

How to consolidate and enhance European democracy support today ?

DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTOCRACY. WHY THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS SUPERIOR AND HOW IT CAN DEFEAT AUTOCRACY

HOW TO CONSOLIDATE AND ENHANCE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY SUPPORT TODAY?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present research paper is intended as a contribution to reflection in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, considering the analysis of internal risks, threats and opportunities that can positively or negatively influence the future of the European Union.

Social Media summary

There is a sense that democracy has reached a significant point in its development in Europe. The institutions of democracy are more widely accepted and practised across the continent than ever before. It is important to recognise the problems, challenges and opportunities that face European democracy, because it can provide the context in which Europe is seeking to make democratic institutions work.

Keywords

#democracy #policy #populism #autocracy

Short bio

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1. Introduction

Democracy is not a tangible result that can be attained by all member states, but is, rather, an incomplete project which is continuously under development in all nations that strive for democracy. In this regard, it is not possible to define either an individual nation's progress towards democracy or, indeed, greater Europe's progress, although it is possible to recognise specific democratic achievements in terms of institution building. There exists, therefore, an element of in temporality in which it is not possible to identify what stage Europe has achieved in building democracy. Instead, it is only possible to point to the institutions that support democracy and the ways in which they enhance democratic practice¹.

The fact that European democracy is going through a bad patch is documented by *The Global State of Democracy 2019 Report: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise*² and the *Democracy Index 2020. In sickness and in health?*³, painting a picture of an EU where citizens' perceived distance from institutions fosters populism, illiberal discourse and anti-democratic views, trends aggravated by the handling of the pandemic crisis.

At the same time, beyond chronic vulnerabilities in Central and Eastern European countries, even Western European countries are feeling the pinch, with the Nordic countries still the benchmark of democracy, with the same performance - Sweden, Finland and Denmark. Although the EU has shown that it is capable of a huge mobilisation of forces (and budgetary and extra-budgetary funds) in response to the pandemic crisis, and European populists have lost an argument about the EU's 'inability to act', they remain⁴ relevant because:

- (i) reflects a deep mistrust - differing from country to country - of institutions, traditional political parties and leaders, the media and, in general, the ruling class;

¹ Lawrence Pratchett and Vivien Lowndes, *Developing Democracy in Europe, An analytical summary of the Council of Europe's acquis*, available at https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/democracy/Activities/Key-Texts/01_Analytical_summary/03_Developing_Democracy_en.asp

² *The Global State of Democracy 2019 Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019, available at: <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/the-global-state-of-democracy-2019.pdf>

³ *Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health?*, The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020, available at: https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=democracy2020

⁴ *Ibidem*.

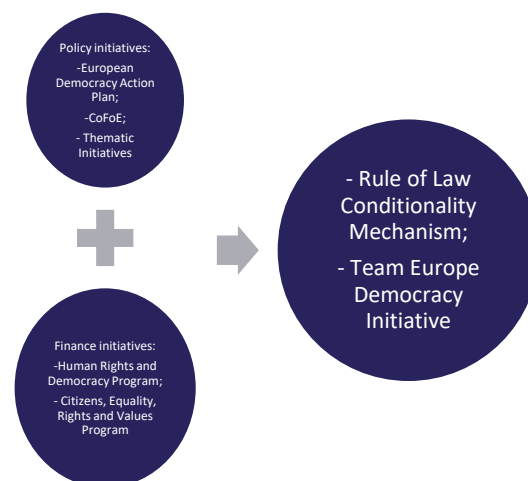
(ii) it proliferates when unemployment, poor quality of life, inequalities of all kinds and poverty are on the rise (and appear to be worsening in the short term at least);

(iii) it is at the forefront of those who can limit immigration (associated, more or less forcibly, with Islamism or terrorism).

To counter propaganda and cyber-attacks, the European Parliament⁵ has set up a special committee, whose mission goes beyond public health disinformation, tracking attempts by foreign powers (e.g. Russia, China) to undermine democracy and global trust in the EU. Although major online platforms have taken decisive steps to "filter" sensitive information, the European Federation of Journalists, the Council of European Editors and others consider voluntary measures to be too little, calling for "effective" sanctions. However, given the difficulty of detecting genuinely fake news promptly, there are fears that freedom of expression could be affected.

2021 marked the first year of implementation of the *EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024)*, which recommitted the EU and its Member States to use the full range of instruments for the protection and promotion of human rights and democracy in all areas of external action and highlighted the link between human rights and the environment, climate change, and the impact of digital technologies⁶.

