

Introduction

by Klaus Welle and Federico Reho

Democracy is the beating heart and core of the EU's identity, along with peace. From its inception in the aftermath of the Second World War, European integration has been open only to democratic countries that respect the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. It has also played an essential role in democratising, stabilising and integrating new countries, from Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1970s and 1980s to the post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and 2000s.

Since the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979, the EU's democratic system has developed hugely too: by increasing transparency, empowering the European Parliament, making the European Commission more accountable and even involving citizens in innovative experiments such as the Conference on the Future of Europe. As a result, the EU now has clear dual democratic legitimacy as a union of states and citizens, each represented in one of the equal co-legislators: the Council and the European Parliament respectively. Moreover, the multilevel nature of EU democracy is recognised through the direct involvement of the national parliaments in various capacities, from the ratification of mixed trade agreements to the yellow and orange card procedures which protect subsidiarity.

As a side effect of the last 15 years of successive crises, EU affairs have also become more politicised. As a result, European issues have become essential to national democratic debates, and a European public sphere has finally begun to emerge. It is important that democratic accountability does not lag behind political and institutional developments, as has at times been the case over the last decades when new rules and bodies have been created outside the EU legal framework to react to crisis situations.

As the EU acquires new powers and competences to manage new challenges in the most diverse fields, it will be necessary to improve the quality of EU democracy, the legitimacy of its institutions, and their responsiveness to the needs and preferences of the EU member states and citizens. Moreover, democratic values and institutions face new challenges, such as disinformation, polarisation and a lack of trust in political elites—all in a world of systemic rivalry.