated regression models that include country fixed effects. These models reveal structured and meaningful patterns (Figure 6).

Three determinants stand out clearly. The first is age. Younger citizens display significantly higher levels of Europeanism than older age groups (35-54 and over 55). This generational profile may suggest that some experiences like exposure to mobility may contribute to more positive views of the EU, see e.g., debates on the Erasmus programme in Mitchell (2012).

The second key determinant is education. Individuals with higher educational attainment consistently score higher on the Europeanism Index. Education's impact may function as a factor affecting familiarity with supranational governance (and its limits) and the perceived benefits of integration in a globalised (and now growingly multipolar) complex world order. Looking at the coefficients plotting in Figure 6, however, we can observe that the contrast between low education and medium education is not statistically significant, meaning that the significant

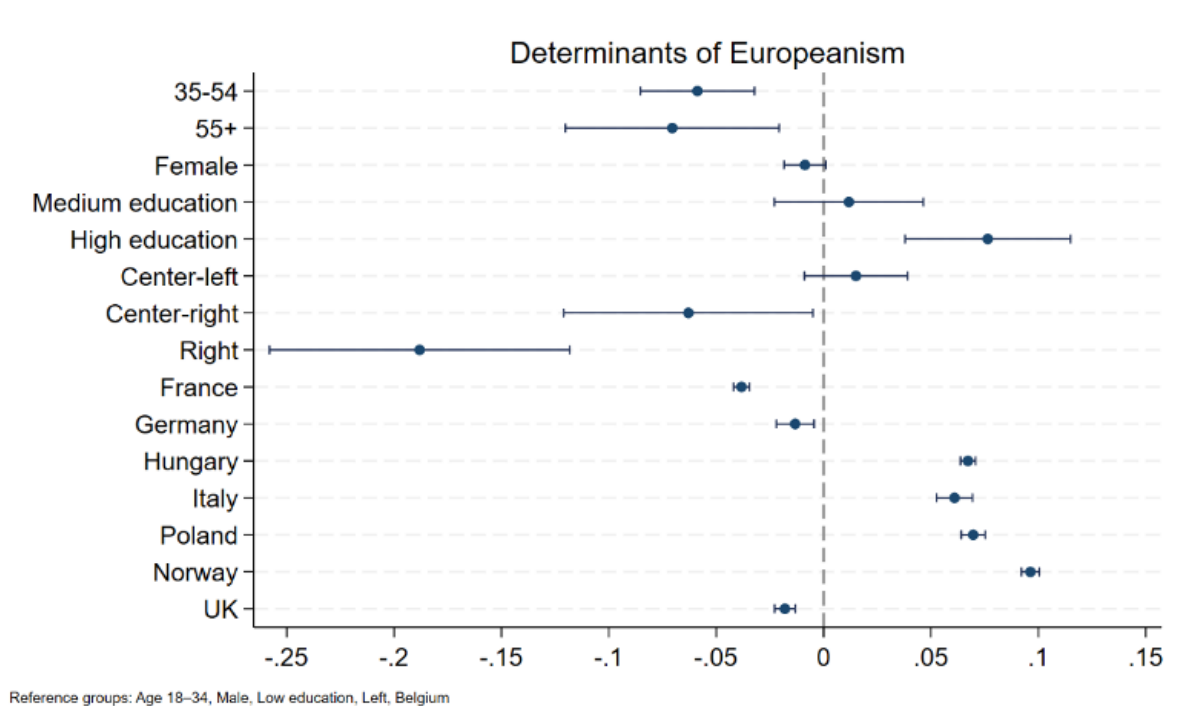


Figure 6: Determinants of Europeanism

differences in Europeanism are between those who are low educated and those who are highly educated.

Then, the third major factor is ideology. The left to right gradient is strong and linear. Respondents on the right express clearly lower levels compared to left-leaning individuals. This finding points to an ideologically diverse demos, driven by progressive views rather than conservative ones. Of course, this is not surprising considering the dynamics and characteristics of contemporary party competition in the examined countries. Finally, the last sociodemographic feature we considered is gender. Gender differences are very small and do not reach the conventional threshold of statistical significance. That means that we do not record strong differences between male and female when it comes to our composite index of Europeanism.

These structured patterns in Figure 6 may suggest that Europeanism is not random. It is socially and politically patterned, which is exactly what we expect in the presence of a political community that is weak but nevertheless meaningful. If European orientations lacked internal consistency, we would expect flat or unpredictable relationships. Instead, the data show that Europeanism follows clear social gradients, and this may reinforce the view that the demos exist in a modest but detectable form. We may also interpret these findings by considering the social profile of the “Europeanist” as a “less weak” demos of the European future.

4 Citizens-centred reforms in the EP debates. Contingent demos in sight?

Magdalena Góra, Volodymyr Posviatenko, Elodie Thevenin, Kaytarzyna Zielińska

The second empirical part of the report examines the opinions of political actors in European Parliament (EP) debates, focusing on the reforms needed (and how) to increase citizens' role in EU decision-making, in both direct and indirect ways. References to demos appear almost every time a democratic nature of the political system is raised. It tackles the crucial aspects – who are the self-governing citizens and what are their rights and obligations within a polity. In the EU context, the debate concerned how democratic the EU can be without a 'European demos' (Liebert 2012). Demos is simply defined as “a public that sees itself as a democratic people” (Lord 2023, 29). The scholarly debate, however, tackles the distinction between an essentialist understanding of demos – assuming a similar process of creating thick identity as in national contexts – and political demos – the one that is created in response to the functioning of a political system that grants citizens with new, broader sets of rights and obligations. Christopher Lord addresses the tension: “It is unfortunate that so much of the debate about demos, democracy and how people should be represented in decisions of the European Union has focused on identity. Democratic political community is more than shared identity. It is also a relationship of mutual obligation (Miller 2007, 124). That obviously includes the obligations of democracy itself. But it also includes any obligations to secure justice, rights and non-domination that are all mutually required by one another and by their relationship to democracy.” (Lord 2023, 29). Scholars also assume that, in the long term, a well-developed political demos can foster deeper collective identification and the emergence of a new, supranational identity (Laffan 2004). However, it is often raised that “There is no European demos sharing a collective identity because the European level lacks a community of communication, collective experiences, and common memories” (Kaina and Karolewski 2013, 744).

The aim of this part of the report is to provide an insight into how political actors debate the democratic nature of the EU and the links between citizens and the EU political system as well as the demos paradox. This allows us to capture what model of European democracy is envisioned by political actors and what the means (reforms) are to achieve it. We analysed parliamentary debates in the EP following the CoFoE as well as debates that concerned the European Commission's plans for better protection of democracy in the era of hybrid warfare against democratic institutions at the national and European levels faced by Russia and other adversaries. The specific context for such debates was created by the democratic momentum of the CoFoE between 2021 and 2023. It was followed by the intensive debates regarding protection of the EU's and its member states' democratic institutions. For this analysis, we selected the debate on the Defence of Democracy Package. The Package is a legislative initiative proposed by the European Commission aimed at strengthening the EU's democratic resilience against foreign interference and threats to electoral integrity through increased transparency. According to the Commission, one of the stated goals of the initiative is to enhance the participation of citizens and civil society in public policymaking. We also selected debates discussing the flagship European Commission proposal, the Democratic Defence Shield, as voiced by Ursula von der Leyen during the campaign before the 2024 European Parliament elections.

