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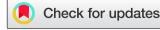
Democratic resilience in Europe – and its limits

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ABSTRACT
The article applies the concept of democratic resilience to recent political developments in Europe. In line with core definitions of the concept, we distinguish between ways in which European democracy has resisted crises and threats, on the one hand, and deeper democratic renewal, on the other hand. In each of these categories, we assess institutional, societal and transnational resilience. Disaggregating resilience in this manner helps pinpoint both the achievements and limitations of European democratic resilience.

Fifty years on from the Third Wave, European democracy shows both resilience and fragility. European countries have suffered varied forms of political malaise and the predominant narrative in recent years has been one of democratic crisis rather than strength in the region. In the late 2010s, Poland and Hungary became emblematic cases of autocratization. Yet, most European countries have resisted the global trend of autocratization and overall levels of democracy in region have not changed dramatically. Against such a backdrop, the article develops a multi-layered notion of democratic resilience to help capture political trends in Europe.

Democratic resilience has helped prevent Europe from drifting into autocracy in the way some predicted a decade ago. We unpack two dimensions of resilience: first, democracy's resistance to threats and crises; second, a spirit of democratic renewal aimed at revitalizing democracy in a more qualitative sense. Within each of these dimensions we distinguish between institutional, societal and EU-trasnational resilience. We contribute to the literature by contrasting *different types* of European democratic resistance; factoring the *transnational* EU dimension into the concept of resilience; and focusing on pro-democratic *action-oriented strategies* rather than countries' structural institutional attributes. Using this multi-layer framework, we note the thickening but also the *limits* to European democratic resilience. This eclectic picture will shape European democracy for the

foreseeable future and cautions against overly stark or uniform framings of the current moment.

Unpacking democratic resilience

In the last several years, a growing body of academic work has explored the concept of resilience and sought to conceptualize it with more precision and operational utility.[1] One widely accepted definition terms democratic resilience as the ability of a political system to react to challenges so as to maintain democratic features.[2] It is generally accepted that the concept refers to some degree of resistence against actual or potential autocratization, rather than mere continuity of democratic norms.[3] In this special issue, Merkel defines resilience expansively as a democracy's capacity to absorb external and internal stresses and also adapt in ways that enable it more effectively to face emergent crises.[4] Democratic resilience in this sense requires a political system to attenuate the damage inflicted by crises and then move into a phase of qualitative democratic renewal.

This implies different degrees or stages of resilience: early prevention against non-democratic moves; recovery from spells of autocratization; moving forward to improve democratic practices.[5] A crucial distinction is between early-stage democratic regression and contexts where autocratization has already gathered considerable momentum. Resilience is achieved through multiple actors and at different levels: formal institutional guardrails, political-party strategies, organized civil society actions, and the positions adopted by a wider political community.[6] The balance between these sources or actors of resilience varies across countries: in some cases, resilience is enabled by autocrats not having control over strong state capacity, while in others it is rooted in increasingly strong societies.[7] It might be summised that the deepest resilience requires both state and civic action, in a way that fuses institutional and societal resilience in a single dynamic.[8]

In short, the sources, degrees and results of resilience vary; we adopt the term as central to this special issue, while cognizant that some writers insist different terms are better used for each different dynamic. In some cases, resilience may be tantamount to a wholesale process of re-democratization, but in others a more modest dilution of democratic ill-health. In some cases, resilience strategies may be relatively shallow, while in others they may open pathways to far-reaching transformation. In many "U-turn" trajectories autocratization and democratic pushback unfold together.[9] Some country examples suggest that democracy may rebound through a single event, while in others it will take the form of less dramatic but more pervasive and drawn-out resilience. In its most far-reaching sense, resilience is not tied to one election result but entails resistance over time and cycles of regime fluctuation. Recovering democracy from a democratic slide is likely to involve different challenges from an initial transition, being less about establishing the basic building blocks for democracy than re-establishing the autonomy of captured state bodies.[10]

We test these still-emerging analytical debates by parsing them into a framework that distinguishes between *two dimensions* of resilience in Europe. First, democracy's capacity to withstand major crises and threats. Second, political renewal that contributes to resilience by improving democracy's general health, vibrancy and responsiveness. Within each of these dimensions, we examine three levels of resilience. Drawing from the definitions above, we draw out instances of institutional resilience and societal resilience. We add a third level that we believe is under-developed in the

Table 1. A multi-dimensional analytical framework for democratic resilience.

Democratic resilience	Institutional resilience	Societal resilience	Transnational resilience
Resistance to crisis and threats	Capacity of institutions to withstand disruptions and respond to crises.	Capacity of citizens and civil society to resist, adapt to, and mitigate crises through collective action.	Capacity of the EU institutions to facilitate collective response to crises.
Political renewal	Efforts to reform and adapt democratic institutions to enhance accountability and transparency.	Attempts of citizens and civil society to renew and strengthen democracy through collective action, and participation.	EU mechanisms to support democratic renewal and fostering democratic norms across member states.

resilience literature: the role played by the policies and mechanisms of the European Union at the transnational level. This EU transnational resilience needs to be more systematically incorporated into explanatory frameworks of resilience as the trajectory of democracy in Europe can no longer be explained without reference to EU-level developments. Through these different levels, we foreground agency, not to question the importance of structural attributes but to focus tightly on mapping concrete resilience *actions*.[11] The framework can be distilled in a resilience grid, as laid out in Table 1.

