



IN PRAISE OF DEMOCRACY

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Democracy Under Attack

Michele Nicoletti

Today, we are addressing the topic of democracy and the challenges it currently faces. I will begin with a brief introduction, after which Benedetta Carlotti and Andreas Oberprantcher will explore many of these points in greater depth.

We are speaking about democracy under attack—an expression used earlier by Giuseppe Zorzi, with which I fully agree. My first reflection, therefore, concerns the reasons why democracy must be defended and protected. I would like to highlight eight key reasons why safeguarding democracy today is essential.

1. The global decline of democracy

According to sources such as Freedom in the World 2022 and the State of Democracy report, both of which monitor democratic development worldwide, the state of democracy has been steadily deteriorating over the past 15 years.

Several factors explain this trend. Some countries once regarded as large, stable democracies are undergoing internal transformations in their policies and institutions, making it increasingly difficult to classify them as truly democratic. The clearest example is India. Having recently surpassed China as the most populous country in the world, India was long celebrated as the world's largest democracy. Yet today, its political situation has become far more problematic than in the past.

2. Coups d'état

In recent years, we have witnessed new coups d'état in countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar, where fragile democratic systems have been overthrown and replaced by authoritarian regimes or outright dictatorships.

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3. Contesting election results

Another deeply concerning development is the contestation of democratic election results in countries with long-standing democratic traditions, such as the United States and Brazil. In both cases, former presidents Trump and Bolsonaro questioned the legitimacy of outcomes, sending a highly troubling signal about the fragility of democratic norms.

4. Attacks on the very idea of democracy

What is under attack today is not only democratic institutions, but the very concept of democracy itself. Just before Russia's aggression against Ukraine in early 2022, Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping issued a joint statement claiming that there is no universal model of democracy, and that each country has the right to define democracy in its own way.

While cultural differences must certainly be respected, democracy also depends on a set of universal standards. Without these standards, the concept of democracy risks losing its meaning altogether.

5. Illiberal democracy

Another internal challenge arises from the concept of 'illiberal democracy', promoted in recent years by certain European leaders, most notably in Hungary. This notion implies that democracy can exist without liberalism—without the full respect for individual freedoms and human rights.

This is a deeply troubling idea. Democracy cannot be reduced to the mere act of holding elections; it must also safeguard freedom, equality, and human dignity. Without these, the essence of democracy is lost.

6. The weakening compromise between democracy and capitalism

In Europe, democracy was historically strengthened by a compromise between capitalism and the welfare state. Market economies were harnessed to fund education, healthcare, and social protections, creating fairer and more inclusive societies.

Today, however, this balance has weakened. Rising poverty, growing inequality, and the erosion of social protections have undermined trust in democratic systems. Populist movements feed on this dissatisfaction, while democracy's ability to guarantee a fair distribution of resources is increasingly under strain.

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7. The role of information technology

Democracy depends on open and balanced communication, yet modern information technologies pose serious risks. The concentration of media power in the hands of a few corporations enables manipulation of public opinion, often replacing rational debate with emotional appeals. This undermines the very foundation of democratic life, which should rest on informed, reasoned discussion rather than distortion and manipulation.

8. The difficulty of responding to global emergencies

Democracies also struggle to respond quickly and effectively to urgent crises such as climate change or pandemics. Some argue that authoritarian regimes are more efficient in dealing such emergencies, fostering the dangerous perception that democracy is too slow or ineffective to meet today's global challenges.

These, then, are my eight reasons for believing that democracy is under serious threat.

How can we defend democracy?

I believe that many people today experience a profound sense of dispossession—as if their lives are controlled by others, whether banks, corporations, or international institutions. This sense of alienation is dangerous not only on a personal level but also socially and politically.

Some people respond by seeking more protection. Yet I am convinced that the answer does not lie in protection, but in empowerment. What we need is more self-government, a stronger sense of belonging, and greater participation. In this respect, democracy offers the best response to dispossession, because it is precisely about organizing collective life on the basis of self-determination, shared responsibility, and mutual respect.