Figure 1 Key EU Policy and Funding Initiatives



Source: European Democracy Support Annual Review 2021⁷

⁵ For those interested see more details at *REPORT on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation*, European Parliament, 2022, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0022_EN.html

⁶ *EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2021*, European Commission, 2022, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/eu-annual-report-human-rights-and-democracy-world-2021>

⁷ *European Democracy Support Annual Review 2021*, Carnegie Europe, 2022, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/EDH_Annual_Review_final.pdf

There was broad continuity in European aid for democracy and human rights in 2021. Funding for external democracy projects continued on a relatively constant course, with some donors making modest increases, while the EU opened a new program for spending on democracy projects in member states. Still, the funds allocated for democracy aid remain relatively low compared to those for other policy areas such as climate action or security. A striking deficiency is that donors still generally struggle to identify how much they actually spend on democracy and human rights. Figures are not easily available, democracy aid is mixed in confusing ways with other funding (such as for public administration reform or peace-building), and aid categories are not directly comparable across countries. Even those policymakers responsible for democracy aid are almost always unable to say how much their country was spending on this objective. This compares unfavourably with other areas of external funding⁸.

⁸ *European Democracy Support Annual Review 2021*, Carnegie Europe, 2022, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/EDH_Annual_Review_final.pdf

2. EU internal challenges, risks and opportunities⁹

European construction is facing nowadays three categories of phenomena/situations: a) *challenges* – which require real-time (or anticipatory) assessments and reactions b) *risks* - requiring avoidance measures, and, if this is not possible, to counteract or neutralise; c) *opportunities* - which, towards unlike challenges or risks, appear as potentials to be realised. The relationships between these can be seen as follows: challenges become vulnerabilities in the face of risks, but can also be transformed into opportunities.

2.1. Internal challenges¹⁰

➤ *The rule of law*¹¹. Considered fundamental to the democratic order and defined with international rigor, contestation can become a challenge for the EU by the simple fact that it is questioned the foundation of values of the Union, stipulated by art. 2 of the European Union Treaty. Aware of this challenge, the European Union is constantly following the developments in the matter, on four coordinates – judicial systems, anti-corruption framework, pluralism and media freedom, as well and other institutional checks and balances. Last report¹², from 2021, captures the experience the pandemic, which meant different pressures (by country and by domain) on the rule of law, but also a general sense of the need for resilience, noting that this remains a component crucial part of preparing societies to (manage) crisis situations¹³.

➤ *Green technologies*. This is one of the most important internal challenges at EU level. Now there is an ambitious strategy in matter - the *European Green Deal* - the goal of the Pact being to transform the EU into the first climate-neutral continent by 2050¹⁴.

⁹ These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora *et al.*, *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 18 – 33, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 20 – 22.

¹¹ *The Rule of Law Checklist*, Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, 2016 available at:

https://www.venice.coe.int/images/SITE%20IMAGES/Publications/Rule_of_Law_Check_List.pdf

¹² *Communication from the European Commission (2021), Rule of Law Report The rule of law situation in the European Union*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0700>

¹³ These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora *et al.*, *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 20-21, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

2.2. Risks associated with internal challenges¹⁵

- *Disinformation through digital platforms.* The proliferation of digital interconnection solutions has the gift of amplifying the possibilities of online interaction between senders and receivers, among others, and of false information (delivered knowingly - as disinformation -, or unknowingly – as misinformation). The European Commission¹⁶ is already following the subject on issues such as: improving transparency; promoting information diversity; promoting credibility, accessibility and information traceability; etc.¹⁷
- *Economic inequality.* The future of work¹⁸ represents one of the sectors we can identify new sources of inequality. Automation and other megatrends have already caused change occupational and skills in all local labour markets. Explainable, employment in the EU has grown in knowledge-intensive sectors such as telecommunications, financial services, real estate and education, and decreased in manufacturing and agriculture. And for political decision-makers, the prospects of even more polarized developments in the typology and remuneration of jobs (between sectors/branches) and demography (through the numerical reduction of the active population due to aging) means reasons for social tension and inequality to manage in the future. The pandemic also highlighted opportunities, the risk being the slowness of their exploitation¹⁹: the normalization of telework, the resorption of the skills/skills differential through education, the rethinking of social protection, etc.²⁰

¹⁵ These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora et al., *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 23 – 25, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

¹⁶ *Tackling online disinformation*, European Commission, 2022, available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation>

¹⁷ These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora et al., *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 22-23, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

¹⁸ *The future of work in Europe*, McKinsey Global Institute, 2020, available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-in-europe>

¹⁹ *The future of work. Trends, challenges and potential initiatives*, EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679097/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)679097_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679097/EPRS_BRI(2021)679097_EN.pdf).