Using this framework, the article examines European democratic resilience to crises and threats, and then evidence of political renewal. Within each of these, we present evidence of the three levels of resilience: institutional, societal and EU transnational. Some degree of resilience needs to be identified and unpacked as overall European democracy scores have held up reasonably well in the last ten to fifteen years.[12] Many European countries have suffered declines in democratic quality, especially on civic liberites,[13] and yet wholesale autocratization remains largely absent from the region: the exhaustively covered case of Hungary is more exception than rule. Still, democratic resilience suffers from clear limitations in Europe and the region's democratic systems are under severe strain from mutiple challenges – including socio-economic factors, the far right, spill-over uncertainties from the war on Ukraine, Russian disinformation and, from 2025, the added complication of an alarmingly illiberal US administration.

Crisis and threat responses

A first dimension of resilience lies in the way that European democracy has resisted against crisis and threats in recent years. It is true that there is a degree to which democracy has simply endured, at least in Western Europe: democracy in most of the region was consolidated before the Third Wave began and its democratic practices apparently well embedded. Yet, European democracy has also proven resilient in the sense of actively resisting crises and threats. There have been mutiple crises and threats in Europe in the last two decades; as it is beyond the article's scope to detail all of these, we examine the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of the far-right as those that have particular relevance in illustrating the dynamics of democratic resilience.

I. The Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic most directly showcased Europe's capacity for democratic resilience. In the early phases of Covid-19, dire predictions were commonplace that

the pandemic was likely to shake many democratic systems beyond repair. To manage the health emergency, European governments assumed extraordinary executive powers that curtailed democratic freedoms. European democracy scores declined dramatically in 2020 and 2021, with many restrictions continuing into 2022. And yet, the governments gradually withdrew these measures and overall levels of democracy in the continent now stand higher than they were at the beginning of the pandemic, against most expectations.[14] Globally, serious violations of democratic standards endured far longer, especially where the pre-existing level of democracy was relatively limited.[15]

Institutional resilience

Institutional resilience was evident in this crisis as parliaments and regional administrations pushed to have a say in the management of the pandemic, and courts provided an effective check on executive emergency powers.[16] Parliaments kept operating in some form and several parliamentary committees opened enquiries into the crisis that kept governments under scrutiny.[17] Parliaments and courts were especially focused and influential in keeping rights restrictions time-limited, within constitutional parameters, subject to review and negotiated with opposition parties. In most European countries, parliaments insisted on regular reviews of emergency powers and many pushed successfully for these to be limited and eventually phased out. Parliamentary committees on government crisis responses were created inter alia in Finland, France, Latvia and Slovenia and helped ensure that emergency measures stayed within constitutional bounds. In countries like Austria, Finland and Spain, opposition forces launched motions of no confidence against incumbents that were formally related to Covid-19 mismanagement but also more broadly acted as a check on executive aggrandizement.[18]

Courts forced many European governments to retract some quarantine, vaccination and testing rules deemed to be overly intrusive of civic liberties. They reined back governments in places like Spain and Italy for adopting measures the courts deemed extreme in their abridgement of democratic rights. Several courts allowed cases from citizens challenging lockdown and vaccination rules. Portuguese courts, for instance, accepted an increased number of claims related to fundamental rights and ensured that emergency measures were subject to judicial review.[19] Courts and parliaments together pressed some governments into making constitutional changes that would better protect democratic rights in future pandemics and crises.[20] While the pandemic pushed public authorities into curtailing civic freedoms it also prompted them to open new channels of engagement with citizens. Many public authorities created new consultation processes in an effort to gain public involvement in and acceptance of emergency responses, boosting open government indicators.[21] The French parliament, for instance, hosted a virtual public forum for citizens to give their recommendations for post-pandemic policy.

Societal resilience

Societal resilience was also strong and flanked the roles played by formal institutional actors. Protests against executive overreach in Covid-19 restrictions spread across Europe;this was one especially dramatic instance of a general rise in disruptive activism across Europe in the last decade.[22] Protests erupted across Europe against government failures in the pandemic, the closure of democratic space and overly zealous repression against civic mobilizations. Revolts erupted in Paris and several other French cities

against heavy-handed police enforcement of lockdown. In the UK, protestors mobilized in front of the parliament to push for a citizen assembly on Covid-19 recovery plans. Some of the most effective societal pushback was against would-be autocratizing leaders in places like Bulgaria and Slovenia as these managed Covid-19 and the surrounding years of EU crisis especially badly.[23] Many of these protests rumbled on into the post-pandemic period around calls for new types of democracy and political space.[24]

Still, several protests reflected uncomfortable combinations, with some ostensibly pro-democracy marches in European cities organized by groups associated with pandemic denialism and far-right libertarian agendas. For instance in Germany, Querdenken leader Michael Ballweg mobilized thousands of corona deniers and used protests to project a far-right agenda.[25] In Austria, the far-right Freedom Party organized protests against Covid-19 measures, gathering thousands of protesters in the wake of a nationwide lockdown.[26] In France, thousands rallied against the Covid-19 health pass, with the far-right National Rally playing a key orchestrating role. Covid-19 was a potent catalyst for democratic mobilization but also far-right protests.

