

NEW IDENTITIES AND NEW EXCLUSIONS

Stakeholder Event

Festival del Presente / Pandora Rivista
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SUMMARY

This report presents the outcomes of the stakeholder event "New Identities and New Exclusions: European Democracies between Polarisation and Global Challenges", held in Bologna on 11 October 2025 within Festival del Presente and organised by Pandora Rivista in collaboration with the REDIRECT project.

The event brought together Donatella Campus, Colin Crouch and Luca Verzichelli for a public discussion on democratic fragility, the crisis of representation and the transformation of political identities in Europe.

The discussion explored the weakening of traditional political identities, the rise of nationalism and fragmented identity politics, and the role of media and social platforms in amplifying personalisation and affective polarisation. Particular attention was devoted to emotions in politics, the changing relationship between leaders and citizens, and the fragmentation of the public sphere.

The REDIRECT project provided the analytical frame for the debate through the concept of representative disconnect, understood as a combination of intermediation, governance and affective disconnection. The event also reflected on possible pathways of democratic reconnection, including stronger representative institutions, renewed civic engagement and new spaces for political dialogue.

Overall, the event confirmed the value of public discussion as a tool for dissemination and stakeholder engagement, while highlighting the need to rethink how European democracies can rebuild trust, belonging and meaningful representation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE DISCUSSION

The event aimed to open a public conversation on the transformations affecting representative democracy in Europe. Its objective was not to provide ready-made solutions, but to clarify the roots of democratic fragility and to identify possible avenues for reconnection.

- Discuss how political identities in Europe have changed since the weakening of traditional class, religious and party alignments.
- Analyse the rise of nationalism, fragmented identity politics and new forms of exclusion.
- Examine the role of political communication, mediatisation, personalisation and social media in contemporary democratic politics.
- Reflect on the affective dimension of politics, including emotional attachment to leaders and hostility toward opposing groups.
- Present REDIRECT's framework of representative disconnect and discuss possible strategies of reconnection.
- Connect academic research with public debate and stakeholder engagement.

These objectives made the event particularly suitable for dissemination. The discussion was broad enough to engage a non-specialist audience, while remaining closely connected to the central analytical vocabulary of the REDIRECT project.

BACKGROUND OF THE STAKEHOLDER EVENT

The stakeholder event was organised in Bologna within Festival del Presente - Forme del Caos, in collaboration with REDIRECT. It was conceived as a public discussion on the changing conditions of European democracy at a time of political uncertainty, social fragmentation and renewed concern about the resilience of liberal-democratic institutions.

The opening remarks framed the debate around the tension between the democratic promise of inclusion and the reality of multiple forms of exclusion. This tension was connected to declining electoral participation, weakening trust in institutions, the growth of authoritarian leadership, and widespread disillusionment toward parties and other intermediary bodies.

The event also addressed the fragmentation of the public sphere. Social media and algorithmic communication were presented as forces that can simplify political debate, amplify polarisation and replace collective spaces of confrontation with more fragmented and performative forms of expression.

For REDIRECT, the event was important because it translated the project's core concerns into an accessible public discussion. The concepts of representative disconnect, political belonging, affective polarisation and democratic reconnection were discussed not as abstract academic categories, but as challenges shaping the everyday relationship between citizens, parties, leaders and institutions.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The event linked REDIRECT's research agenda with a broader audience of citizens, readers, students, stakeholders and public intellectuals.

POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN TRANSFORMATION

Colin Crouch

Colin Crouch opened the substantive discussion by reflecting on the historical transformation of political identities in Europe. His argument started from the observation that European democracies were once rooted in major conflicts of class, religion and social belonging. These conflicts were often destructive, but they also generated durable alignments and stable democratic identities.

In that historical setting, parties and citizens knew where they stood. This relative stability made compromise possible, because political conflict unfolded within a shared structure of meaning. Crouch argued that the weakening of these identities from the 1980s onward was not surprising, because the social conditions that had produced them could not simply be reproduced.

The problem is that the erosion of older identities became destabilising — when European societies were hit by successive shocks: the financial crisis of 2008, globalisation, terrorism, the perceived incapacity of national politics, and the coronavirus pandemic. Together, these developments undermined confidence in political systems and created a demand for stronger forms of identity.

