



# EU democracy in the times of coronavirus

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## Abstract

The future of the European integration project depends on the EU's ability to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and to other crises in the future. The pandemic constitutes an opportunity for EU democracy to be reinvented and for its complex institutional design and mechanisms to be adapted to the current challenges. This article examines the long-standing debate around the shortcomings of EU democracy and focuses on two elements—populism and communication—as crucial components in understanding the difficulties of democratic governance in the EU today. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the flaws of the populist forces, which seemed to lose their consensus in the first months after the outbreak of the pandemic, thus giving traditional parties a chance to reaffirm their position. Furthermore, COVID-19 has emphasised the need for more and better communication between EU institutions, member states and citizens. Overall, EU democracy could benefit from these difficult times and bring the EU closer to its citizens.

## Keywords

EU, Democracy, Coronavirus, Democratic deficit, Populism, Communication

## Introduction

For over a decade now, EU democracy has been one of the issues taking centre stage in political debate. Following Easton's model of political systems, it can be argued that discussions have referred to both the 'input', that is, the methods of citizen participation, and the 'throughput', namely the institutional arrangements and functioning of the EU (Easton 1957, 383–4).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the debate has revolved around the democratic character of this apparatus, addressing numerous concerns about the legitimacy and accountability of EU governance (see, e.g. Follesdal 1998). Against this backdrop,

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the global health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has been having a severe impact on the economic and social fabric of the EU, thus contributing to a very insidious picture for EU democracy.

This article investigates the future of the European integration project after the coronavirus by addressing the question of populists' influence on public opinion and the role of communication between EU institutions and citizens. In so doing, it argues that these two elements play a crucial role in defining both democracy in the Union and citizens' trust in the EU. Moreover, they pose pressing questions that will determine the future of the EU, which is now confronting its longstanding and unresolved problems as well as the new challenges imposed by the coronavirus crisis.

The analysis is structured as follows. First, the current state of EU democracy and its weaknesses are presented. Second, the performance of populism in the times of coronavirus is scrutinised and some proposals are put forward to strengthen EU democracy. Lastly, the ties between citizens and EU institutions are discussed through the lens of the Union's 'communication deficit'.

## **EU democracy: between expectations and disappointment**

If we start out from the basic assumption that there is, by definition, an unbreakable bond between democracy and the people, the complexity involved in applying the political categories normally used on a national scale to a supranational and multilevel system such as the European one—whose people are simply the sum of those of its constituent democracies—immediately becomes apparent. Indeed, EU democracy has its own unique features. These peculiarities are linked to its history, how it has been built up through the decades since the Second World War, and the economic, political and social developments that have shaped its evolution. For the purpose of this article, EU democracy is understood as the institutional design and decision procedures of the supranational institutions that characterise the unique system of political actions that the EU embodies.

EU democracy is a product both of the idea that belonging to a single 'European house' can protect the continent from the re-emergence of nationalism, and of the constant balancing of individual member states' interests with those of the EU. Therefore, its structure—evolved during the various stages of the integration process—is manifested at different levels in a complicated intertwining of competences, bodies and decision-making mechanisms known as EU governance. This hybrid model is determined by both intergovernmental and Community mechanisms, which involve both bodies of democratic representatives, such as the European Parliament, and instruments of direct democracy, such as petitions. However, a lot of processes are managed by specialists (or 'technocrats') under the remit of the European Commission and its agencies. Revolving around these, a microcosm of non-governmental organisations, think tanks and businesses actively participate in the EU decision-making process and influence its outcome.

The complexity of these interaction mechanisms, along with the proliferation of rules and bureaucracy that have arisen from them, has reinforced the citizens' perception of a

‘democratic deficit’. The main arguments behind the idea of an ‘undemocratic EU’ refer to the lack of an electoral contest for the political leadership at the EU level and a weak European Parliament (see, e.g. Follesdal and Hix 2006), or the lack of accountability. Furthermore, while for a long time the continent’s economic prosperity and political stability provided a bulwark against citizens challenging the legitimacy of EU democracy, the gradual decline in these areas and the critical issues that have emerged in the governance framework have led to the public’s gradual alienation from the European project. This trend is reflected in the generally low turnout rates for the European Parliament elections—50.66% in 2019 (European Parliament 2019). This has been accompanied by a growing rejection of the commitment to abide by the constraints enshrined in the EU’s integration pact (i.e. financial stability policies, burden-sharing and solidarity schemes).

Finally, EU democracy has also morphed over time into a ‘democracy of narcissism’. According to the definition coined by the historian and political scientist Giovanni Orsina (2018), this is characterised by increasingly demanding citizens, whose democratically elected representatives have made substantial promises of well-being and individual rights which have not, however, been completely honoured, resulting in a vicious circle of growing expectations and disappointments. This is all the more true in the EU because the European level sometimes lacks the powers required for effective action.