Transnational resilience

After EU responses to the 2010s eurozone crisis seemed to aggravate Europe's democratic malaise, EU measures in the pandemic seemed to offer a more positive source of resilience. Governments agreed the flagship 800-billion-euro Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) in record quick time, and formally gave civil society a role in deciding how these funds would be spent. However, in an example of resilience limitations, this transnational level remained a source of concern, as new EU powers and measures were not subject to full democratic control. France and other member states expressly sought to keep the RRF separate from the EU budget partly to avoid lengthy democratic checks. The RRF was embedded within the European Semester process giving the Commission prime influence over recovery plans and was adopted under legal procedures that limited the European Parliament's role. As the pandemic deepened the role of specialist functional EU agencies, technocratic decision-making advanced in some areas. Even though national-level democracy indicators recovered, citizens in some countries expressed a sense of disempowerment as the pandemic led to more centralized EU decision-making without commensurate gains in accountability.[27]

II. Resisting far-right threats

The far-right represents a more drawn-out threat and quasi-constant factor accumulating over time as opposed to one dramatic moment of risk. The predominant focus within this most exhaustively researched of topics has been on explaining the rise of far-right parties rather than on democratic resilience against them. After a brief dip in the early 2020s around Covid-19, support for the far right has since risen steadily in what appears to be a second wave of the phenomenon, after its first surge in the 2010s. The biggest swings in the large number of elections that took place in 2024 were in favour of the far-right.[28] In addition to Fidesz remaining in power for over a decade in Hungary, the Brothers of Italy party has taken a firm hold on power in Italy, while in countries like Austria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden far-right parties have either participated in coalition governments or exerted influence over administrations from the outside. The truculent illiberalism of the

second Trump administration has clearly strengthened the wind in European far-right sails.

Without in any way minimizing the severity of these trends, it might be noted that European democracy has shown some resilience against the far right, preventing it from undermining democratic systems in any highly dramatic or widespread manner. After many years of concern about the European far-right, these parties have not over-turned democracy except in one or two very specific cases. European trends in far right illiberalism have been diverse and multidirectional, often indeterminate in their impact on democracy.[29] Radical parties have commonly challenged select counterveiling powers – Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's tightened control over media and judicial appointments in Italy a particularly notable case in point – although many seem to have become less overtly menacing to core democratic politics than appeared likely a decade ago. When in coalition, they have often used their leverage to push specific policy changes rather than system related issues. To cite just one illustrative example, the Finns Party signed onto a governing coalition in 2023 and did not subsequently press democracy-threatening measures. Institutional and societal levels of resilience have played their part in these trends, mitigating what might otherwise have been a far worse far-right menace to European democracy.

Institutional resilience

Institutional guardrails have played a role in limiting radical parties' ability to use crises as anti-democratic breakpoints.[30] In most European countries, democratic parties have refrained from fully normalizing relations with far-right parties. While some centre-right parties have explored expedient cooperation with far-right parties on select issues, the broad ethos of a cordon sanitaire has remained a constraining influence overall. In the European Parliament, after 2024 elections the European People's Party declined an alliance with the European Conservatives and Reformists group while coordinating with it on certain policy issues; all mainstream parties blocked the Patriots for Europe and Europe of Sovereign Nations far-right groups from taking institutional positions like committee chairs.[31] The AfD's second place finish in Germany's February 2025 elections was alarming, but the winning CDU and the SPD reached a coalition agreement to keep the far-right away from power. In Austria, the FPÖ won elections in 2024 but was eventually kept out of power by an unprecedented accord among three other parties.[32] In Belgium in 2025, Flemish nationalist N-VA leader Bart de Wever formed a five-party coalition which excluded the far-right Vlaams Belang. In Portugal, the centre-right took office as a minority government in June 2025, with informal facilitation from other parties, rather than ally with fast-rising Chega. In the October 2025 Czech elections, illiberal-populist victor, Andris Babiš, drew support away from more radical right parties, but found himself shunned by mainstream parties in seeking a governing majority. In the Netherlands, dynamics were more mixed: a new coalition formed in 2023 that for the first time included the far-right PVV, but other parties did not agree to election-victor Geert Wilders becoming primeminister; after new elections in October 2025, the PVV lost its place in government. Some detect a trend of institutions and parties holding the far-right at a distance while taking on some of its concerns as a mixed strategy to neutralize its most authoritarian elements; this combination appeared to undercut the far-right in Denmark, for instance.[33]

In 2025, leaders' statements suggest that the Trump threat has made European democratic parties even more vigilant against the far right, as it becomes increasingly clear this is driven by powerful transborder networks. Senior US figures' open support for the AfD almost certainly reinforced Chancellor Merz's determination to maintain distance from the far right as he took power after elections. More widely, through the Council of Europe governments elaborated a new Pact for Democracy in 2025, which spurred new cooperation on protecting democracy's core institutional tenets from far right threats.[34] Governments also made democratic resilience the defining theme of their European Political Community summit in May 2025.