²⁰ These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora et al., *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 23-24, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

- *Climate change/global warming*. Climate change poses a double risk. One is that of degenerative phenomena at the ecosystem level - from the disruption of biorhythms to damage the biodiversity (5% of all species worldwide would be threatened with extinction by an increase in global average temperature of 2 degrees Celsius or even 16% if the global average temperature rises by more than 4.3 degrees Celsius)²¹. Then there is that associated with the real cost of decarbonisation measures - although the Union has put in place the Just Transition Mechanism to ensure that the transition to a climate neutral economy takes place in a fair way.²²
- *Illiberalism*: taking under government control some powers/competences of autonomous public institutions²³;
- *Extremism*: creation of political structures (parties) at the extreme ends of the political spectrum (left or right)²⁴;
- *National autocracies*: violations of human rights, of democratic norms and defiance of international law²⁵.

2.3. Internal opportunities²⁶

- *Civics*. The opportunity targets levers such as: limitation and control of state power; anticorruption and the initiation of good governance reforms; promoting political participation a citizens; the development of democratic values and civic education programs, etc. For instance, if we analyse the voter turnout for the European Parliament elections there is still room for improvement (see Figure 2)²⁷.

²¹ IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019, available at: https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/inline/files/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers.pdf

²² These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora et al., *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 24-25, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

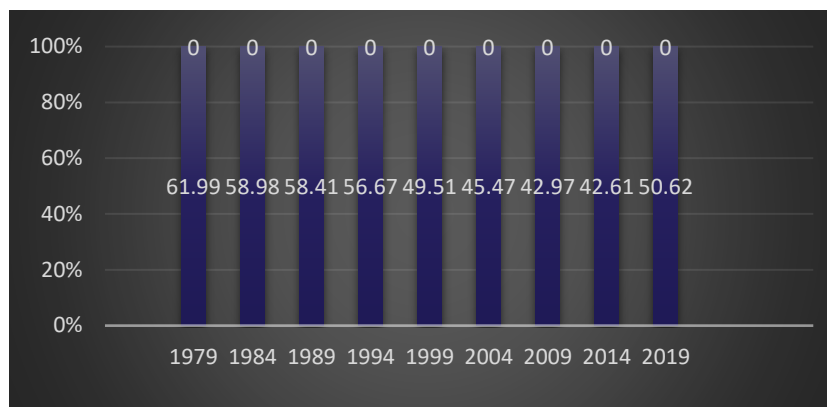
²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 22-23.

Figure 2 EU Parliament: voter turnout in the European elections 1979-2019

Source: Statista, 2022²⁸

- *Single market.* The European Single Market is one of the EU's greatest achievements, fuelling economic growth and improving the daily lives of businesses and European consumers. The integrity of the single market has come under intense pressure during the Covid-19 pandemic²⁹.
- *Cultural/creative industries.* Culture and creativity are powerful assets in both the 'commercial' dimension, through related goods and services, and as an element of 'spirit', based on shared human experience and expression of human values. Creativity remains an underexploited strategic resource, capable of an above-average economic growth and generating quality jobs (e.g. for young people)³⁰.
- *Renewable energy.* Increasing the share of renewable energy is a key to achieving the EU's renewable energy targets: reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, making it a climate neutral continent by 2050³¹.

²⁸ Voter turnout in the European Parliament Elections in the European Union (EU) from 1979 to 2019, Statista, 2022, available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/300427/eu-parliament-turnout-for-the-european-elections/>.

²⁹ Single market, European Commission, 2022, available at: https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/actions-topic/single-market_en and Octavian-Dragomir Jora et al., *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 25-26, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

³⁰ Cultural and creative sectors, European Commission, 2022, available at: <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-and-creative-sectors/cultural-and-creative-sectors> and Octavian-Dragomir Jora et al., *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, p. 26, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

³¹ Renewable energy targets, European Union, 2022, available at https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/renewable-energy/renewable-energy-directive-targets-and-rules/renewable-energy-targets_en and Octavian-Dragomir Jora et al., *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, p. 26, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

3. Possible scenarios³²

*Scenario 1*³³

A climate burdened with mistrust/disappointment will be fertile for populism, which capitalizes the perception of the loss of power of the nation state. From xenophobic attitudes towards migrants to the point of denouncing the terms of trade in international trade, they settle through scepticism towards the EU project, favouring an isolationist, protectionist and ultra-sovereign discourse.

In order to restore the European cohesion, the Union may for instance need to:

- (i) *Focus on essential public goods* – facilitating development/maintenance of interconnected physical and virtual infrastructures at EU level;
- (ii) *Favour the inclusion of as many critical value chains* on the European territory;
- (iii) Stepping back for the time being from further integration processes in the sensitive or secondary aspects of cohesion in the eyes of the public opinion.

The Union should capitalize more the synergy effect of the cooperation between the member states, which means strengthening both the economic, institutional and political cohesion of the member states, and the promotion of standards of freedom, democracy and solidarity.