To achieve this, we must return to the roots of democratic life. Democracy was born from the conviction that a community of people—committed to freedom and to treating one another as equals—could govern itself through reason and non-violence.

We must remember that democracy is not a natural condition. Human beings are not born into equality, but into asymmetric relationships. Democracy has to be actively built, deliberately desired, and consciously chosen every day. It rests on freedom, respect for others, and the recognition of equal dignity. These principles are never permanently secured—they must be renewed continuously.

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This is why I believe that initiatives such as Schools Beyond Regions and Borders are so important. Rebuilding democracy today requires two key approaches:

a) Strengthening local communities. Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the greatest observers of democracy in the 19th century, noted that if democracy dies at the local level, it declines everywhere. Local communities are where people most directly experience belonging, self-determination, and the practice of democratic life.

b) Strengthening international cooperation. At the same time, the major challenges of our era—war, migration, climate change, and artificial intelligence—can only be effectively addressed through strong international cooperation. Protecting human rights and individual freedoms requires not only robust democratic institutions at the national level but also effective institutions at the European and global levels, including the United Nations.

The key, therefore, is to combine vibrant local communities with robust international cooperation. Only this dual approach can safeguard human rights and sustain democracy in today's complex world.

Thank you very much for your attention. I now hand the floor to my colleagues, Benedetta and Andreas.

Is Euroscepticism really 'bad' for democracy/ies?

Benedetta Carlotti

First of all, thank you—thank you for having me here. This project is truly amazing, and it's a real pleasure to speak with students from so many different countries. I'm very happy to be part of it.

My intervention will focus on the European Union and, in particular, on Euroscepticism—a phenomenon that, broadly speaking, spreads across Europe in a rather critical or negative way.

Before we begin, let me outline what I will cover. I promise to keep it engaging. First, I will explain what Euroscepticism is, where it comes from, and why it is such a contested concept—just a little theory, nothing too heavy. Then, I will look at Euroscepticism today. As Michele Nicoletti rightly noted, the spread of liberal democracies across Europe shapes this phenomenon. We will ask ourselves whether Euroscepticism is truly a “bad phantom,” or whether it might, in some ways, contribute

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something to the current state of the European Union. Can it, perhaps, become a constructive force?

What is Euroscepticism?

The first thing to clarify is that Euroscepticism, as a term, essentially exists because the media decided it should. It was, in a sense, invented by the media—particularly in Great Britain, which was the first country to openly express strong doubts about the European Union.

Its origins can be traced back to British press in the 1980s. For example, a 1985 article in *The Times* summarized the British government's position at the time. The opposition was not against removing trade barriers per se, but rather concerned about measures that would centralize power within the European Union instead of leaving it in national hands. At that time, the European Union—then focused on developing the Single Market—was still in its early stages.

A key figure in the development of Euroscepticism is Margaret Thatcher. She was the first European leader to openly voice strong opposition to European integration. Importantly, she was not against international cooperation between European nations, but she was deeply skeptical of the European Union evolving into a centralized entity.

Thatcher's position, as reflected in her famous speeches, stressed that the European Commission should not concentrate excessive power, that decision-making should remain within national democratic institutions, and that European integration must respect the sovereignty of Member States. This perspective laid the foundation for modern Euroscepticism.

Euroscepticism and European integration

Euroscepticism cannot be separated from the European integration process—it has always existed in response to it. Naturally, its focus has shifted over time. In Thatcher's era, opposition was primarily concerned with the market and the structure of the European Union. Today, Euroscepticism is an established part of the democratic process, yet defining it precisely remains challenging.

Scholars have developed different ways to classify Euroscepticism. For example, in 1998, it was described as either a contingent or conditional position toward European integration, or as a total and unconditional opposition. Over time, a distinction emerged between "hard" Euroscepticism, which seeks to reject the EU entirely, and "soft" Euroscepticism, which expresses dissatisfaction with specific policies or aspects of the EU without rejecting it as a whole.