## **Never let a crisis go to waste**

In this climate of dissatisfaction, it was easy for the seeds of populism to take root and bear fruit in almost every country across the EU. Populist rhetoric, be it on the left or right, centred on a mantra emphasising the need for people to regain control over the democratic process. ‘Let’s take back control’, the slogan of Vote Leave that successfully campaigned for the UK’s departure from the EU in the country’s 2016 Brexit referendum (*Why Vote Leave* 2016), implied that Britain had ended up in the hands of an EU and global governance system dominated by anti-democratic elites.

It is no coincidence that the first major populist wave to spread across the EU coincided with the period following the 2008 financial crisis. This movement was instigated specifically by a desire to challenge global finance, market deregulation policies and international financial institutions, which were regarded as responsible for the economic disaster. In the EU, populism and Euroscepticism are two sides of the same coin. Both phenomena have made constant headway, propelling populist forces of various kinds to the top of the opinion polls in many EU countries, and even into government itself in some cases—as has happened in Greece, Italy, Poland and the UK. According to populists, the processes of European integration and globalisation are responsible for the impoverishment of vast swathes of the population and growing inequalities.

Years of economic recession, rising unemployment, the lack of a coordinated approach to migration and a standstill in EU governance reforms have worn the EU down. Thus weakened, it now faces a public health challenge whose scale and impact can be likened to a war. In this light, it is conceivable that—once again—the political forces that will

benefit will be those that advocate turning in on ourselves behind our national borders as the solution to the effects of internationalisation. Yet, an initial examination of people's feelings—expressed in public opinion polls in the EU and in other parts of the world during the first month of the health emergency—showed a reverse in this trend.

In the US, President Donald Trump's administration has been accused of underestimating the scale of the health crisis and exposing the US population to the risk of the uncontrolled spread of the virus. In late April 2020, the US—a country without welfare mechanisms capable of providing long-term support to its people, in particular those with lower incomes—had both the highest number of reported coronavirus cases and the biggest COVID-19 death toll (*Worldometer* 2020). In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has been severely criticised for minimising the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, he has become such an isolated figure that the very institutional balance of his government has been shaken to its core (*Il Post* 2020). Meanwhile, in Germany, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern) saw their approval ratings rise in their first month of handling the crisis, from March to April 2020 (Forsa 2020), while the far-right populist party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) suffered a decline in its fortunes as it had major problems presenting a clear and credible alternative solution (Schulz 2020). Even in France, Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally (Rassemblement national) experienced a dip in support during the initial phase of the crisis (de Calignon 2020), while its Italian counterpart, Matteo Salvini's League (Lega), has gradually lost support since the onset of the public health emergency (Faggiano 2020). As for Poland and Hungary, where the coronavirus crisis has led to the adoption of measures criticised for aiming to strengthen executive power, both public opinion and the EU institutions are keeping a close eye on these countries' governments.

For the moment these are only empirical observations, as the situation remains fluid and the trend may well be reversed again. It will all depend on how the crisis develops and the ability of moderate government and opposition forces to provide citizens with practical solutions. However, the current situation suggests a glimmer of hope for the traditional parties, which have an opportunity to reassert their leadership. This contrasts with the flaws so far shown by populists in government and the inability of populists in opposition to present themselves as credible alternative governments in times of crisis.

In this context, EU democracy is under scrutiny too. Now is the time for the EU to demonstrate that, notwithstanding its initial delays and lack of coordination, it can offer a joint response to the crisis. From the beginning it was evident that the scale of the upheaval caused by the spread of COVID-19 would make a return to the pre-crisis status quo unlikely. Instead, huge fiscal interventions and liquidity injections into the system have been required, inevitably raising the level of public debt for many countries. 'Flexibility—not rigidity—is what may yet save Europe', wrote political scientist Ivan Krastev back in 2017 (Krastev 2017, 110). In fact, EU institutions need to deploy the conventional and unconventional tools at their disposal to support member states as they cope with this crisis.

Despite initial disagreements and harsh debates on the approach to take, the EU has adopted several initiatives. The European Commission's three-pronged response to the current crisis provides a good starting point: it has (a) mobilised funds and opened credit lines for member states through various channels such as the European Stability Mechanism, the European Investment Bank and the huge intervention by the European Central Bank; (b) ensured that national borders between member states have remained open so that goods and aid can continue to circulate; and (c) suspended the constraints imposed by the Stability Pact and deviated from the rigid state-aid rules. Nevertheless, the main EU response will arrive with the delivery of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 and the recovery fund, which is called 'Next Generation EU'. At the time of writing, the intense negotiations of the European Summit of 17–21 June had just ended with a 'historic deal' (Strupczewski et al. 2020). Indeed, the European Council's agreement on the unprecedented mobilisation of the EU budget and the creation of new financing instruments for the recovery looks promising and paves the way for future prospects for EU democracy. Nonetheless, it is now up to the European Parliament and national parliaments to discuss, approve and implement this agreement.