The key research questions for this exercise look into who pursues the demos argument in the EP and how it is framed. We analyse the European democracy through the role of citizens, providing a rich picture of tensions caused by the discussions on compatibility between repre-

sentative and participatory democracy models, citizens' rights and protection against external and internal threats. Secondly, we analyse what political actors identify as problems and solutions to improve citizens' links to the European polity. Finally, we were interested in analysing where do they locate potential improvements.

4.1 European demos and representative disconnect. Conceptual frames of analysing political discourse

The debate about European demos – both in terms of essentialist and institutional aspects – prompts the crucial discussion on redirection strategies conceptualised and researched within the REDIRECT project (Castiglione 2024b). Representative democracy assumes that the homogenous nature of demos is not necessary (Alonso 2011). However, for most historical developments, the plurality of representative democracy was maintained within the frame of the nation that shared some features such as identity, culture and/or language. Hence, as stated in the theoretical part of this report, many political actors are constantly referring to the nation states as the key vessels of demos and reject the EU's ability to (and necessity of) building the European demos. This trend is strengthened by the presence of radical-right sovereignist actors (Góra et al. 2026). At the same time, many political actors of the political spectrum are concerned with the democratic performance of the EU, albeit from very different (and often contradictory) vantage points (Góra et al. 2026; Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski 2026).

The suggested remedies for the fundamental problems of representative democracy and its disconnect issues involve two main strategies – reconnection and redirection. As stated in the theoretical part, the former assumes that reforming the political system should focus on enhancing existing links, such as political parties and parliaments. The latter strategy recognises the growing need to rethink how citizens are connected to the political system, proposing that through direct or deliberative formats, as well as new channels and activities, these links can be strengthened with innovative approaches. Redirection strategies can serve as alternative or complementary methods to better integrate citizens into the representative framework. These strategies are debated also at the European level in the context of the EU political system. As REDIRECT researchers demonstrate, the CoFoE itself contributed to both strategies. Moreover, institutional formats such as citizens' assemblies that better connect citizens to the legislative process within the European Commission by soliciting opinions on legislative proposals are among these redirection strategies and are a result of CoFoE recommendations (Fossum et al. 2026). In addition, the discussion on the protection of democracy that dominated the EU's agenda following Russian full-scale aggression and the hybrid hostile attacks directed against democratic institutions within the EU provided us with another layer of reflection on how the two strategies are exposed to external and internal attacks.

Hence, in our analysis, we examined how political actors, with their distinctive ideological profiles, frame reforms concerning the role of citizens. To what extent is attention given to the reconnection or to redirection as regards the reforms, and who are the promoters of such solutions? How the threats for European democracy are recognised and categorised in both categories?

4.2 Data and methodological remarks

This study is based on a discursive analysis of plenary speeches in the EP during selected topical debates on democratic reforms in the EU. The aim of this study is to analyse the patterns of how political actors discuss and foresee democratic reforms, and the position of citizens within the political system of the EU. We rely on the assumption that “the construction of collective identities in relation to democracy takes place through particular discursive practices that mark the boundaries of the underlying collective of political self-determination” (Góra et al. 2013, 160). In addition, we assume that political actors defined by their party membership are crucial in contemporary debates in Europe. In the period of increasing (un)constrained dissensus regarding European integration, the insights into the views promoted by political parties are crucial and telling (Góra et al. 2026).

We selected six plenary debates that addressed the follow-up to the CoFoE and discussed the European Commission’s plans to protect democracy against hybrid external attacks between 2020 and 2025 (see Table 1). Overall, 317 speeches from six debates were analysed. Four debates concerning the CoFoE and its follow-up were held between 2020 and 2022. These debates focused predominantly on questions of citizen participation and citizens’ relationship with EU institutions. The CoFoE was envisaged as a participatory format intended to address the EU’s democratic deficit and bring citizens closer to EU decision-making to strengthen the EU’s democratic legitimacy. The January 2020 debate focused on the European Parliament’s vision for the CoFoE. The June 2020 debate involved further discussions on the objectives and scope of the Conference. The short presentation in July 2021 addressed proposed formats for citizens’ dialogues. Finally, in the May 2022 debate, MEPs assessed the outcomes of the CoFoE and discussed their potential implementation in policies and institutional reforms. In contrast, the later debates concerned Commission-proposed initiatives, namely the Defence of Democracy Package (2023) and the European Democracy Shield (2025). These debates addressed the growing challenges of foreign interference, disinformation, and hybrid threats. The issue of protecting democratic rights was a central emphasis of these discussions.

Table 1: Overview of data selected from European and national parliaments

Parliament and term in office	Title of debate and date	Number of speeches	Number of MEPs’ speeches	Number of EC or CEU representatives’ speeches	Speeches with at least one code referring to demos
EP 9	2020/01/15 – European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe	118	114	4	100
EP 9	2020/06/17 – Conference on the Future of Europe	20	16	4	18
EP 9	2021/07/05 – Citizens’ dialogues and citizens’ participation in EU decision-making (short presentation)	4	3	1	2

Continued on next page

Table 1 continued

Parliament and term in office	Title of debate and date	Number of speeches	Number of MEPs' speeches	Number of EC or CEU representatives' speeches	Speeches with at least one code referring to demos
EP 9	2022/05/03 – The follow up of the Conference on the Future of Europe	87	87	0	77
EP 9	2023/12/12 – Defence of democracy package	40	36	4	37
EP 10	2025/09/25 – Need for a strong European Democracy Shield to enhance democracy, protect the EU from foreign interference and hybrid threats, and protect electoral processes in the EU	48	44	4	39
Total		317	300	17	273

Source: Own compilation.

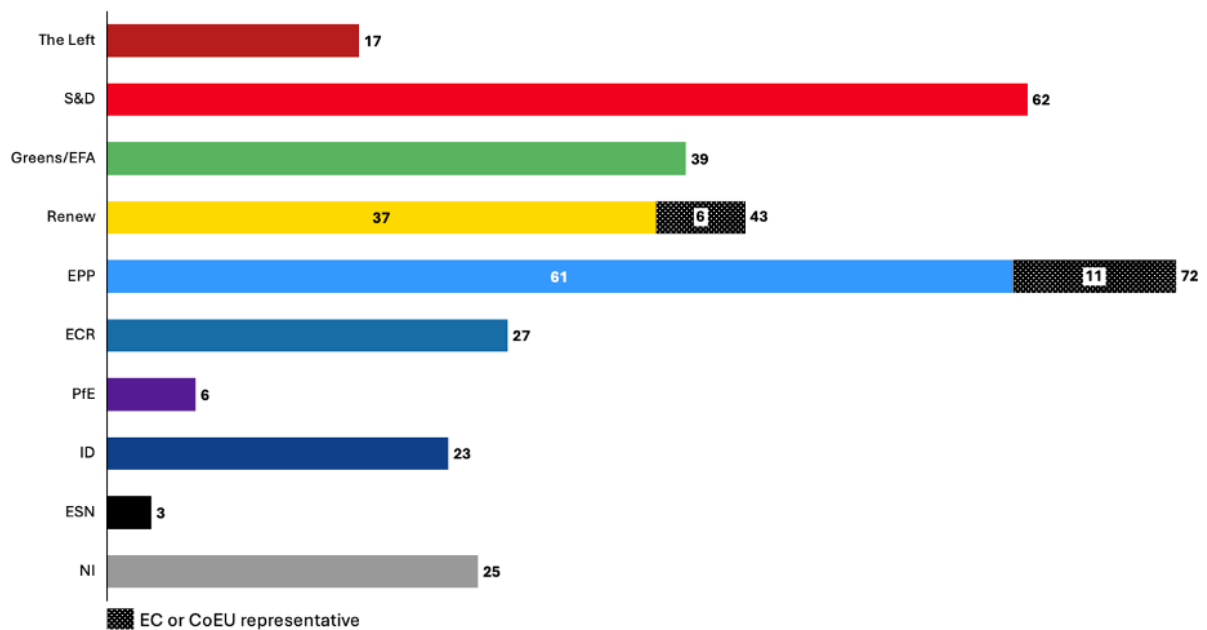
At the second stage, all speeches were characterised by variables indicating personal traits such as gender, incumbency, and country of origin, as well as their roles in debates, like MEP or representative of other EU institutions. There is also a set of variables describing speakers' ideological stance, including membership in European and national party groups. This enables further analysis of speeches based on these variables.