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Regardless of how it is defined, Euroscepticism is generally perceived as a negative force for both the European Union and democracy. Historically, the EU has been an elite-driven project—a process negotiated among political elites, though still subject to public scrutiny. Consequently, opposition was often treated as a niche phenomenon, something to be managed or contained rather than engaged with constructively.

Euroscepticism today

Over the past 15 years, we have witnessed a wave of opposition to the EU, represented both by political parties and social movements. Some notable examples include:

- Poland's Law and Justice Party
- Spain's Podemos
- Greece's Syriza
- Italy's Five Star Movement
- UK parties like UKIP and figures like Nigel Farage
- Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

Both left- and right-wing actors—though more prominently on the right—have challenged the EU's democratic structures.

Since around 2014, the presence of Eurosceptic voices has grown at both the supranational and national levels. Populist and Eurosceptic parties have gained representation in governments, marking a real shift in European politics. These voices are no longer marginal—they are here to stay.

Causes of Euroscepticism

Scholars link the rise of Euroscepticism to several major crises:

The 2007 economic crisis triggered widespread protests across Europe, including Spain's "15-M" movement and demonstrations in Greece, exposing deep inequalities among Member States (e.g., Germany versus Greece).

The migration crisis created tensions between Member States along Mediterranean and Balkan routes, highlighting divisions and reducing solidarity.

Brexit (2016) marked the first time a country left the EU through a referendum—a historic event that shook European democracy. While domestic debates played a role, Euroscepticism contributed to this outcome.

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The pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war tested EU's capacity to act. The Union responded with measures such as investment programmes and support for refugees, demonstrating solidarity, yet also raising questions about fairness and efficiency.

Other challenges—such as climate change, political instability, and more—have also fuelled Euroscepticism across the continent.

Trust in the European Union

Examining trust in the EU over time (2010–2021), we can observe clear fluctuations:

- During the economic crisis, trust declined sharply.
- At the peak of the migration crisis in 2015, trust fell even further.
- More recently, effective EU management of the pandemic has helped restore some confidence.

Conclusion

There is a big elephant in the room: Euroscepticism. Alongside populism and nationalism, it represents a significant challenge to European democracy. Rather than dismissing these voices, we should consider how to integrate them into democratic discussion.

Opposition is a cornerstone of democracy. Excluding dissent risks provoking harsher and more entrenched forms of resistance. The question we face is: can we include Eurosceptic voices constructively within democratic politics, perhaps through institutional reforms at the EU level? And can some forms of opposition—such as advocating for a more solidaristic Europe—actually strengthen democracy rather than weaken it?

This has been my brief contribution on Euroscepticism. I hope it has been clear, and I look forward to engaging in the discussion with all of you. Thank you very much for your attention.

Democracy across borders

Andreas Oberprantacher

Thank you very much, Daniela, and thank you, Beppe, for the kind invitation. It's truly wonderful to be here. Honestly, we would need at least twice as much time to properly

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discuss each presentation and examine how they relate to each other—both in terms of convergence and divergence.

My opening question is: how do we praise democracy? This is the theme that unites us, yet we must consider it in light of the many forms of structural discrimination that, in my view, are embedded in the very history and development of democracy and democratic institutions. As prof. Nicoletti mentioned at the outset, it is essential to return to the very origins—the beginnings of what we might call democracy.

If we consider what is often called ‘Athenian democracy’ as one possible historical starting point, we see that the history of democracy was not merely contingent or accidental—it was also systematic. Ancient Athens was not a society where slavery was a minor footnote; it was a society built on slavery. From the very beginning, structural discrimination was a central feature of democratic history, not only in antiquity but also in the modern reconfiguration of democratic institutions.

Modernity, with its discourses of equality, freedom, and rights, coincided with the creation of new forms of domination, such as plantation slavery—the most brutal form of oppression. Modernity invested not only in State formation and democratic projects but also in imperialism and colonial domination. I mention these aspects to emphasize that structural discrimination is an inherent feature of the history of democracy. It is not marginal; it is systematically embedded in the evolution of democratic institutions.