In some instances legal provisions have challenged far-right parties' threat to democratic norms. European governments have opened an increasing number of legal cases against hate speech and have flanked these with investment into education initiatives warning of far-right risks.[35] In Italy, courts have twice ruled against Giorgia Meloni's migration deal with Albania on human rights grounds.[36] The German constitutional court has ruled that the AfD can be classified as an extremist organization whose ethno-nationalist concept of citizenship undermines democratic principles.[37] In December 2024, the Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the presidential elections and canceled the second round of voting due to intelligence reports that pointed to Russian interference in support of the far-right; the replacement far right candidate lost the re-run election in May 2025.[38] Mutiple court cases have charged far-right parties with corruption offences – most notably in 2025 barring Marine Le Pen from running for office in France – and for defamation.[39]

One inverse concern is that mainstream governments have themselves adopted some rather undemocratic actions in the name of containing far-right populists: even where the far-right's own agendas do not prevail, its rise has had the effect of generating a more executive-controlled top-down form of politics across Europe. In response to the far-right's growing influence, President Emmanuel Macron's administration has centralized more executive power and used increasingly intrusive surveillance techniques, engendering concerns over democratic checks and balances.[40] The cancellation of Romania's election was controversial and helped sustain support for the far right at a relatively high level, even if it lost the May 2025 election.[41] In Germany, the AfD's rise has prompted mainstream parties to support tougher security measures, including expanded surveillance powers without matching democratic accountability.[42] The court's ruling that the AfD is extremist has opened debate in Germany about banning the party; in this debate, some voices have questioned whether overly absolute exclusion may be boosting the far right's popularity.[43]

Societal resilience

In terms of societal resilience, protests against the far-right have become more numerous, frequent and extensive. Increasingly, pro-democracy actors have marched against the far-right.[44] In Slovenia, large-scale protests took place against the far-right administration of Janez Janša regularly between 2020 and 2022; these used innovative tactics to mobilize citizens and helped drive the autocratizing government from power in 2022 elections.[45] In Germany, more than 150,000 people gathered in front of parliament in February 2024 to protest against the AfD.[46] After the FPÖ secured nearly a third of the vote in Austria's 2024 general elections, thousands gathered in the capital to protest against the rise of far-right politics.[47] In Italy, demonstrations erupted across the country as the far-right assumed power[48] and civil society

initiatives, like Osservatorio Repressione, proliferated against illiberal trends. In Slovakia, the Not In Our Town movement mobilized against local right-wing movements.

The UK has witnessed numerous anti-fascist protests in response to rallies organized by far-right groups such as the English Defence League; counter-protests by organizations like Unite Against Fascism have played a key role in resisting far-right movements.[49] Meanwhile, in Sweden, the Left Party organized a large rally to oppose the far-right.[50] In 2025, a new wave of such democratic protests roiled mutiple countries, including Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, as well as European states beyond the scope of this article, like Georgia, Serbia and Turkey. The protests in Hungary gathered particularly notable momentum and underpinned a surge in support for emergent opposition leader Peter Magyar. Protests rumbled on through 2024 and 2025, under different organizational formats, with several events mobilizing tens of thousands against the Orbán government. With support from the opposition-held Budapest municipal administration, over two hundred thousand turned out for the 2025 Pride parade after the government banned it, while another large-scale revolt aimed at the government's new law further restricting NGO activities in June 2025. Magyar's rise was both cause and effect: he was instrumental in mobilizing some of the protests, while also harnessing those that occurred in a more spontaneous, informal manner.

One view is that the challenge to democracy in Europe has come "from the top" in the form of elite power-retention strategies, and is not driven by any definitive illiberal shift in popular values.[51] Voters want parties to stem migration but do not appear to support de-democratization. While the far-right has dragged center-right conservatives to the right on issues like migration and climate change, it has generally not pushed them into anti-democratic positions. The benign reading is that fear of the far-right has pushed other parties to be more responsive to citizen concerns, potentially helping revitalize democracy.[52] Even if this is overly sanguine – rising support for far right parties surely heralds deeper future problems – the resilience of core democratic values in Europe should be enitrely overlooked.

Transnational resilience

A ubiquitous, staple criticism is that the EU failed to halt far-right illiberalism in the 2010s, with the European Commission declining to use its various democracy-protection tools and member states reluctant to exert critical pressure against backsliding governments.[53] The Commission has begun to deploy punitive conditionality, with member states gradually moving to support such measures.[54] In 2022 and 2023, the Commission used multiple instruments to withhold 28 billion euros from the Hungarian government from various funding streams, although it released 10.2 billion of these funds as the EU sought Viktor Orbán's assent for support to Ukraine.[55] The Commission also launched multiple legal proceedings and fines against Hungary for various infringements related to political rights. In a new case of concern, in 2024 the Commission threatened punitive measures against Robert Fico's government in Slovakia in relation to proposed legislative measures against NGOs; in tandem with local civil society campaigns, this pressure forced the government to dilute the new laws. In July 2025, the Commission proposed to extend rule of law conditionality to cover all EU funds.[56]Although elements of passive under-reaction undoubtedly persist,[57] the Commission and most member states have apparently become more aware of the need to act against autocratization.

