



PROGRESSIVE MANIFESTO

For a European Democracy

The Conference on the Future of Europe enables European citizens and civil society to have a say on how to reform the EU by dealing with policies as well as institutional issues. It represents a unique opportunity to address questions and implement changes related to the future of European democracy. **It is vital to put democracy and citizen participation at the centre of the Conference to enhance the legitimacy and efficiency of EU decision-making.** Within the past decade, European democracy has been threatened by increasing polarisation, disinformation as well as populism and autocratic tendencies. The EU's understanding as a "Union of shared democratic values" is therefore under pressure. The lack of a common European understanding of the EU's basic values as stated in Article 2 Treaty on European Union, is arguably one of the biggest internal challenges confronting the EU.

Faced with continuation of the multiple crises, within the EU the Covid pandemic triggered contradictory reactions: it led to the unprecedented decision that the EU can take out loans. However, the unilateral temporary closure of national borders was detrimental to the European spirit of being "United in Diversity". Considering that past crises have evoked decisive steps of deepening European integration, however, without changing its technocratic and intergovernmental character, the discussions and outcomes of the Conference are even more relevant. **It is highly important to make the EU more democratic and accountable to its citizens. This Manifesto entails recommendations on how to shape a progressive future for Europe by strengthening parliamentary democracy, participatory democracy and the rule of law.**

We believe that institutional changes making the EU more democratic also motivate citizens to engage in political processes and make use of participatory instruments. We do not only strive to strengthen parliamentary democracy by providing the European Parliament with more powers, but by envisioning a political system with the European Commission as an elected European government, a two-chamber legislature and real party competition. Furthermore, we think that in order to give citizens a serious say in EU affairs, citizens' dialogues having sustainable influence on EU policies need to be established on a regular basis and a digital platform for participation should be created among other measures to enable more meaningful and effective participation. As ongoing disputes over the rule of law threaten the Union's internal cohesion, we propose different measures to solve the situation. Besides a clear understanding among EU member states on the meaning of the rule of law, several other measures can be taken to strengthen the EU's and the member states' democratic foundations. European political parties play an important role across all three areas as they not only have an essential role in strengthening the EU's

parliamentary democracy, especially in light of the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle and the formation of transnational lists, but also because they can become important actors in the disputes over the rule of law.

In light of the past, present and upcoming challenges the EU faces, we emphasize that the Conference on the Future of Europe is vital to engage in meaningful discussions on the future of European democracy and to seriously follow up on its outcomes. This Manifesto is meant to accompany the discussions within and around the Conference and to provide proposals on a progressive future for European democracy.

Parliamentary Democracy

The European Parliament is neither powerful nor politically meaningful enough to shape the direction in which the EU is moving. It lacks a true budgetary capacity without which the EU cannot be an authentic public power. Without a fully-fledged parliament, the EU is not a complete democracy which gives its citizens the power to rule their common destiny. European citizens recognize this, limiting their interest in the European democratic process. Their limited interest in turn further undermines the power of the Parliament. This is a vicious cycle that we need to break.

We want to transform parliamentary democracy and make it the central feature of EU politics. The European Parliament is the one single EU body where this can happen. Citizens must be able to shape political choices through European elections to regain trust that their voices matter for the future of the EU. To enable this transformation, the Parliament must command the legislative and budgetary powers that are needed to make an impact that citizens acknowledge. The European Parliament does have a budgetary competence, but not a true budgetary capacity: it only votes on a “technical” budget. To make a difference, we need a meaningful political budget to be controlled by the Parliament and financed through common debt and taxes. Members of the European Parliament will then decide if and how public money is spent or raised. We want a political European community able to produce public goods in accordance with the preferences of the citizens’ majority.

To provide the accountability and legitimacy that is needed to justify this increased political power, both European elections and party politics in the European Parliament as the unique direct representative body of European citizens must be improved and reformed towards a complete parliamentary democracy. This requires a more politicized and European, rather than technocratic or national public discourse. Important debates should be

fought along political cleavages, not national ones. This also requires electoral reform. Progressive powers in Europe, for whom democracy is an essential political goal, must confidently be at the vanguard of this transformation and develop into a truly European force for democracy united under the banner of a social union. Citizens need real European parties where they can discuss and propose solutions for the future of Europe. This will allow to reap the benefits of greater trust from voters and a stronger voice in shaping the future of Europe.