At the final step, all empirical material was manually coded and analysed in MAXQDA software along deductive and inductive codes. Deductively, we drew on theoretical debates on the European demos, looking for articulations of European and national identity, citizens' rights, and opinions on challenges and reforms of European democracy. Altogether, 273 speeches (86%) included at least one code and were deemed to be on the topic. The following parts present the key patterns detected in analysed material.

4.3 Main actors debating citizens' participation.

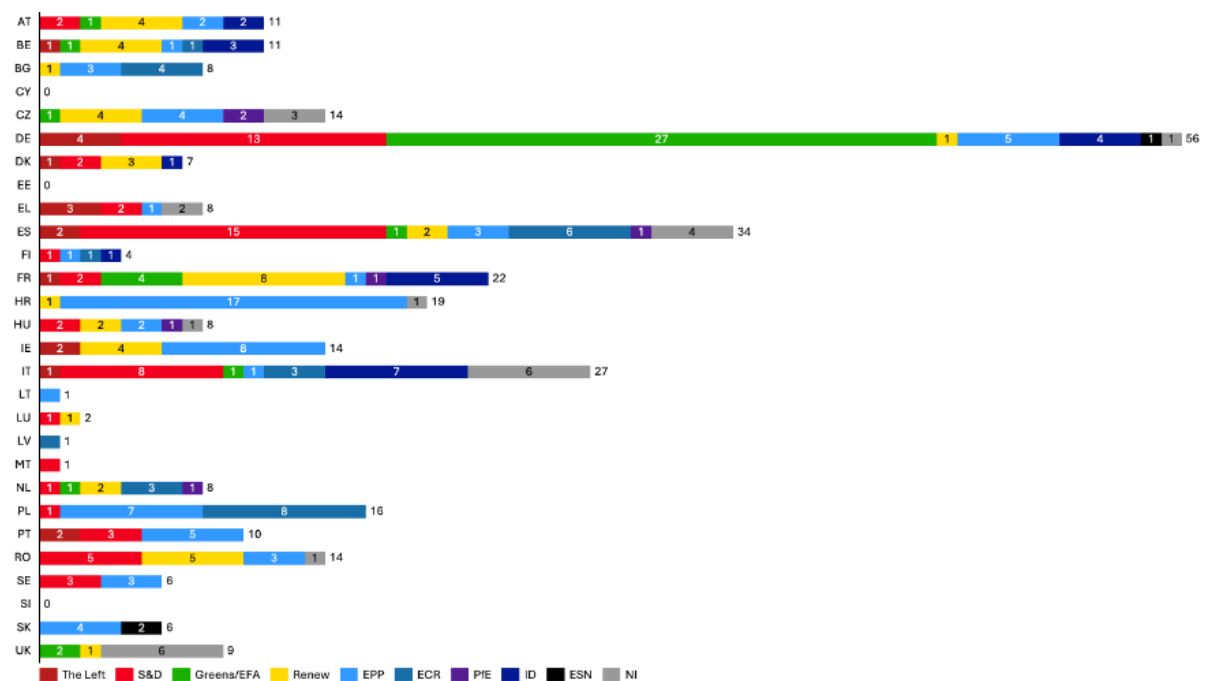
Overall, the analysed debates were clearly dominated by MEPs. Nearly 6% of all speeches were delivered by representatives of the European Commission and the Council of the EU. All political parties actively participated in the debates, as shown in Figure 7. The major parties – EPP and S&D – delivered the most speeches (obviously resulting from their size), but other actors were also active. Interestingly, a significant number of Non-Inscribed MEPs participated in debates, sharing often radical views.

MEPs from nearly all EU member states were active in the analysed debates. Naturally, due to their larger representation, MEPs from bigger EU countries spoke more frequently during these debates. Regarding party affiliations, in some nations there was a notable presence of certain parties, such as Greens, which dominated the German delegation's performance or S&D MEPs in Spanish delegation (see Figure 8).



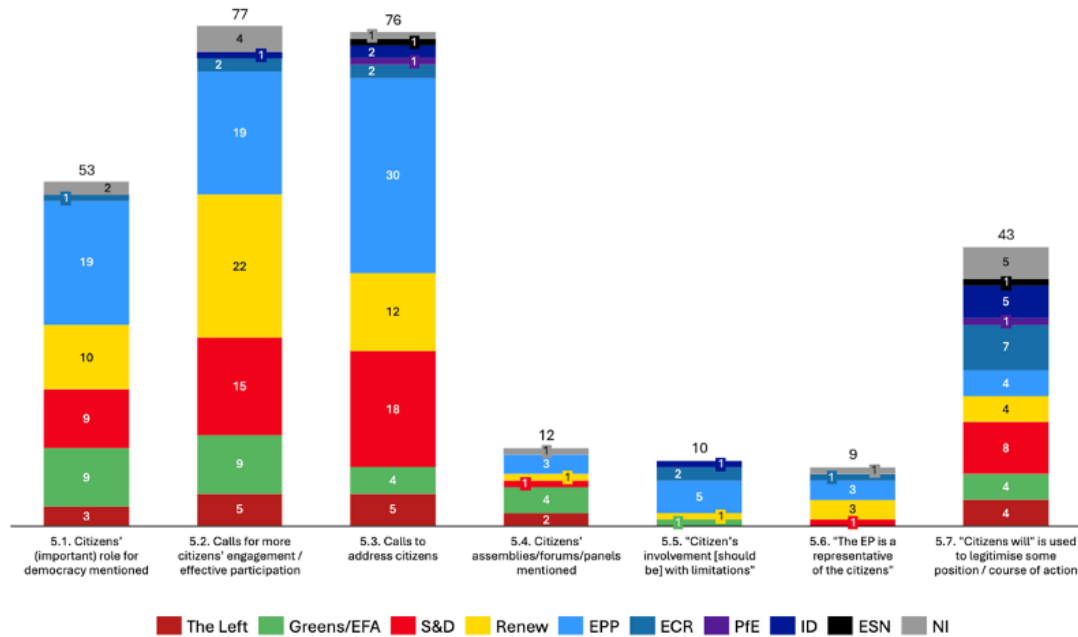
Source: Own compilation.

Figure 7: Speeches by European party affiliation (n = 317).



Source: Own compilation. Note: MEPs from the UK were present during the debate on the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe on 15 January 2020.