Moreover, the EU has developed many other new democracy-protecting initiatives too – measures of a broader nature but crafted with the far right surge expressly in mind. The EU-level of resilience has targetted a particularly potent source of far-right threat: Russian and other actors' malign online influence operations. The Commission has stepped up deployment of multiple funding and regulatory instruments to protect key European elections from large platforms' distortionary interventions. The EU has become a leader in containing online risks to democracy and regulation of tech platforms, inter alia through its Digital Services Act and Defence of Democracy package proposed in 2023 that strengthened electoral resilience against cyber-attacks and placed limits on political advert micro-targetting.[58] In November 2025, the Commission presented a European Democracy Shield initiative with increased funding aimed at protecting democratic norms from such far-right disinformation and external assaults against democratic elections. It also advanced ideas for a rights based, public-interest digital infrastructure – or Eurostack.[59]

In a striking expansion of civil society support, the Commission launched a 1.5 billion euro Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme across EU member states, focusing in particular on bolstering civic pluralism and online protections. Various Commission programmes have channelled funds to city adminsitrations, including those held by opposition forces in backsliding countries. The Commission agreed a raft of new EU funding on fundemantal rights in March 2025, helping to counterbalance cuts in US aid for these issues in Eastern Europe; this was agreed in the face of far-right parties' efforts to decrease EU support for civil society groups.[60] Even if all these regulations and funding initiatives remain subject to limitations, taken together they represent an expanding programme of work on democratic resilience.[61]

Political renewal

The second form of resilience has also gained potency in Europe: that is, efforts to sustain democracy through upgraded and novel kinds of democratic engagement. This kind of resilience is not so directly tied to specific crises or threats, and has developed as a more regular and ongoing dynamic of political reform and renewal. Even if it is difficult to pinpoint how such efforts and initiatives have helped democracy survive against potential authoritarianism, they have clearly acted as a counterweight to the narrative of regression. While showing causality is difficult, these trends can be seen as having intrinsic worth in encapsulating a new spirit of democratic engagement. They are relevant insofar as resilience comes from citizens feeling they have a participative stake in the democratic system. Thousands of examples exist; the article cannot go into individual examples but outlines the general trends of significance.

Institutional resilience

Many such democratic initiatives have been implemented by formal institutional actors. Public authorities' use of e-government has become ubiquitous and mainstream. All Western European governments and most local authorities now have some form of online petition provisions. So-called consul democracy software is now used in thousands of local administrations across Europe, in what has now become normal practice. Hundreds of apps have been introduced that allow citizens

to be in contact with politicians, ask them questions and put requests to them – this kind of dynamic has now become standard in Western European democracies in the last decade. Countries like Estonia, the UK and Spain have raised the global benchmark for digital governance and citizen participation. Estonia leads the world in digital governance with 99 per cent of its public services now available online. The UK parliament' petitions platform enables direct citizen engagement in policy-making, while Spain's consul democracy software has been taken up by many local authorities to facilitate digital citizen participation. Apps like CitizenLab and Polis further foster participatory democracy by allowing citizens to propose ideas, offer feedback and engage with their representatives, with CitizenLab being used in over 300 cities across Europe. An increasingly sizeable number of local authorities across Europe now use AI to widen the scope and scale of these online platforms.

Public authorities across Europe have increasingly opened themselves to public consultations and deliberative exercises. Deliberative initiatives in Europe have increased significantly in number from the mid-2010s, registered a notable spike during Covid-19, and were still spreading into 2024.[62] By 2020 there were five times more public deliberative exercises being held each year than in the early-2000s; 80 percent of them have taken place at a sub-national level around local issues of urban planning, health, environment and municipal infrastructure projects.[63] More recently, national and local authorities have called climate assemblies, for example in Ireland, Belgium, Spain, UK and perhaps most high level in France. Large numbers of city and regional governments opened citizen assemblies specifically on the pandemic.[64] Across Europe, over 60 cities and numerous regional authorities ran assemblies for selected citizens to provide recommendations on moving beyond the pandemic emergency.[65]

Into the 2020s, assemblies have spread into central and eastern Europe, with over forty such exercises being held – a means of local level engagement even in states experiencing the most serious democratic problems.[66] In what increasingly represents standard practice, local authorities have used AI tools in deliberative-panel initiatives, and insisted this facilitates better quality democratic engagement among a larger number of citizens.[67] Some public authorities have more recently moved to make citizen assemblies permanent, and to dock them more effectively into formal institutional processes – addressing criticisms long made against such bodies.

In contrast, democratic renewal within political-party systems has been less notable. While some new parties have emerged with an aim specifically to revive liberal-democratic processes and build in movement-like participation, they have mostly fallen short of meeting these aims. La Republique en Marche party was built around local circles and policy deliberations with ordinary citizens, although became an increasingly top-down vehicle tied to President Macron. La France Insoumise formed around locally-based *groupes d'appui* and direct-democracy internal processes, but then became less participative over time. Italy's Five Star Movement styled itself as a new and participative digital party and had very few mediated structures between the party leadership and its grass-roots membership; into the 2020s it lost its way, sought to become a more standard party, and lost support.[68] In Spain the centrist Ciudadanos party was born with similar dynamics but drifted to the right, became increasingly top down and then disappeared. On the left, Podemos also moved away from decentralized citizen deliberation, before also dramatically losing support. Many such new parties that emerged in the last decade have ended

up either looking increasingly like the old parties or have descended into internal wrangling.