*Scenario 2*³⁴

It is understood in the EU that although a natural feeling of inequality persists, it can be managed through a well-measured combination between conceding particularities (individual, sectoral, regional or national) and finding common ground. Subsidiarity can be the best manager of inequality and the community side can be strengthened: "let's do more slightly better". For example, if innovations are sought in a cohesive Europe, they can be not only technological, but also social.

³² These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora *et al.*, *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 42 – 52, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 42 – 43.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 46 – 47.

Such an EU can be moderate in ambitions and, at the same time, assertive, and it can do that through mostly political measures such as:

- (i) Giving up the temptation to regulate behaviours in favour of educating attitudes (slower effects yet more durable) (e.g., solidarity as responsibility in society);
- (ii) Bringing democracy closer to the citizens, from representative (and distant) democracy to participatory (and involved) democracy, especially with the help of new technologies;
- (iii) Infusing with a European ethos of all the structures of governance, at all possible levels.

Scenario 3³⁵

Studies of democracy and the rule of law at the global level have shown a decrease of the number of liberal democracies. The global political order seems to privilege authoritarian styles of governance, and this trend does not avoid the member states of the Union either. Liberal democracy is important not only as such, but also because it represents a way to better adapt to globalisation, and the EU democratic status can help the European citizens to make the most of it.

In that context the EU can serve as a support for the liberal democracy on multiple levels:

- (i) Keeping a fair relationship between community and national democracy, without claiming the prevalence of one over the other based upon the respect of fundamental rights and freedoms;
- (ii) Widening the geographical area of the manifestation of this relationship between the two democratic levels;
- (iii) The mutual democratic validation between the EU and the member states generates a series of democratic contagion effects throughout the region.

³⁵ These elements and the subsequent details are based upon a 2021 Romanian study on the future of Europe, available only in Romanian language. See more about this classification in further details in Octavian-Dragomir Jora *et al.*, *Viitorul Uniunii Europene: riscuri și scenarii pentru 2030. O uniune coezivă în fața provocărilor globale* [The future of the European Union: risks and scenarios for 2030. A cohesive union facing global challenges], 2021, pp. 47 – 48, available at: http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Studiu-SPOS-1_Viitorul-Europei_clean_final_site.pdf

CONCLUSION

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was a novel and innovative process which has opened up a new space for debate with citizens to address Europe's challenges and priorities, with a view to underpinning the democratic legitimacy of the European project and to upholding citizens' support for our common goals and values. However, ambitious and wide-ranging follow-up will be required if the conference is to generate tangible progress toward democratic renovation. While the CoFoE was undoubtedly the most open and participative exercise of this kind that the EU has ever held, it did little to address the broader state of European democracy. The conference may lead to one or more regular EU-level citizen forums; the even more important advance would be if it serves as a catalyst for wider democratic improvements across Europe³⁶.

In the face of the challenges facing the European Union and directly affecting European citizens, European institutional and political mechanisms lack a transmission belt to ensure dialogue, legitimacy and deliberation. Major questions in recent years have remained unresolved, even though the potential of involving citizens in a direct democratic mechanism would clarify many policy options. This consultation process could compensate for the limitations of representative democracy and the European democratic deficit, which have led to more and more political crises in the EU in recent years.

³⁶ Richard Youngs, *EU Democracy After the Conference on the Future of Europe*, Carnegie Europe, 2022, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/05/12/eu-democracy-after-conference-on-future-of-europe-pub-87110>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) Turning European values into concrete realities for EU citizens, in particular through more interactive and direct engagement.

European citizenship should be strengthened by providing more specific rights and freedoms to citizens. Also, a European statute for cross-border associations and European non-profit organisations may be of interest. European values should also be promoted through education. The European public sphere, including media channels, should receive additional EU investment for development and consolidation.

(ii) The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights should become universally applicable and enforceable. Also rule of law events / courses / other type of relations activities should become more common while more support for promoting these values is needed.

(iii) The rule of law instruments already in place should be effectively used. We should use all the legal, political and financial instruments to sanction the violation of the rule of law.

(iv) As the number of migrants increase we should be attentive to their integration process and promote the EU values through various educational programs in order to reach them. A successful integration of migrants in the EU societies and the correct understanding of our democratic values is needed for a better future.

(v) The enlargement process of the European Union must see that the candidate states respect the values and principles enshrined in the EU Treaties and the EU (v) Charter of Fundamental Rights. There must be a sine qua non conditions for EU membership and they are not subject to negotiations.

(vi) Avoid any double standards as the EU values must also be fully respected in all Member States so that they stand a symbol on the global level and become an attracting element on the global stage for all our partners³⁷.

³⁷ For more details and insight of the wishes of the European citizens see also the Report on the final outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe, 2022, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20220509RES29121/20220509RES29121.pdf>

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