Figure 8: Speeches by national affiliation and European party (in all debates) (n = 317).



Source: Own compilation.

Figure 9: Citizens' role in the EU in EP debates (n = 169).

The issue that dominated all the analysed debates was the citizens' role in the EU polity present in more than 50% of all coded speeches. As seen in Figure 9, speeches calling for greater citizen engagement and for better addressing citizens were mostly delivered by left- and centre-leaning parties. Interestingly, the citizens' will – often used as a legitimising argument – was often raised by the right-wing parties.

4.4 Citizens' participation and inclusion in debates following the CoFoE

The key issues raised in debates organised in the EP following the CoFoE conclusions concerned citizens' participation and inclusion in the decision-making process. As scholars state, it is because the EP used the CoFoE outcomes as a legitimising structure, allowing proponents of the reforms to pursue such ideas (see Fossum et al. 2026). Therefore, the CoFoE offered a good opportunity to initiate the debate on citizens' role in the EU polity. At the same time, significant party differences emerged during the debate on the issue.

4.4.1 Representative disconnect and parliaments

The MEPs, especially during the CoFoE debates, were raising and debating the representative disconnect. One MEP stated: "Perhaps if we, as politicians, had done more, yes, I believe in representative democracy, we represent citizens, but have we met with citizens as much as we should have to consult them when we vote, when we make decisions on their behalf?" (Maria Grapini, RO, S&D, MEP, 15.01.2020). Another MEP stated: "For me, the heart of democracy here is the European Parliament. This is where decisions are made, this is where we must exchange views and discuss issues. I think it is good that we involve citizens' opinions broadly in the process here, but at the end of the day, we in the European Parliament must decide. That is our job;

that is what we were elected to do. I would be very pleased if, in the course of the debate, parliamentary democracy with the right of initiative and the like were to be strengthened accordingly in the Conference on the Future of Europe” (Angelika Niebler, DE, EPP, MEP, 15.01.2020). Main MEPs’ attention was on their own performance as citizens’ representatives.

Debates on the CoFoE triggered MEPs to reflect on parliaments and their role in representative democracy. Often, and across the political spectrum, it meant balancing the support for the CoFoE and citizens deliberations with assuring a dominant position of parliaments. One of MEP summed it nicely: “Some of us were a little afraid of pitting representative democracy against participatory democracy” (Pascal Durand, FR, Renew, MEP, 03.05.2022). In general, MEPs from all political formations were supportive of citizens’ deliberations, but at the same time stressing the need for reconnection through parliamentary channels. For example, Polish right-wing MEP stated: “We also agree that citizens should be involved in the debate on the future of the European Union, but we know that there is no single European public sphere, which is why this should take place at national level. We also believe that public discussions cannot replace parliamentary debates and should only be of a consultative nature” (Zdzisław Krasnodebski, PL, ECR, MEP, 15.01.2020).

Another prominent MEP stated: “I do not believe that the problem can be solved by illegitimate referendums, nor do I believe that the problem of European unity can be solved by a kind of non-representative democracy that goes against the will of the people, i.e. the peoples who have chosen their elected representatives. That is why I believe that the role of the European Parliament must be strengthened and that it must finally be given the power of legislative initiative, as is the case in all parliaments around the world. At this conference, too, we must certainly give space to the voice of the citizens, but we must also give space to the voices of elected representatives, including the mayors and presidents of the regions who sit on the European Committee of the Regions” (Antonio Tajani, IT, EPP, MEP, 15.01.2020).

There were often clear references to the core role of parliament in democracy. German MEP stated: “There is one thing we should not do: we should not create a divide between the citizens there and Parliament here. Parliament can become smarter as a result of this conference, and we should involve the people. But ultimately, after 300 years, we in Europe have learned that parliamentary representative democracy is the best way to organise democracy. Regardless of the outcome of the conference, I believe it is important that we create a European public sphere, and this Parliament must be the platform for that public sphere” (Sven Simon, DE, EPP, MEP, 15.01.2020).

All in all, MEPs were carefully assessing the citizens’ participatory mechanism and mostly perceived it as supportive of the established representation channels. For example, a Portuguese politician stated: “Clearly, too, we are seeing an appreciation of participatory democracy, but also a desire to strengthen representative democracy at all levels. This is a clear message from citizens and a clear message from national institutions and parliaments, as well as from other partners: social partners, the Economic and Social Council, the Committee of the Regions” (Paulo Rangel, PT, EPP, MEP, 03.05.2022).

MEPs often raised the issues of the specific opportunity that has been created by the CoFoE on raising the need and necessity of citizens' engagement in the EU political process. One of the MEPs claimed: "As citizens said to me, 'the boat of history has just arrived on our shores and we cannot miss it' " (Danuta Hübner, PL, EPP, MEP, 15.01.2020). Both MEPs and representatives of the EU institutions also highly valued the CoFoE and citizens role: "More than 2 000 dialogues have been organised across all Member States. I personally have participated in them and find them to be a valuable source of inspiration and exchange" (Dubravka Šuica, HR, EPP, Vice-President of the Commission, 05.07.2021). Portuguese MEP stated: "It is true that most of the citizens' panels produced recommendations that I would describe as very stimulating" (Paulo Rangel, PT, EPP, MEP, 03.05.2022).

In the following parts, we will delve into the analysing key arguments concerning both reconnection and redirection strategies.

4.4.2 Citizens' oriented reforms and reconnection strategies

On the occasion of CoFoE, the reconnection strategies were debated (see Figure 10). The key one and most often raised concerned the idea of introducing the transnational party lists in the EP elections. It has been an important idea developed early in the history of European integration, although unsuccessfully. The foundational concept was that by voting for the pan-European list, citizens would develop stronger attachments to the European polity. In 2022, the proposal received another boost when, based on a report by Spanish MEP Ruiz Devesa, the European Parliament voted to accelerate the changes allowing the creation of a 28-slot European list, for which competition will be led by European party candidates within the Lead candidate (Spitzenkandidat) framework. The EP position was supported by the EPP, S&D, Left, and Renew. However, since then, the proposal – which needs to be unanimously accepted by EU member states – has become stuck in the Council (Duff et al. 2025).

Within the debates on CoFoE the idea was supported, especially by the MEPs from parties supporting the legislation. For instance, Renew's prominent politicians stated: "the conclusions of the conference can be implemented immediately, as we already did today with the vote on the transnational lists. Let's remember that. Because let's be honest, it was a recommendation of the citizens and it was a conclusion of the conference" (Guy Verhofstadt, BE, Renew, MEP, 03.05.2022). In the same debate, Daniel Freund argued for the solution legitimising it by referring to significant citizens' support: "Well, it now appears that the abolition of national vetoes, transnational lists in European elections, genuine European citizenship, investment in Europe's future and not in corrupt autocrats, a more social and transparent Europe, is not some kind of federalist conspiracy, but what the majority of citizens want. There was 70, 80, 90% support from citizens for the proposals on the table. And it was not only citizens, but also national MPs, civil society and governments that ultimately agreed to these proposals" (Daniel Freund, DE, Greens, MEP, 03.05.2022).