Societal resilience

In parallel to formal institutional initiatives another layer of democratic engagement has emerged more organically from within European societies. There has been a notable expansion in practical, community-level civic activism. European civil society has changed in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The last decade has witnessed an increase in the number and density of organised civil society initiatives related in some manner to democracy. These include CSOs directly defending civic space, those constructing a more robust community-level democratic politics, those pioneering citizen-owned participation and campaigns addressing the overarching challenge of making the EU more democratic. This growth of grassroot civics has helped connect larger numbers of citizens on a daily basis around concrete areas of "democratic repair".[69]

Much of this entails informal, structure-lite civic activism built around everyday issues like local employment opportunities and service provision. Co-operative sharing and mutualism have made a comeback, prompted by Europe's economic crisis and then Covid-19, as well as by a general sense of democratic disempowerment. Thousands of "mutual aid" groups have emerged to organize food supplies, online classes and advice services. New kinds of civic infrastructure have taken shape, including community wealth building initiatives, "maker communities', so-called public commons partnerships, movements for citizen-led candidates for city elections, and housing democracy movements. In the UK, over four thousand local mutual aid groups have helped create a "hyperlocal social infrastructure" of informal localism.[70] Hundreds of digital citizen initiatives that sprang up related to Covid-19, have endured and grown beyond the pandemic.[71] The Build Back Better civic movement took shape to coordinate pressure for governance reforms into 2022 and 2023.

These kinds of initiatives have their many detractors. Sceptics insist such civic engagement is small matter and lacking in major political impact. It is certainly important not to overly idealize any bottom-up civic wave. Yet, it is reasonable to suggest that this dense collection of democratic activity has helped bolster democratic resilience and acted as some kind of bulwark against more dramatic autocratization. A layer of "post-representative politics" has begun to take shape across Europe.[72] Taking the broader historical sweep of this volume, it is significant that fifty years on from the Third Wave the focus of democratization debates and policies has shifted towards these more unmediated, direct forms of citizen engagement. They are not captured by the indices that dominate debate about democratic trends and they point towards a qualitative shift in the shape of European democracy.

Transnational resilience

The EU has also begun to experiment with novel forms of democratic renewal. In the late 2010s the European Commission ran a series of citizen dialogues across the continent. In 2018 and 2019, this deepened into a more open and structured initiative of European citizen consultations. This comprised nearly 2000 events involving citizens that fed into the new EU strategic agenda in 2019. Between April 2021 and May 2022,

the EU ran the so-called Conference on the Future of Europe to deliberate on the future of the EU project. This was billed as "citizen led" and featured citizen panels that got around 700,000 people involved in making recommendations on the EU's future to a plenary of parliamentarians and governments. As part of the conference, the European Commission also ran a digital platform that attracted over five million views. These represented a first attempt to run such large-scale participation at the transnational level, bringing citizens together across national borders.

In the wake of the conference, the Commission has held regular citizen panels. As of 2025, these have been held or opened on food waste, the virtual world, learning mobility, energy efficiency, tackling hatred in society and the EU budget. Through these panels, EU-level deliberation has become a regularized feature of the decision-making process. Critics have argued that all these initiatives suffer from shortcomings, in their openness to citizen ideas and their impact, and yet they have begun to infuse the EU with a more open decision-making style, at least on some issues. While the EU continues to suffer from a democratic deficit that can in some areas hollow out formal institutional accountability, it has also been at the forefront of democratic innovation. Curiously, looking at the long sweep of its institutional development, the EU seems to have both cushioned and unsettled national democracy.

Combined resilience in Poland

Poland shows in especially sharp form both the potential of democratic resilience – through both drawn out organized resistance and a definitive moment of democratic recovery – and the headwinds its faces. Poland's very recent political trajectory showcases the different levels of democratic resilience functioning in unison. Resistance against the far-right Law and Justice (PiS) government eventually halted an advanced process of autocratization. In October 2023 elections, Poles voted to eject the PiS and this opened the way towards democratic recovery.[73] Poland's Economist Intelligence Unit Index score declined to a low of 6.62 in 2019 under the PiS; in 2024, it rebounded to 7.40, the country's second highest score since 2006. This recovery entailed both resistance to crisis and broader democratic renewal.

Poland's turnaround resulted from a combination of institutional, societal and EU transnational resilience. Polish citizens protested over several years against the PiS's illiberal proposals on issues like abortion. A 2023 March of a Million Hearts protest saw hundreds of thousands of people united under the slogan of "free, European Poland".[74] There was a striking intensification of civil society activity around a democratic-recovery agenda under the auspices of a well-organized Committee for the Defence of Democracy.[75] The civic movement Obywatele RP (Citizens of Poland) championed civil disobedience against the PiS government's restrictions on the freedom of speech and assembly. Pro-bono attorneys offered legal aid for convicted protesters in courts.[76] The ePaństwo civic-tech organization ramped up open data portals exposing government spending and conflicts of interest, enhancing transparency and direct democratic accountability.

A larger number of previously unengaged Polish citizens got involved in civil society actions and cooperation deepened between grassroots mobilization and professional CSOs. Poland has also been a key site for deliberative initiatives. While the PiS worked to undercut democratic norms, many municipal and other public authorities, and civic groups organized citizen assemblies. A national level assembly ran

on energy poverty in 2022, and one on food policy followed in 2024.[77] Even if these assemblies struggled to get their recommendations fully implemented, they increased citizen enthusiasm for and belief in democratic participation.[78]

A large number of civic get-out-the-vote initiatives helped increase participation in the 2023 election to 74 per cent; a parrallel PiS referendum on migration and other issues attracted a turnout of only 40 per cent, below the minimum to be implemented. Crucially, three opposition parties cooperated in an alliance against the government. Civic tech CSOs and grassroots initiatives acted as watchdogs guarding electoral integrity, leveraging social media and targeting young voters during the campaign. The Pilnuj Wyborów (Guard the Elections) foundation launched a campaign recruiting thousands of citizens via Facebook and Twitter to monitor polling stations. The democratic opposition launched online campaigns to educate citizens on voting, track possible fraud, and connect volunteer election observers. This civic mobilization raised turnout and had a significant impact on the election.[79]