Recommendations on Parliamentary Democracy

- To strengthen parliamentary democracy at the European level, we propose the following institutional measures: We want the European Parliament to become the central decision-making institution of the EU. **The ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) must become the standard** way of operating, including in emerging areas of fiscal and economic policy that currently remain controlled by the European Council and the Commission.
- The Parliament's role within the OLP must be deepened, including a **right to legislative initiative**. New areas of EU policy including those where a smaller number of member states deepen integration under the Enhanced Cooperation procedure must be co-decided by (sub-bodies of) the European Parliament.
- Currently controlled by the European Central Bank, **monetary policy should become more accountable** to European citizens including potential revisions of the central bank's current mandate.
- We want a meaningful **European budget to be controlled by the European Parliament**. This budget must be large enough to have macro-economic effects, at least 3 or 4 percent of the EU's GDP, and should be financed in part through common European taxes in new fields like digital economy and financial transactions as well as common debt issuance.
- We want to transfer power from the European Council to the European Parliament. Our long-term goal is to abolish the European Council and **establish a two-chamber structure**, with the European Parliament serving as the lower chamber complemented through an upper chamber consisting of directly elected representatives from member states.

- We want to **transform the European Commission into a true European Government** linked to European political parties rather than member states. All executive competencies need to be moved to the Commission, which is to be elected by the European Parliament. Such a reformed Commission should represent the political majorities in the Parliament rather than national interests. This requires the Commission Presidents to run as the lead candidates of their parties in European elections and win continuous support from a majority in the Parliament.
- To strengthen the democratic legitimacy of European elections, we furthermore propose the following: we want to **change the way the European Parliament is elected**, because greater powers and larger funds imply greater responsibility. We want the composition of the European Parliament to better reflect the democratic principle of “one person one vote” and the election of some Members of the European Parliament via transnational lists. Appropriate regional representation should be ensured through the second chamber.
- We also want to improve European elections by **harmonizing existing electoral laws** and representation thresholds, as well as truly **transnational party platforms** that should form the binding basis of representatives’ behaviour in the European Parliament.
- Additionally, the role of **European political parties within the EU should be strengthened: European political parties have key responsibilities to lead the transformation required to restore democratic confidence in the EU**. Only political parties are represented both within the Parliament and the Council and can therefore legitimately bridge the gap between national and EU-wide representation. It falls on them to bind the national governments to support the democratization of EU politics in both old and new issue areas. Within a strengthened parliamentary democracy in the EU, European political parties represent citizens’ voices in European decision-making and contribute to the formation of political wills in a continent-wide approach paying tribute to specific national demands and contexts. To achieve this, currently loose **European political parties need to develop into true Europarties** with common political agendas, programmes, and candidates, enabling democratic participation at the European level.

- Progressive actors should be at the forefront of these transformations, actively committing themselves to greater parliamentary democracy within EU politics and staying committed to their promises even when they occupy influential roles within currently powerful institutions like the European Council. Credibly pushing for true democracy in the EU would allow to pressure competing parties to do their part in making the transformation possible that is needed to regain citizens' trust. Rather than perceiving a push for EU-level democracy as a threat to national-level democratic influence, **progressive actors must see these transformations as an opportunity to strengthen their bond with electorates across the continent and thus ultimately increase their leverage.**

Participatory Democracy

The lack of a common European identity and increasing polarisation inside the EU present challenges to European democracy. The heterogeneity of modern information sources, misinformation channelled through digital communication technologies as well as the different educational levels within the EU represent important challenges concerning participatory democracy. Further challenges are democracy sceptics preferring intergovernmentalism over participative approaches and an unbalanced influence of interest groups on EU policies. Therefore, it is essential that all EU citizens are aware of their citizens' rights to participate, such as the European Citizens' Initiative. Furthermore, they need sufficient information about the topics up for discussion. The decision-making process must therefore be comprehensible, inclusive, and easily accessible, so that European citizens do not cede the political arena to privileged and well-educated pro-Europeans as well as to radical Eurosceptics.