For proponents of the solution, it was mostly strengthening the European aspect of European elections and through the Lead candidate system – to make the European Commission stronger. S&D MEP explained: "I think the transnational lists will be a good opportunity for all of us. It's

not true that they will put us far from our voters. Instead, we can be really able to Europeanise elections and to not talk only about our national priorities, but also looking from the campaign already to the next mandate, to priorities and what we will fight for. I think it's a very good improvement. It will be a good change for a European Union that will be more and more united and able to offer European parties with a real system where our heads of the lists can be our Spitzenkandidaten to lead our fight for a more political and so stronger European Commission" (Brando Benifei, IT, S&D, MEP, 03.05.2022). Such a reform was also linked directly to the creation of European demos. French-Italian politician stated: "I am convinced that there is a European identity. I am convinced that as European citizens we can exercise our rights anywhere in the European Union. That is why, as an Italian, I decided to stand as a candidate in France, and I did so precisely to promote this idea of transnational politics, of transnational democracy, which we will pursue together. I am sure, dear Damian [he referred to German MEP Damian Boeselager from Greens – own addition], that through transnational lists, because this is Europe, this is the democracy we want" (Sandro Gozi, FR, Renew, MEP, 03.05.2022).

Critical views very also visible in debate. They mostly came from right-wing MEPs describing transnational lists as "costly projects" (Kinga Gál, HU, NI, MEP, 03.05.2022) or as not important for citizens. German right-wing MEPs raised concerns about the alienating effect of such lists, emphasising that this alienation would be between voters and MEPs (Gunnar Beck, DE, NI, 03.05.2022). An Italian MEP stated: "A striking example of the failure and mistakes of the Conference are the famous transnational lists that citizens did not ask for and that the usual politicians imposed as dogma. These transnational lists are not even mentioned in the motion approved by the Italian Parliament and have been publicly opposed by Italian and European citizens and in the working group on European democracy. Citizens do not need transnational lists that only serve to guarantee seats for a few politicians" (Mara Bizotto, IT, ID, MEP, 03.05.2022). Ultimately, opponents frequently cited survey data suggesting that support for such innovation is limited and rather small (cf. Michel Hoogeveen, NL, ECR, MEP 03.05.2022).

4.4.3 Redirection strategies and democratic innovations

The CoFoE itself was a form of redirection strategy – engaging citizens directly in deliberations on the future of the European project. This was raising controversies among political actors. Already at the stage of the debates initiating the CoFoE – the disagreement between political forces in the EP was evident. Leftist parties, Greens, and Renew were rather supportive, while right-wing parties and some of EPP politicians were expressing concerns. As leftist MEP concluded: "We are struck not only by the far right's outright refusal to support this resolution, but also by its refusal to accept the participation of citizens in this dialogue. Why are you afraid of citizen participation?" (Dimitrios Papadimoulis, EL, Left, MEP, 15.02.2020).

In the analysed empirical material, besides the CoFoE itself, the attention was focused on citizens' assemblies – also because these formats were an inspiration for the CoFoE. Good examples from member states were often brought forward mentioning Ireland, Germany and France. Most proponents of the CoFoE expressed interest in introducing the participatory and deliberative mechanisms into the EU decision-making in a permanent way. One MEP stated: "For me, there

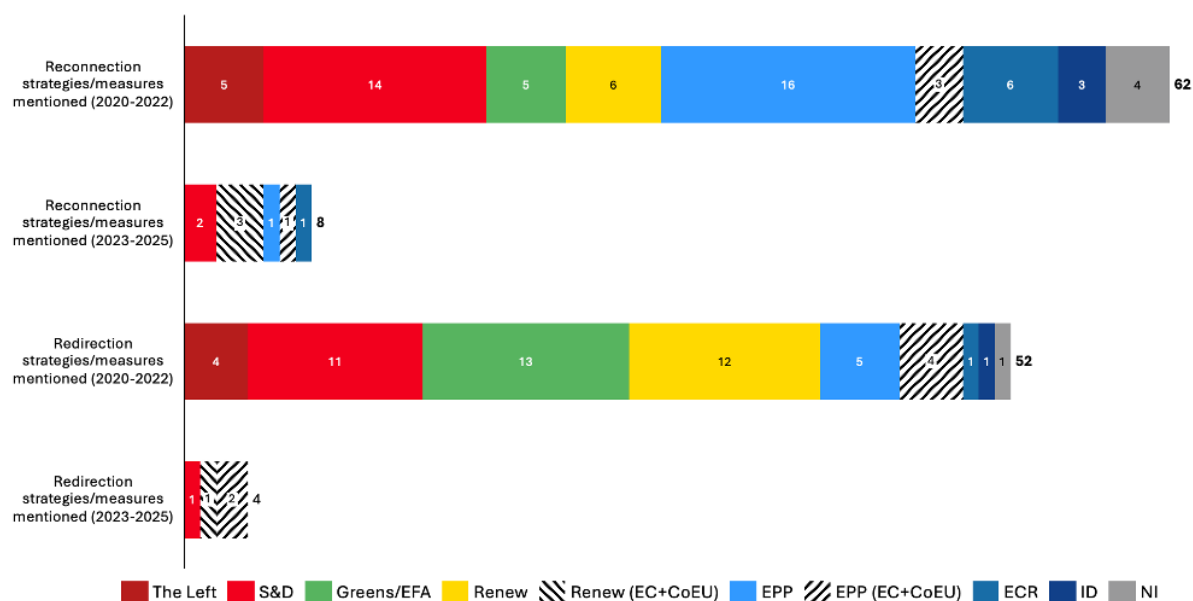


Figure 10: Redirection and reconnection strategies/measures mentioned in MEPs' speeches in selected debates (n = 131).

are two lessons to be learned from this exercise in participatory democracy. The first is that it is time to make this exercise in direct consultation with citizens a permanent feature" (Alin Mituța, RO, Renew, MEP, 03.05.2022).

Early on, there was significant criticism of participatory and deliberative forms of citizens' engagement. One stream of criticism put emphasis on the threat for the parliaments as main connecting institutions in representative democracy. One EPP representative stated: "Citizens' assemblies parallel to parliaments only serve to delegitimise parliaments" and further he explained: "I believe in representative government. I understand that the Council and the Commission consult citizens because they are not parliaments, but I think there is a certain contradiction in the fact that parliamentarians elected only six months ago by the people need to consult the people about anything" (Esteban Gonzáles Pons, ES, EPP, MEP, 15.02.2020). Another stream of criticism was concerning the possible difficulties in introducing such redirection strategies to the existing EU political system.

4.4.4 On creating European demos in the EP

Discussions about demos were rare in the analysed material. However, most of the speakers were addressing the citizens' role. In the view of many, the CoFoE was an exercise accelerating the processes of creating the European demos or at least public sphere that can lead to creating the European people. German MEP stated: "Regardless of the outcome of the conference, I believe it is important that we create a European public sphere, and this Parliament must be the platform for that public sphere" (Sven Simon, DE, EPP, MEP, 15.01.2020). More often however, they spoke on developing mechanisms bringing citizens closer to the EU and allowing them to better channel their view and legitimise the EU.

References to European identity as a marker for such a European demos were rare. The key line of disagreement was between right-wing MEPs who denounce the idea and those who decided to defend it. For the former, the nationally bound demos – nations – are the only foundation for democracy. An ECR MEP stated: “The truth is that we are fighting for a Europe of fatherlands: a normal Europe, with a normally organised society, a family created by a man and a woman, as is the natural, beautiful, good order of things. And since you keep talking about European identity—which does not exist, has never existed, and cannot exist” (Angel Dzhambazki, BG, ECR, MEP, 03.05.2022).