Institutional resilience came from judges refusing to accept political appointments, rejecting politically influenced decisions and turning to the European Court of Justice to challenge government reforms that undermined judicial independence. In 2023, the Commission froze a sizeable €110 billion in funds to Poland: if such conditionality came too late in Hungary, in Poland it usefully helped motivate societal and institutional resilience, especially since even citizens not particularly supportive of the opposition feared the country being left isolated from European cooperation. The EU moved quickly after the elections to release the suspended funds in early 2024 with the express aim of helping the new government re-establish democracy. Taken together, these different levels of action and response generated Europe's most notable case of democratic resilience in recent years. The democratic turnaround was helped by the fact that Poland had not autocratized as far as Hungary, but the effective knitting together of varied sources of resilience was also significant.

Nevertheless, the limitations to democratic recovery have also become apparent. The governing coalition soon lost some of its unity and struggled to advance reforms. It either delayed re-democratization measures or implemented them around the blurred edges of legal process in ways that looked to many similar to the PiS playbook.[80,81] Many criticized the extent to which the new government seemed set on replacing PiS supporters with its own people in key public positions, while many feared that the EU forfeited influence over this by releasing suspended aid too quickly and unconditionally. Then, PiS-backed candidate Karol Nawrocki won presidential elections in June 2025. This did not end re-democratization, but it did make progress more difficult in some areas; the new president was likely to veto judicial reforms. The result showed how prevalent illiberal views remained among the Polish population. Elements of resiliance and illiberalism looked set to coexist for some time in Poland.

Conclusion

Trends suggest that wholesale autocratization has been rare in European states, and yet for a decade the popular narrative about democracy has been largely negative in Europe, as elsewhere. The media, think tanks and academic journals are unsurprisingly drawn to publishing articles about the sense of crisis rather than elements of continuity in European democracy. Placed in the comparative context of this volume, the evidence invites the more measured assessment, even as concerns mount about the health of European

democracy and as new challenges gather force with the US's illiberal turn, worrying events in Ukraine, a renewed far right surge and even more assertive Russian influence operations targeting European democratic processes. Our argument is categorically *not* that all is well with European democracy, but rather that the very severity of its malaise has triggered counterbalancing dynamics of resilience. Fifty years on from the Third Wave, trends in Europe suggest that the concept of democratic resilience is a necessary complement to longer-standing analysis of moves to and away from democracy.

Democratic resilience has prevented a dramatic collapse in European democracy in most EU member states. Hungary's fall into authoritarian rule is the exception not the rule. We have painted a broad-brush overview here to demonstrate the general presence of different levels or forms of democratic resilience in Europe; our contribution is to disaggregate the contrasting dimensions of democratic resilience. In some cases, resilience has taken the form of a protective resistance that has held anti-democratic risks at bay; in other cases, it has seen the recovery of democratic norms after crisis-induced dips. A combination of institutional, societal and transnational resilience has emerged in Europe, where in other regions more acute authoritarian dynamics have left most onus on societal-level resistance. In most instances in Europe, resilience has been about mitigating second-order threats to democracy, while in a small number of cases democratic commitment has resurfaced from more severe and far-advanced autocratization. The article shows the value of resilience as a concept, but also the need to unpack its different forms and understand better how they can either amplify or undermine each other.[82] The effort to unpack the three levels should open reflection on the respective roles of state and societies in defending democracy – as a larger conceptual debate that is linked to but goes well beyond this article's scope.

A core theme in the above anlaysis of European trends relates to the *depth* of democratic resilience. A standard take is that European democracy endures but has become an increasingly brittle, battered and jaded creed, far less enthusiastically backed by its disgruntled citizens than was the case when the Third Wave began. A sobering report is that not many positive democratic turns around the world in recent years have resulted in long-term and far-reaching change.[83] The chapter suggests that much democratic resilience has indeed been relatively shallow in Europe, in line with the more minimalist definition of the term. Across each of our categories, democratic resilience has been subject to clear shortcomings and limitation. Democratic actions have not yet done enough to foster vibrant self-government separate from the liberal-values component of democracy – the latter still receiving most attention in debate about democratic erosion.[84] Relatively healthy European democracy scores mask accumulating stresses that might yet tip into more autocratic turns. Yet, citizens' vibrant and rumbunctious engagement in democratic actions at least partially offsets this minimalist and passive resignation. Democracy in the region is doing a little more than simply hanging on by default; active citizen politics are giving its meaning a catalyzing refresh. Even if many civic initiatives have been low-key, they have been significant enough to underpin democratic resilience – especially where they combine in mutually reinforcing configurations with other levels of resistance. A new ethos of civic empowerment has acted as a counter-balance to the executive aggrandizement that has in recent years constricted the quality of democratic pluralism.[85]

In the most recent period, negative assessments have revolved mainly around the far-right. In this, Europe shows some distinctiveness: while rightist-populist leaders have led illiberal political trends elsewhere too, other challenges and factors have

been more prominent in driving democracy's troubles in other regions of the world. The unresolved question is whether the far-right is a body punch that European democracy has largely absorbed – bloodied and swaying but still standing – or is still potentially a knock-out blow. The resilience framework helps shed light on this much-debated topic, suggesting that it would appear *both* overly alarmist to suggest the far-right is on the cusp of autocratizing Europe *and* unwise to discount enitrely the possibility of such dramatic assault at some point.