Up to now, most EU citizens are rarely involved in policy-making and lack practical knowledge and experience in political decision-making. This is a fertile ground for one-sided, often negative perceptions of the EU. Apart from that, many politicians and EU staff would not like to see EU citizens gaining major influence on policy-making. These reservations are only partly grounded on rational and legitimate reasons. There are also wide-spread fears linked to democracy scepticism or even hierarchical and elitist concepts of governance. This adds up to a growing gap between political representatives and EU officials on one side and citizens on the other side, which has to be bridged. We are convinced that it is crucial to empower and enable European citizens to take responsibility and shape an inclusive and socially equal EU in order to prevent a further drift to nationalism, Euroscepticism and an increasing

disparity of voters' attitudes. Thus, we believe that participatory democratic processes could dissipate popular frustration and strengthen the European integration spirit.

Recommendations on Participatory Democracy

- We want to noticeably **improve the representation and participation of EU citizens** from all social classes and cultural backgrounds. We emphasize to aspire to an effective framework enabling citizens to sustainably influence EU policy-making. This should encompass all levels of policy-making and all strata of society in order to bridge the growing gap between citizens and political representatives in Europe.
- We think that information should be easily accessible without any barriers of entry for EU citizens and that citizens should have access to an arena where debates can take place under a pre-defined code of conduct. There should also be **opportunities to actively engage on a regular basis** in local, regional, national or EU level policy-making for all citizens in all member states in order to gain not just theoretical, but practical knowledge of politics and democratic procedures.
- Consequently, a new layer of European democracy **adding inclusive and co-creative elements to representative democracy** should be established. We propose to establish a **digital platform for European citizens' dialogues**, accessible for all citizens in the EU with a broad bundle of applications. This digital platform should enable EU citizens to seek advice and information on democratic rights, including webinars hosted by civil society as well as citizens' ideas and projects. It must of course be ensured that the provision of such information and participation tools are not prone to manipulation. This granted, we are deeply convinced that as a result, European citizens increasingly identify with Europe by not only having their say but also by creating their own democratic environment.
- We advocate **digital citizens' debates and assemblies**. The pandemic demonstrated that events can be held in hybrid forms i.e. virtually for those citizens who cannot attend in-person and physically for those who lack the skills for online participation. This ensures that even handicapped or socially disadvantaged people get access to democratic knowledge, resulting in emancipatory political education as well as participatory democratic action.

- We propose to implement sortition-based citizens' assemblies and dialogues. We recommend **co-creative forms of participation** like moderated, expert-supported citizens' assemblies with participants chosen by lot. By employing further stratification measures to the randomized selection process, high standards of representation can be met by including members of all relevant social and age groups. Such bottom-up approaches offer strong legitimation for political recommendations. Expert-supported citizens' assemblies can come up with ideas and proposals that have not been thought of yet by governments or parliaments and thereby add new citizen-driven creativity to the policy-making process.
- In the EU, such assemblies could be established on all levels of policy-making including European assemblies with citizens from all member states. In order to make a real difference, we are convinced that such assemblies must have a noticeable impact on policy-making – for example by combining them with referenda or directly linking them to political actors like the European Commission or the Council. We propose to employ **citizens' assemblies on all political levels** in the EU in the following ways:
- Firstly, citizens' assemblies should be employed for preparing and enriching decisions by the European Council and the European Commission. We believe that the assemblies need an explicit **right of proposal for the European Council's Strategic Agenda and major political initiatives** launched by the Commission (e.g. the Green New Deal etc.). Both European Council and Commission should commit themselves to respect and thoroughly consider the citizens' assemblies' policy proposals in their future actions.
- Secondly, the **European Parliament should ensure that the assemblies' proposal right is respected** by the European Council and the Commission. The two institutions will be required to report their measures.
- Thirdly, **citizens' assemblies should be promoted on a regional and local basis** all over the EU by adhering to the principle of subsidiarity: The EU should provide funding and know-how for conducting effective citizens' assemblies in all European municipalities. In addition, it should launch a fully funded initiative for organising transnational assemblies in all Euro-regions. Those could concentrate on improving cross-border cooperation and mutual understanding.