For the latter, the European identity is in the process of creation, and the EP has a special role to play in this process. For instance, one MEP claimed: “Like all the identities that make up each of us, it changes over time and improves. That is why we need the convention: to change and improve our European democratic citizenship, our European democratic identity, our future as Europeans, our future in general” (Maite Pagazaurtundúa, ES, Renew, MEP, 03.05.2022).

All in all, political actors in the EP engaged in debates on improving democratic performance in the EU, mostly focusing on reconnecting strategies, especially linked to their own institution. Less specific and detailed debate concerned the redirection strategies, even if those were also perceived as relevant. The attention to citizens and their rights and role in the political process was very clear and shared by politicians from all ends of the spectrum, even if very differently framed.

4.5 Citizens and protection of democracy in a context of hybrid warfare

After the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022, the tone of debates on democracy in the EU shifted to debate the causes and protection of democratic institutions from hybrid external attacks. Across the 2023 Defence of Democracy Package and the 2025 European Democracy Shield debates, references to citizens’ rights undergo a shift compared to the pre-2022 context. Whereas earlier debates emphasised participation and inclusion of citizens in decision-making at EU level, post-2022 debates increasingly prioritise the protection of citizens’ rights and institutions rather than focus on participation (see Figure 10). In post-2022 discourses, citizens’ rights are framed primarily in two ways: as rights to be protected by institutions in centre groups’ discourse, or as rights to be defended against institutions in Eurosceptic right-wing and left-wing discourses. Despite the stated goal of enhancing citizens’ participation, the debates are not centred around strategies to reach this goal and do not propose of any new formats and mechanisms. Overall, calls to increase citizens’ participation were scarce, and voiced primarily by Commission representatives in their introductory statements presenting the initiatives.

Framings used by MEPs in the 2023 and 2025 debates mark a shift away from an attention to citizens’ position within democracy. While citizens may be mentioned as the primary source of democracy and as agents executing the democratic will, implicitly these concepts are used by political actors to legitimise particular political positions and to present themselves as acting in the name of citizens’ interests. Overall, post-2022 discourses on citizens’ rights reveal that the question of demos or no demos is not a central issue when the democratic legitimacy of the EU is concerned.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the Commission's representatives suggests that European citizens are the primary addressees of both the Defence of Democracy Package (2023) and the European Democracy Shield (2025) initiatives. According to statements made by Commissioners during parliamentary debates, the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms from manipulation, particularly disinformation and foreign interference, constitutes the central focus of these measures. The need to achieve broad engagement and effective participation of citizens is highlighted each time the initiatives are presented: "This package keeps our open society open. But openness cannot mean that we are vulnerable or weak, and a crucial aspect of that is achieved by creating a space for engagement and participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policymaking processes" (Dubravka Šuica, HR, EPP, Vice-President of the Commission, 12.12.2023).

Protective measures were, in fact, presented as empowering citizens' participation: "We need to defend democracy, as all of you have said here, citizens are not objects of democracy, they are participants. And when even one citizen is strengthened in their ability to engage in a democratic process, then democracy as a whole is strengthened" (Dubravka Šuica, HR, EPP, Vice-President of the Commission, 12.12.2023).

The discourse around the European Democracy Shield transformed into emphasising protection of democratic rights instead of highlighting the ways to reach citizens' even further. The initiative was framed not only as necessary but also as urgent. In this case, the Commission focused on protecting free media as a means of safeguarding democracy and citizens' freedoms. The resilience of electoral processes was another aspect consistently emphasised as being in need of strengthening. In this context, the Commissioners' discourse also suggests that citizens are placed at the centre of policymakers' concerns. Still, according to the Commission representatives' statements, the Shield is oriented towards increasing citizens' engagement in European democracy and empowering civil society actors: "[...] with the European Democracy Shield, we will step up our collective capacity to monitor and detect information manipulation and disinformation, to strengthen the level of protection of our media and the resilience of our electoral processes. [...] Building societal resilience and boosting citizens' own engagement in democratic life will be a vital pillar of the European Democracy Shield" (Michael McGrath, IE, Renew, Member of the Commission, 25.09.2025).

Again, protective measures are framed as supporting citizens, who appear as vulnerable democratic subjects exposed to manipulation, by creating better conditions in which they can exercise their democratic will: "I want to assure people that the purpose of the Democracy Shield is to ensure that there is a safe space for people to make up their own mind when it comes to casting their vote. It is not about influencing how they vote; [...] they deserve to [make a decision] in a safe environment, free from interference by people and actors who have a political motivation for seeking to influence the outcome of our elections" (Michael McGrath, IE, Renew, Member of the Commission, 25.09.2025).

Among MEPs, the assessment of the Defence of Democracy Package and the European Democracy Shield revealed a polarised discursive landscape. MEPs representing different European party groups articulated conflicting understandings of citizens' rights, democracy, and the le-

gitimacy of EU measures. In the changed post-2022 context, in which debates focused on protecting democracy and citizens' rights against disinformation, direct criticism of the European Commission and its initiatives increased markedly. The Commission was criticised primarily from the far-right and far-left ends of the political spectrum. Both far-right and far-left groups, despite their nominally different ideological standpoints, framed the initiatives as mechanisms that undermine democracy by weakening citizens' freedoms and rights, and shared the claim that the Commission is illegitimate and presents a threat to genuine democracy.

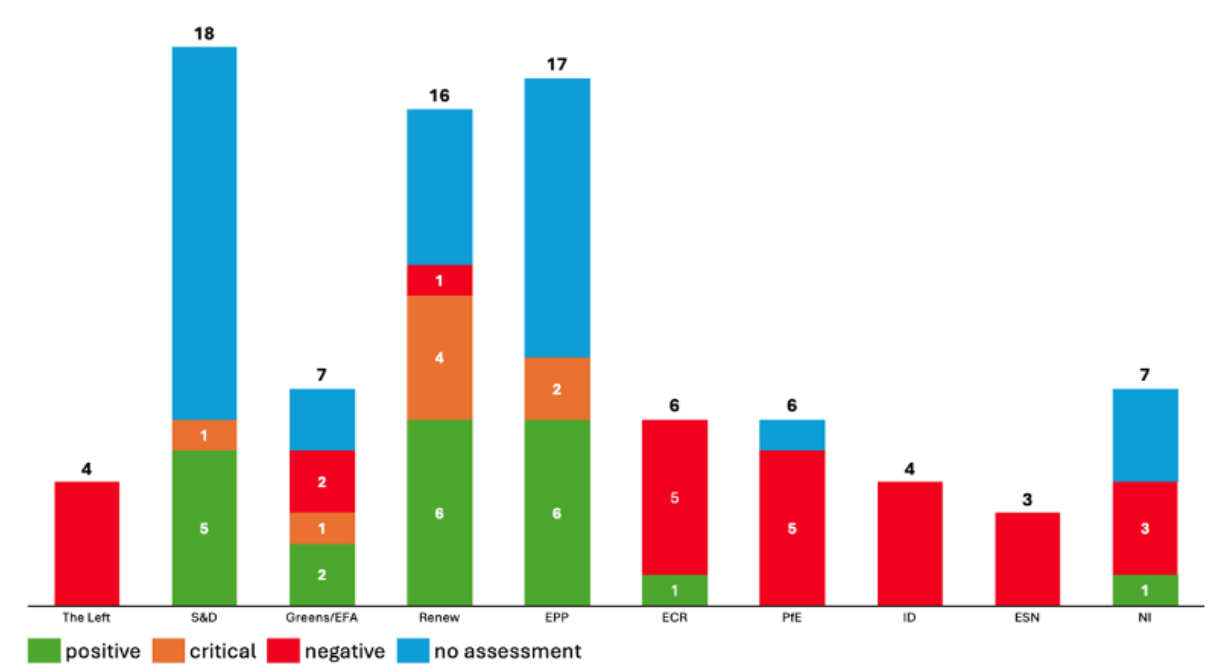


Figure 11: The assessment of the European Commission and its initiatives (Defence of Democracy Package and the European Democracy Shield) among MEPs in selected debates (n = 88).