These findings relate back to this special issue's overarching themes. They suggest a cardinal lesson from fifty years of debating democracy in the wake of the Third Wave: the need to avoid thinking that any one analytical focus or prism can comprehensively capture a particular era. As noted elsewhere in the special issue, the weight of analytical attention has shifted in the years since the Third Wave from transitions, to consolidation, to regression, to an incipient focus on democratic resilience. Yet, our chapter suggests that different kinds of dynamics increasingly unfold in parallel with each other, leaving a decidedly mixed democratic panorama – not as anomaly but enduring fixture. The complex interface between autocratization and different levels of resilience looks set to condition Europe's politics for the foreseeable future.

Notes

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2. Wolfgang and Lührmann, "Resilience of Democracies", 879.
3. Croissant and Lott, "Democratic Resilience", 150.
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5. Boese et al., "How Democracies", 890.
6. See note 3 above.
7. Cianetti et al., "Pathways of Autocratization".
8. Panchulidze and Youngs, "The Source of Georgia's democratic", 125–127. Gamboa, "How to save democracy".
9. Nord et al., "When Autocratization", 13–20.
10. Cheeseman et al., "How to Strengthen", 7–9.
11. Tomini et al., "Standing up against autocratization", 124.
12. V-Dem, "25 Years of Autocratization"; Economist Intelligence Unit, "What's wrong with representative"; Freedom House, "The Uphill Battle".
13. CIVICUS, "Civic Space Report 2024".
14. Democracy Reporting International, *Phase Two*.
15. Lozano and Mou, "Democratic Accountability", 18.
16. Youngs, "Covid-19".
17. UK Parliament, "The Government's".
18. Värttö, "Parliamentary oversight", 90.
19. Venice Commission, "Observatory on".
20. International IDEA, "Taking Stock".
21. Open Government Partnership, "Collecting Open".
22. Hessel, *Indignez-Vous*.
23. Williamson, *Democracy in Trouble*.
24. Di Cesare, *The Time*.
25. Zehring and Domahidi, "German Corona Protest Mobilizers on Telegram".
26. Aljazeera, "Austrian Far-right Freedom Party".
27. Youngs, *Democratic Crossroads*.
28. Burn-Murdoch, "What the year".
29. Cianetti and Hanley, "The end", 70–72.
30. Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience*.

31. Abnett, "EU lawmakers reject attempt".
32. Henley, "Austrian Centrist Parties Reach Deal".
33. Jonge and Heinze, "How to Respond".
34. Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly. *The Challenge of Far-Right*.
35. Ibid.
36. See Tondo, "Italian judges".
37. See McGuinness, "Germany Court".
38. See Anghel, "Why Romania".
39. Sharp, "Marine Le Pen Found Guilty".
40. See CIVICUS, "France: Far right"
41. Anghel, "How the Far Right Almost Destroyed".
42. See Deutsche Welle, "Wing' of far".
43. Connolly. "AfD 'extremist' label sets up".
44. Berman, "The Future", 80–82.
45. Marczewski et al., "Resisting the Illiberal".
46. Voice of America, "More Than 150,000".
47. Voice of America, "Thousands Rally in Austria".
48. Zampano, "Police Clash with Students".
49. Ducourtieux, "Anti-racist Protesters Mobilize"
50. Reuters, "Masked Attackers Storm Anti-fascist Event in Sweden".
51. Bartels, *Democracy Erodes from the Top*.
52. See note 42 and 51 above.
53. See Theuns, *Protecting Democracy in Europe*.
54. Blauberger and Sedelmeier, "Sanctioning Democratic Backsliding".
55. Sorgi. "Hungary to Lose €1B in EU Funds".
56. Sorgi. "Brussels pushes to block".
57. Kelemen, "Will the European Union Escape its Autocracy Trap?".
58. European Commission, "European Democracy Action Plan".
59. Bria et al, "EuroStack – A European alternative".
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61. Pornschlegel, "From Democratic Resilience to Democratic Security".
62. See the OECD database.
63. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Innovative Citizen", 20–23.
64. See Eurocties' database.
65. Falanga, *Citizen Participation*.
66. Česnulaitytė, "Citizen assemblies"
67. Verhulst and Chwalisz, "The case for local".
68. Seddone and Sandri. "Primary Elections", 485.
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70. Marcin, "Mutual Aid", In *Democracy in a Pandemic.*
71. Ibid.
72. See European Commission, "Digital Response".
73. Csaky. "The Difficulties of Restoring Democracy".
74. Scislowska, "Polish opposition leader".
75. Pospieszna and Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves, "Responses of Polish NGOs".
76. Dadlez, "The Machine of Repression".
77. The Real Deal, "Polish citizen assembly".
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79. Marczewski and Blaščák, "Resisting the Illiberal Turn".
80. Bill and Stanley, "Democracy after illiberalism".
81. Marczewski, "Democratic turnaround".
82. Tomini et al., "Standing up against autocratization".
83. Bianchi et al., "The Myth of Democratic Resilience".
84. Ober, *Demopolis*
85. Bermeo, "On Democratic backsliding", 7–10. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions"; Jonge, de Léonie and Anna-Sophie Heinze, "How to Respond to the Far Right"; Open

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