Disputes over the rule of law have not only triggered deep internal divisions and distrust among EU member states but have also evaporated the EU's authority and legitimacy towards candidate states resulting in the so-called Copenhagen dilemma. Previous attempts of addressing the issue have proven to be either inefficient, because of addressing only part of the problem, like the infringement procedures, or were deemed too radical such as the Article 7 procedure. The debates on the rule of law bring along essential issues of sovereignty and legitimacy: Who has the right to define what it means to breach the rule of law principle? Are democratically elected governments allowed to take disputable steps? Should citizens be held responsible for the decision of a state's government?

We therefore propose to develop a more detailed and practical common understanding with clear denominators of what the rule of law means which is a debate that should be held on expert level. We furthermore propose a set of new tools that would help to add pressure on member states in breach of the newly defined values. Those proposed tools are filling the gap between the current "soft tools" and the "atomic options", such as stripping the country of voting rights or access to EU funds.

Recommendations on the Rule of Law

The various tools we suggest differ regarding their legal basis, comprising hard and soft measures as well as regarding the actors enforcing them, e.g. EU institutions, member states or European political parties. We recognize that the recently introduced steps, namely the Rule of Law Review Cycle or the first attempt of the ex-ante conditionality linked to the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), lead in a good direction. They must nevertheless be followed up by efficient enforcement. In the past, we have seen that the guarantee of rule of law cannot be achieved by a single instrument. A long-term strategy and a clearer, more understandable toolkit are needed. Regarding the external legitimacy of EU policies, the rulebook must be streamlined for both current and aspiring member states. Most critically, the toolkit must address the current issues of opaque and inefficient communications by introducing uniform, transparent, and clearly enforceable standards that uphold democratic values in Europe. On the European level, we identify the following areas that could be further explored to better address the rule of law shortcomings in EU member states.

- The **role of the European Public Prosecutor** should be extended to cover rule of law issues, especially in terms of guaranteeing media plurality and transparency of the democratic processes.
- The **European Court of Justice** is a key factor in addressing the rule of law shortcomings, however, we must ensure that its decisions are delivered as soon as possible, as any lengthy delay might potentially hamper the chances of preserving the checks and balances in a given case.
- Considering the 2020 debate on introducing the **ex-ante conditionality** to the MFF, the discussion on how and when those rules will come into practice must be as swift as possible. We argue that the rules should be set in a way minimizing the direct impact of financial measures on citizens.
- We propose to **create two tiers of the EU budget**, where only one is linked to the rule of law conditionality. Thereby, an incentive for member state governments would be created to get all the funds available, while guaranteeing that a certain scope of funds is available for essential cohesion purposes. Such a new distribution scheme of the EU funds could also strengthen the role of local administrations in the process. A clear connection between the ex-ante conditionality and the Rule of Law mechanism must be established in all cases. The connection between the European Semester and the newly established Recovery and Resilience Facility can serve as an example.
- As seen in recent years, the **role of European political parties** is significant, yet often unexplored or downplayed due to fears of losing seats. However, a strong stance by a political group can send a powerful signal directly towards a political party responsible for controversial rule of law-related initiatives.
- To strengthen democratic structures within the member states, we propose a **broader funding mechanism for civil society organizations** on the EU level – the newly established Rights and Values Programme can play significant role. It should be enlarged significantly under the next MFF.
- On the member state level, we call for a **more activist approach to rule of law topics**. It is understandable that most member states tend to stay away from any steps that could be considered an interference to another state's

internal affairs. But once there is a common understanding on what is an acceptable rule of law rulebook, any clear breach of those rules should also become a **subject of bilateral relations**. At the EU level, member states or individual politicians in question could be excluded from informal meetings. Such a step is not as severe as the provisions of Article 7 TEU, but nevertheless sends a very strong signal that common values were breached.

Europe, April 2021

We, the signatories of this **Progressive Manifesto for a European Democracy**, call on all members of the Conference on the Future of Europe to focus the debates on the reforms needed to strengthen European democracy. With our reform proposals we want to give a concrete impulse to this important debate and call on all European citizens to join our appeal.

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