The crises that have put the EU's democracy to the test in the last two decades, that is, the 2008 economic and financial crisis and the current one, have shown that there is a need for political will to support unconventional measures to get through crises, with these measures then being followed by structural reforms of the European frameworks, in particular, the eurozone. The need to reform EU governance has been discussed for more than 10 years now—unfortunately to no avail. There is also the need for a change of pace in the debate on which European integration model should be pursued in the future. The five scenarios outlined in the European Commission's *White Paper on the Future of Europe* (European Commission 2017) provide a useful tool for understanding where it is possible to achieve a wider consensus. In this context, the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe (European Commission 2020b) will take on even greater strategic importance and could be the platform that will finally herald the reform of EU governance.

Every crisis brings challenges but also progress and opportunities. The pandemic constitutes an opportunity for EU democracy to be reinvented and for its complex institutional design to be adapted to the current challenges, in line with the original ideals.

## **Citizens and institutions turning an eye to the future**

Communication plays a crucial role in any democracy. In the case of the EU, however, the lack of a European public sphere makes it extremely difficult to ensure the effective flow of information and communication between the nerve centre of the EU institutions and the member states. Indeed, despite the many tools and platforms at its disposal, the EU has trouble getting its messages through to citizens, with the lens of national debate often acting as a filter on the original content. The EU institutions do have direct communication channels that are easily accessible online for everybody to see, but a lot of their communications continue to be relayed by media outlets or national/local representatives. The

original message travels over long distances and is reflected in a kaleidoscope of ‘derived messages’, expressed in a range of linguistic and cultural codes, often incorporating the intermediary’s point of view and interpretation.

While the process of democratising information and communication has resulted in a wider and more accessible range of channels, it has also made checking sources and selecting such channels more difficult. In this context, there are also frequent cases of ‘misinformation’ (the unintentional dissemination of fake news) and ‘disinformation’ (the intentional dissemination of fake news), which are difficult to control and which further complicate communication within the EU’s 27 national public spheres. Initiatives such as the website<sup>2</sup> What Europe Does For Me (European Parliament 2018), where users can directly consult information on EU policies and projects with a local impact on citizens, are emerging with a view to supplying an official source of clear, accessible and reliable content. Over the past decade, many projects have been launched to establish a direct channel of communication between institutions and citizens and to counteract the EU’s ‘communication deficit’. However, the crucial element is not the quantity but the effectiveness of these communications, that is, the strategies that can be put into practice to communicate with citizens despite the limitations—whether linguistic, cultural or structural—that make the dynamics of any communication between the European institutions and the citizens of the member states extremely complex.

In general, tools that are able to bring the institutions and citizens closer together and create a more direct connection between them also have greater potential in terms of effectiveness of communication. At the EU level, especially in recent years, a lot of effort has been invested in this strategy, attempting to introduce innovative aspects into EU democracy, in terms of both policy and communication. For example, 2014 saw the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, whereby the candidate put forward by the political family that won the European Parliament elections would become president of the European Commission. Despite the undeniable difficulties encountered in making this mechanism work—due to both the specific nature of such elections and the complex negotiations involved in deciding on EU leadership roles—it does have some potential that could yet be explored as time goes on (see Van Hecke et al. 2018). The EU institutions’ representations in the member states also play a strategic role. By promoting projects aimed at citizens and information campaigns on the opportunities offered by the EU, they represent key points of contact between citizens and the institutions. These channels, which have the strategic advantage of greater geographical proximity to the public, should be further developed.

The coronavirus crisis is highlighting once more the benefit of and the need for more direct communication. Tools such as video messages and live chat on social platforms are increasing the reach of EU messages within individual countries. In this sense, the tools of the digital age are powerful aids for the EU institutions. The communication campaigns launched to inform citizens about the real extent of the EU’s joint response and to counter disinformation are a step in the right direction.<sup>3</sup> These are just a few examples, but the number of initiatives has grown over the years. However, even on this front, while much has been achieved, more can still be done—and it can be done better.

## Conclusion

Like any democracy, EU democracy is ultimately imperfect. This makes practical suggestions, aimed at proposing specific reforms and improvements, both useful and desirable. In discussing the implications of the pandemic for EU democratic governance, this article has focused on the role of populism and its consequences for EU democracy, on the one hand, and the EU's communication deficit and the strategic actions to overcome it, on the other. To deal with these two phenomena, which challenge EU democracy on a daily basis, constructive criticism is needed to create the political will to review EU governance and get the integration project up and running again following an effective model, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity. This model will be able to reconcile and build on unity in diversity, relaunching a sense of common European citizenship on these foundations and drawing on the benefits of its constituent individual national identities.

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## Notes

1. 'Throughput' refers here to the processes of EU governance: the rules and procedures that affect the way an 'output' (i.e. a policy) is delivered and its quality and legitimacy (see Schmidt 2015).
2. This website is available in the EU's 24 official languages.
3. For instance, the European Commission's campaigns 'Support the Coronavirus Global Response Effort' (European Commission 2020c) and 'Fighting Disinformation' (European Commission 2020a).

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