The most prominent criticism of the Commission and contestation of its democracy protection initiatives came from right-wing and far-right political groups, such as ECR, ID, PfE, ESN, and far-right non-aligned MEPs. In their discourse, citizens were presented as subjects and as the genuine source of democratic will, who are fed up with imposed decisions limiting their rights, while the abovementioned groups portrayed themselves as acting in citizens' interests and as "knowing what citizens want". Citizens' rights and freedoms, such as freedom of expression, were framed as being under threat from EU institutions themselves. While these MEPs often acknowledge that the stated aims of protecting democracy and countering foreign interference are legitimate in principle, they nevertheless argue that the Commission would use the proposed instruments as tools of control. One of MEPs stated: "[...] we are well aware that foreign interference, manipulation of information and hybrid threats endanger the freedom of our citizens, and that is precisely why the Democracy Shield can be useful. But we Conservatives will remain vigilant until the very last day to ensure that this does not become a pretext for silencing citizens or silencing people whose opinions we do not share. We are for freedom" (Stefano Cavedagna, IT, ECR, MEP, 25.09.2025).

Most notably, ID MEPs were particularly sharp in their criticism. Among the four MEPs from the

group who spoke in the Defence of Democracy Package debate, three issued critical statements explicitly directed at the European Commission. For example, ID MEPs repeatedly employed the trope that the Commission lacks legitimacy because it is unelected, imposes ideological principles and decisions on “the people”, undermines national sovereignty, and is hypocritical in claiming to defend democracy through increased transparency while itself lacking transparency and being marred by corruption scandals. An example of such stance: “But the European Union is anything but democratic. I would remind you that it is run by commissioners who are not elected but appointed, who believe that their ideological principles should take precedence over the decisions of the people and that the sovereignty of nations should bow to Brussels” (Jean-Lin Lacapelle, FR, ID, MEP, 12.12.2023).

Similar statements accusing the Commission of punishing citizens for voting “incorrectly” and of undermining national sovereignty were expressed by ECR MEPs. These speakers centred their comments on citizens, portraying them as the genuine source of democracy and as subjects whose electoral choices are overridden by “Brussels elites”. This critique reflects a broader right-wing discursive pattern depicting the Commission as hostile to the popular will and as a threat to citizens’ freedoms.

Discourse critical of the European Commission is especially pronounced in the European Democracy Shield debate (2025). Criticism among far-right MEPs in the newly created PfE and ESN groups overwhelmingly shifted towards strongly worded claims that the Commission itself constitutes a threat to democracy. In these interventions, citizens were instrumentalised as the central subject on whose behalf the MEPs claim to act and were described as victims of Commission overreach and silencing. The fight against disinformation was interpreted as an attempt to subvert public opinion rather than to protect democratic processes. Accordingly, the European Democracy Shield was framed as an instrument of censorship and narrative control: “Citizens are sick of this, so you jail them for speaking their mind. Your idea of defending democracy destroys democracy. Without free speech there is no democracy. Without free speech, there is only tyranny and totalitarianism” (Christine Anderson, DE, ESN, MEP, 25.09.2025). These discourses reveal that, for right-wing MEPs, the core issue is the alleged active suppression of national demoi by EU institutions.

Critical discourse also emerged from the far-left The Left. Speakers such as Clare Daly and Mick Wallace framed the Commission as fundamentally anti-democratic due to its unelected nature and its geopolitical behaviour. The Commission was accused of moral double standards and external interference. Similarly to right-wing speakers, MEPs from The Left accused the Commission of disregarding citizens who vote “incorrectly” and described it as a threat to civil society: “When citizens elect the wrong government, like in Greece, the gloves come off in Brussels, and that government is crushed. When citizens vote the wrong way in a referendum in Ireland, they’re made to vote again. And after denouncing foreign agents laws abroad, now the Commission wants one here at home” (Clare Daly, IE, The Left, MEP, 12.12.2023).

MEPs from The Left speak extensively about citizens’ rights, which are allegedly systematically undermined by EU institutions. Overall, The Left articulates concerns about censorship and elite control similar to those by far-right Eurosceptic MEPs. However, due to their ideological

orientation, their critique focuses less on national sovereignty and more on the alleged hypocrisy of EU institutions, often invoking concepts such as imperialism, militarism, and globalism. In The Left's discourse, democracy is undermined not by insufficient protection but by excessive concentration of power. The Defence of Democracy Package and the European Democracy Shield are thus described as reinforcing the authority of "Brussels elites", while citizens are ignored, marginalised, and excluded from meaningful decision-making.

MEPs from EPP, S&D and Renew overwhelmingly supported the Commission's initiatives, viewing them as necessary and urgent instruments to protect citizens' rights and the democratic integrity of the EU. These MEPs rarely invoke citizens' rights as a basis for the contestation of EU authority. Instead, the protection of citizens' rights is used to justify expanded EU competence, particularly in the regulation of digital spaces. Accordingly, EPP and S&D MEPs consistently framed both initiatives as protective measures designed to defend citizens' democratic rights against external threats and disinformation. The Defence of Democracy Package was repeatedly described as a necessary step, with transparency regarding foreign funding defined as a minimum condition for democratic accountability. Moreover, the proposed measures were presented as creating conditions that enable citizens to participate more effectively and exercise their democratic rights.

The European Democracy Shield was framed as urgent and strategically necessary considering geopolitical tensions and hybrid warfare against the EU and its Member States. MEPs' statements frequently emphasised the existential character of such measures, pointing towards an increasing securitisation of democracy: "[...] a European Democracy Shield is not an institutional luxury, but a strategic necessity" (Vasile Dîncu, RO, S&D, MEP, 25.09.2025).

In the post-2022 debate context, the conception of democracy increasingly leans towards a security-oriented understanding, in which the EU's democratic legitimacy is derived from its capacity to protect citizens' democratic rights and freedoms. Within this framework, citizens are portrayed as subjects vulnerable to threats to their security originating in the digital sphere, particularly disinformation and foreign interference. In this regard, protective measures are described as instruments to safeguard citizens' rights to free and fair elections and to reliable and accurate information: "This means defending independent media, strengthening civil society and ensuring that citizens can trust the information space in which they live" (Sunčana Glavak, HR, EPP, MEP, 25.09.2025).

A reserved and cautious assessment of the Commission's initiatives can also be observed within representatives of the pro-EU centre-left and liberal spectrum, notably among parts of Renew and Greens/EFA. MEPs from these groups supported the premise that democracy must be protected, while expressing concerns about specific measures and instruments and their unintended consequences for the functioning of civil society. Any potential threat to civil society stemming from foreign funding regulations was implicitly framed as a threat to citizens' democratic rights: "The foreign agents aspect in this package risks so much to sabotage the work of civil society. It could even play into the hands of those who are already looking to target civil society at any cost, instead of addressing the real democratic flaws" (Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield, FR, Greens/EFA, MEP, 12.12.2023).