Crouch described the contemporary field as an unstable tension between nationalism and identity politics. Nationalism tries to create a single and exclusionary identity by defining true citizens against those placed outside the imagined people. Identity politics fragments the field into multiple partial claims of recognition. Neither process recreates the stabilising political identities of the twentieth century.

KEY INSIGHT

The crisis is not simply the disappearance of old identities. It is the emergence of unstable and often exclusionary replacements.

COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP AND MEDIA

Donatella Campus

Donatella Campus addressed the relationship between these transformations and changes in political communication. Building on Crouch's intervention, she described the shift, in Bernard Manin's terms, from party democracy to audience democracy. In earlier phases, political communication operated within a relatively stable structure of parties, ideologies and social identifications.

As these structures weakened, media and communication systems became more central in shaping not only the form but also the substance of political competition. Campus stressed the role of mediatisation, first through television and later through the internet and social media, in changing the performance requirements placed on political leaders.

Politics has become increasingly personalised, not simply because leaders appear more often, but because political communication relies more heavily on narrative, performance and emotional proximity. This also helps explain why populist actors can benefit from media attention even when media outlets are not politically aligned with them.

Campus referred to the phenomenon of political fandom, in which groups of citizens support leaders in ways resembling fan communities around celebrities or entertainment figures. These forms of belonging may be politically relevant and electorally consequential, but they are also more volatile and ephemeral than older forms of party identification.

COMMUNICATION EFFECT

The media environment does not only transmit political messages; it helps shape the forms of belonging through which citizens relate to leaders and parties.

THE REDIRECT FRAMEWORK: REPRESENTATIVE DISCONNECT

Luca Verzichelli

Luca Verzichelli connected the preceding discussion to the REDIRECT project's core concept of representative disconnect. He presented REDIRECT as a project that seeks not only to diagnose disconnection, but also to identify possible strategies of reconnection and redirection.

Verzichelli emphasised that moving from analysis to remedies is difficult. Research is slow, democratic crises are multidimensional, and normative solutions are rarely straightforward. Nevertheless, REDIRECT aims to develop forms of public dissemination capable of contributing to debate beyond the academic field.

Representative disconnect was described as composed of three dimensions. The first is an intermediation disconnect, linked to the weakening not only of political parties but also of broader structures of mediation between citizens and institutions. The second is a governance disconnect, understood as a deep loss of esteem toward institutions and those who inhabit them.

The third is an affective disconnect, which concerns the emotional and relational deterioration of the representative ecology. This dimension begins in social interactions, but is then transferred into politics and institutional life. Social media make reconnection more possible and more difficult: they create direct links, but also intensify affective polarisation and the illusion of immediate representation.

THREE DIMENSIONS

Intermediation, governance and affective disconnect together define the broader representative ecology analysed by REDIRECT.

FROM "I VOTE" TO "I AM NOT"

One of the strongest ideas emerging from the discussion was the transformation from "I vote" to "I am", and even more sharply to "I am not". Contemporary political identity is increasingly expressed through negative belonging: not being like the other side, not identifying with a party, and not recognising oneself as a member, activist or elector in the traditional sense.

This shift helps explain the rise of voting against rather than voting for. Political participation is often organised around rejection, hostility and opposition rather than durable positive belonging. This dynamic connects directly to affective polarisation, because citizens are not only mobilised by what they support, but also by who or what they oppose.

Campus developed this point by stressing that politics has always been permeated by emotions and passions. The problem is not the presence of emotion in politics, but the object and direction of political affect. Some citizens develop strong emotional attachments to leaders; others experience political passion mainly in negative form, through anti-fandom and hostility toward opposing groups.

The challenge for democratic reconnection is therefore not to remove emotions from politics. Rather, it is to understand how affective energy can be redirected toward constructive forms of participation, mutual recognition and institutional engagement instead of destructive polarisation.

AFFECTIVE POLITICS

The democratic problem is not emotion itself, but the prevalence of negative affect as a substitute for stable political belonging.

NOSTALGIC PESSIMISM AND DEMOCRATIC FUTURES

Crouch's final reflections focused on the politicisation of nostalgic pessimism. He described this as the emotional terrain on which right-wing populist mobilisation often thrives. Nostalgic pessimism presents the future as threatening and the past as a lost world of security, order and national strength.