If we take this seriously, it is also essential to rethink democracy today in light of the structural discrimination that continues to persist within democratic institutions, which are often linked to the formation of modern States. Drawing on Aristotle, we might argue that defining who counts as ‘the people’—who is included and who is excluded from equality and freedom—is a central democratic challenge.

Historically, modern democracies were often structured to favour certain groups, mistakenly equating ‘the people’ with a narrowly nationalized conception of citizenship. In this presentation, I will briefly address aspects that invite us to reconsider democratic aspirations and efforts, including the design of new democratic institutions, with particular attention to borders as one of the most problematic, non-democratic elements of institutionalized democracy.

To illustrate this, consider a small village in south-eastern Austria. Behind the fences lies a so-called deportation centre, where individuals are prepared for deportation. The architects and government promoting this project claimed that it aligns with human rights principles, providing a dignified space for people awaiting deportation due to lack of proper documentation or valid asylum claims.

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This raises a complex issue: an institution historically associated with systematic human rights violations is reorganized in a way that presents itself as compatible with human rights and the concept of dignity—core principles of democratic constitutionalism.

In my brief presentation, I want to highlight three interconnected aspects that may help us rethink democracy, particularly in relation to borders as undemocratic elements of institutionalized democracy, and to explore how we might further democratize them.

First, defining borders is far from simple. We typically think of borders as territorial lines separating States, but in democratic terms, the concept is complex and fluid. Scholars like Étienne Balibar have argued that attempts to define borders often move in circles—the very act of defining them already shapes their meaning.

Today, borders do not always exist where we expect. Migration and refugee policies illustrate that border operations take place far from traditional frontiers—in the Mediterranean Sea, within national territories, and not just at the physical boundaries between States. The European Union's integration, including the Dublin Agreement, has not eliminated borders; in some ways, it has multiplied them. Border controls now occur in numerous locations, creating zones of uncertainty and marginalization.

The anthropologist mentioned earlier emphasizes that individuals travelling without proper documentation often experience their own bodies as borders. These people frequently live on the threshold between inclusion and exclusion, subjected to constant surveillance and the threat of deportation. In the Mediterranean, this threshold can be deadly: over the past decades, thousands of people have disappeared, yet no EU member State fully accepted responsibility.

These examples demonstrate that borders are far from neutral; they are crucial for understanding governance, democracy, and accountability. Historically, similar struggles have occurred, such as the occupation of churches in France, the creation of sanctuary cities in the United States and Australia, and other local acts of resistance. Scholars like Mezzadra and Neilson have coined the term 'border stratum' to describe how borders function as non-democratic institutions within democracies, privileging certain groups while marginalizing others.

From a democratic perspective, border coercion must be critically reconsidered. States do not have the exclusive right to control borders; democratic border management should involve all those affected, granting them a meaningful voice in decisions that shape their lives.

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A related issue is the transmission of citizenship rights. Ayelet Shachar, in *The Birthright Lottery*, emphasizes how citizenship often reproduces inequality: where a person is born heavily influences life expectancy, opportunities, and access to rights. To further democratize institutions, we need new ways of distributing rights—potentially based on existing social connections (jus nexus) rather than strictly on birthplace or ancestry.

In conclusion, if borders are non-democratic structures embedded within democracy, then further democratizing democracy requires a fundamental reconsideration of borders themselves. Scholars in critical border studies have long argued that extending rights and freedoms necessitates critically addressing discrimination. Democracy is not static; it must be renewed across generations and expanded to include diverse populations.

Marginalized populations at the edges of democracy must be actively included in democratic processes. John Balibar (1997, 2013) argued that even 'illegalized' migrants embody a form of democratic aspiration, highlighting the significance of ongoing democratic struggles. In this sense, democracy can revitalize itself through border struggles, environmental struggles, and other forms of resistance.

I end with an image from Austrian schools, where children faced deportation. In response, students protested these actions, and in certain cases, their protests were successful. These schools remained democratic spaces, providing safety and enabling all students to participate in fully in the educational process without fear.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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