Notably, Sophia in 't Veld, an independent MEP from Renew, criticised the Commission for failing to live up to democratic standards. She accused the Commission of hypocrisy in its unwillingness to act decisively on democracy protection, of failing to ensure transparency, and of adopting measures allegedly reminiscent of the “foreign agent” laws it condemns abroad: “[...] the European Commission in this package introduces what I would call the European ‘Lex Orbán’, labelling NGOs as potential foreign agents. Funny, isn’t that? [...] Commissioner, I heard you say, and I agree with you, that you consider that the abuse of spyware is unacceptable in a democracy. Then I ask you: why does the Commission refuse, flatly refuse, to act? Finally, if the Commission wants to defend democracy, it should lead by example and finally itself comply with the transparency laws” (Sophia in 't Veld, NL, Renew, MEP, 12.12.2023).

Similarly, the Commission was criticised by Kim Van Sparrentak (Greens/EFA) for insufficient action against the spread of disinformation and for failing to protect citizens more decisively. In these instances, centrist MEPs supported measures aimed at protecting democracy and citizens’ rights, while criticising the Commission primarily for insufficient action, limited effectiveness, or falling short of its commitments to normative values. In this sense, the Commission is criticised for acting too weakly or inconsistently.

These patterns of contestation reveal a tension between the view that democracy requires institutional protection and concerns that the securitisation of democracy protection may backfire by undermining core principles of EU democratic governance. Nevertheless, this critique remains reform-oriented: it does not fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of EU institutions but rather calls for better calibration of protective measures.

Across all positions in the post-2022 debates, citizens are rarely framed as a collective European demos. While rhetorically described as the primary and genuine source of democratic legitimacy, in practice citizens’ rights are discursively instrumentalised to legitimise particular ideas or courses of action, whether to support or to contest institutional measures.

5 Conclusions

This report has discussed the no demos thesis up against REDIRECT’s core concepts: representative disconnect, representative ecology, and the two strategies for democratic rectification through reconnection and redirection. In the theoretical part, we demonstrated that the no demos thesis was basically attributed to key features in the broader representative ecology, which ensured that the representative system could not be transferred to the EU-level; hence, EU-level democracy through a full-fledged representative system was bound to fail. What is notable is that whereas the no demos thesis is steeped in the broader ecology, it did not propose democratic reforms that were situated in the ecology or that would include experimentation. Instead, it relied on the master narrative of national democracy and its representative democracy.

Furthermore, we explicitly addressed the EU and noted that the no demos thesis equated reconnection with the scaling up of the master narrative to the EU-level. It failed to recognise the fact that the EU integration process is not one of scaling up but one of rescaling, because the EU integration process also reshapes national democracy. The upshot is that to understand EU

democracy we need to consider the relationship between reshaping and redirection, as REDIRECT understands the term. One possible such alternative could be demoicracy but it suffers from a number of problems. One is normative reification of a halfway house, another is failure to grasp distinct EU institutional features. Demoicracy may be useful for depicting where the EU is at now but is not a viable model of democracy. The EU illustrates as Näsström (2007) underlined the need to think of the democratic people in a dynamic manner. The EU poses a particularly important and interesting challenge given that it is both about people-forming and polity-forming simultaneously.

Against these theoretical frameworks, REDIRECT researchers employed two distinctive but complementary empirical strategies aiming at assessing the representative disconnect from the point of view of European demos. Firstly, utilising data from REDIRECT survey, scholars empirically assessed the European political community, in other words, the “demos” in Europe. The second initiative aimed to analyse political actors’ discourse on disconnection and strategies of reconnection and redirection in the European Parliament between 2020 and 2025.

The analysis of survey data shows that attachment to Europe is weak but present in all countries, although it is clearly secondary to national and local identities. Preferences about the future of integration are moderate across countries. Citizens do not approach integration as a deeply polarising issue. Instead, they tend to position themselves in the middle of the scale. Trust in EU institutions is also moderate and varies across countries. What is more, the Europeanism Index confirms that European orientation is a multidimensional phenomenon that is more pronounced in certain national contexts and weaker in others. The regression analysis indicates that Europeanism is strongly patterned by age, education and ideology. Younger and more educated citizens tend to be more supportive of the EU. Right-leaning citizens tend to be less supportive. These elements suggest an “elite driven” profile of the pro-European citizen. The challenge for the EU, therefore, is to engage older, less educated and more conservative populations in ways that strengthen their trust in, and attachment to, Europe. Overall, our findings challenge the strongest version of the no demos thesis. There is no evidence of an empty political demos at the European level. What emerges instead is a demos that is evidently modest in intensity, stratified across social groups and dependent on national contexts.

The insights from the discursive analysis of political actors in the EP demonstrate that politicians operating at the European level are clearly aware of the problem of representative disconnect and citizens’ dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy. However, the ideological discrepancies are very clear between those who believe that EU institutions need to change and adopt strategies to improve citizens’ input into the democratic process at the EU level and those who think that democracy should only be functional at the national level.

The key reforms that concerned MEPs were connected to their own institution – the European Parliament. They focused on issues such as a transnational list in the EP elections as a possible reconnection strategy. They discussed less intensively and with more disagreement, the redirection options, such as citizens’ assemblies. The Russian war of aggression in 2022 affected the main themes of the debate and pushed towards defending democracy from external enemies. It also meant that the window of opportunity created by the CoFoE to find ways to better

reconnect and redirect citizens with the EU has been closing. The new reality of a hybrid warfare against European democracy (and democracies) shifted attention and discursive frames to resilience and protection rather than to innovation and experiments. It also demonstrated, however, that the disagreement between mainstream parties and more radical actors is deepening and concrete protective measures for democracy employed at the EU level are perceived as an actual threat to their visions of democratic demos.

All in all, the European demos may therefore be understood as an evolving political community that is currently limited and weak and whose development depends on the interaction between citizens, national political systems and the EU's capacity to act effectively. Reforms that seek to strengthen EU level democracy need to recognize this complexity and work with this layered nature of political belonging in contemporary Europe.

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ANNEX 1. List of analysed debates in the European Parliament

Table 2: List of analysed debates in the European Parliament

Title of debate (in English)	Date of debate (yyyy-mm-dd)	Link to debate	Code of debate
European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe	2020-01-15	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-01-15-ITM-006_EN.html	EP_2020-01-15_CoFoE
Conference on the Future of Europe	2020-06-17	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-06-17-ITM-024_EN.html	EP_2020-06-17_CoFoE
Citizens' dialogues and citizens' participation in EU decision-making (short presentation)	2021-07-05	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-07-05-ITM-021_EN.html	EP_2021-07-05_CoFoE
The follow up of the Conference on the Future of Europe	2022-05-03	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-05-03-ITM-012_EN.html	EP_2022-05-03_CoFoE
Defence of democracy package	2023-12-12	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-12-12-ITM-013_EN.html	EP_2023-12-12_DoDP
Need for a strong European Democracy Shield to enhance democracy, protect the EU from foreign interference and hybrid threats, and protect electoral processes in the EU	2025-09-25	https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2025-09-10-ITM-015_EN.html	EP_2025-09-25_EDS