This form of mobilisation speaks especially to those who feel excluded from the present and abandoned by the future. It offers an apparently simple emotional response to uncertainty: return to an imagined past. Yet this past is often mythical, and the political project built around it tends to exclude those who do not fit the image of the authentic people.

Crouch also suggested that nostalgic pessimism is not the only possible emotional foundation for politics. Post-industrial urban contexts, more educated populations and areas open to social and economic transformation can generate alternative forms of optimism. The political challenge is therefore also economic and territorial.

Reconnection requires credible futures. It depends not only on institutional reform, but also on the ability to create social and economic conditions in which more cities, regions and communities can share in a sense of possibility.

TERRITORIAL DIMENSION

Democratic optimism is unevenly distributed. Reconnection must address the social and territorial conditions that make future-oriented politics credible.

RECONNECTION AND THE REPRESENTATIVE ECOLOGY

In the concluding exchange, Verzichelli returned to the idea of the representative ecology. Reconnection, he argued, must concern the whole democratic environment, not only one institution or one reform. Parties may be weaker, but they are not simply dead; their remaining organisational and mobilising capacities need to be studied carefully.

This point was important because it moved the debate away from simplified narratives of decline. The weakening of parties and intermediary bodies does not mean that all forms of organisation have disappeared. It means that their functions, social bases and democratic legitimacy must be re-examined.

Verzichelli also warned against majoritarian narratives that portray parliaments and representative institutions as useless or obstructive. Such narratives aggravate disconnect by undermining the status and perceived value of representative institutions themselves.

Rebuilding representative democracy therefore requires recovering the pedagogical function of parliaments and representative institutions: their capacity to teach, stage and sustain democratic conflict without reducing politics to hostility. This pedagogical function is central to democratic repair because it helps transform conflict into institutionalised, pluralistic and publicly intelligible competition.

REPRESENTATIVE ECOLOGY

Reconnection is not a single reform. It is a broader process of rebuilding institutions, mediation, democratic learning and public trust.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND DISSEMINATION

Overall, the event confirmed the importance of public discussion as a component of REDIRECT's dissemination and stakeholder engagement strategy. By bringing together Crouch's analysis of political identities, Campus's expertise on political communication and affective leadership, and Verzichelli's REDIRECT framework, the meeting offered a rich interpretation of the contemporary democratic crisis.

The event also showed how research can be translated into a public conversation without losing analytical depth. Concepts such as representative disconnect, affective polarisation, identity politics and democratic reconnection were discussed in a language accessible to a broader audience, while remaining anchored in current political science debates.

For REDIRECT, this is a valuable model of engagement. Stakeholder events of this kind do not merely disseminate findings after the research has been completed. They create opportunities to test ideas, connect research agendas with public concerns and make the project visible in wider debates about democracy.

The key insight emerging from the discussion was that representative disconnect is not merely institutional. It is historical, communicative, territorial and affective. Reconnection will therefore require more than restoring trust in parties or improving institutional performance. It will require rebuilding spaces of belonging, forms of mediation, positive democratic emotions and shared imaginaries of the future.

DISSEMINATION VALUE

The Bologna event translated REDIRECT's research agenda into a wider public debate on the future of European democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bologna stakeholder event served as a public laboratory for REDIRECT's central concerns. It translated the project's research agenda into a broader conversation on the future of European democracy and helped clarify the stakes of democratic repair.

The discussion showed that the crisis of representation cannot be understood only as a matter of low turnout, weak parties or institutional distrust. It is also a crisis of political identity, communication, affective belonging and future-oriented democratic imagination.

Crouch's contribution clarified the historical weakening of traditional identities and the rise of unstable alternatives. Campus showed how media, personalisation and political fandom transform the relationship between leaders and citizens. Verzichelli connected these issues to REDIRECT's broader framework of intermediation, governance and affective disconnect.

The central message is that democratic reconnection requires rebuilding the conditions under which citizens can recognise themselves as participants in a shared political world. This involves institutions, but also emotions, narratives, forms of mediation and credible visions of the future.

In this sense, the event advanced REDIRECT's dissemination mission by showing how academic research can contribute to public reflection on the renewal of representative democracy in Europe.

FINAL MESSAGE

Reconnection means more than bringing citizens back to institutions. It means rebuilding trust, belonging and meaningful representation.

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