

Forecasting Dissensus over Liberal Democracy: How Key Actors View the EU's Role and Future Scenarios

RED-SPINEL Foresight Policy Research Report

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Authors: Charlie Buckley & Jane Carn, Survation

Survation.



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Introduction

The RED-SPINEL project, funded by the European Union’s Horizon Europe programme, investigates the growing dissensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law within the European Union (EU).

Methodology

Through the combination of a stakeholder survey and forecasting workshops, this report explores how key actors across political, legal, and civil society sectors perceive the EU’s capacity to manage dissensus over liberal democracy—and to forecast what might occur in three different future scenarios to establish potential outcomes. Using both the survey and workshop findings allow for a deeper understanding of dissensus over liberal democracy.

Executive summary

Widespread concern over risk to liberal democracy

An overwhelming 88% of surveyed policymakers, academics, and civil society actors believe that democracy is currently at risk in the EU. 76% report encountering challenges to democracy and the rule of law in their professional lives. Dissensus over liberal democracy is perceived as intensifying, particularly on issues such as rule of law, free and fair elections, and judicial independence.

Erosion of trust in EU instruments

Despite the existence of EU institutions, decision-making procedures and mechanisms to defend its common values, enforcement is seen as inconsistent and politically constrained. Only 37% of survey respondents view EU action in defense of liberal democracy as constructive, with 52% describing it as marginal or neutral. Selective enforcement, persistent institutional inertia, fragmented responses, and member state reluctance to confront illiberalism are key challenges eroding perceptions of trust.

Concern about effectiveness in promoting liberal democracy

When asked to qualify EU action aimed at promoting liberal democracy and safeguarding the rule of law, only 1 in 3 said they thought constructive while over half (52%) thought it was marginal or neutral, and a further 6% said that it had been damaging. This concern about effectiveness was echoed in the foresight workshops.

Cautious optimism was expressed

Despite the above concerns there remains a cautious optimism among practitioners that the EU could leverage its institutional tools and external positioning to reform and reinforce its democratic norms. In the foresight workshops, participants voiced that the EU would likely leverage its institutional tools and external positioning to reform and reinforce its democratic norms.

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Scenarios for the future: Collapse, Muddling Through, or Transformation

Three future situations were explored through both the survey and then in more depth as part of the forecasting workshops:

Collapse:

In this scenario, destructive dissensus overwhelms EU governance. Key institutions like the Commission and Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) become impotent, leading to both political and legal fragmentation, while in the member states civic space is even more reduced, and the illiberal governance and practices normalized within member states. Despite pessimism about the future of internal EU functionality, very few survey respondents believed that a total collapse was a realistic outcome for liberal democracy in Europe. Only 4% said that ‘break up and marginalisation’ was the most likely outcome for the EU in the next two decades. In forecasting workshops, although seen as less likely, participants acknowledged that external shocks (e.g., geopolitical conflicts, populist takeovers) could rapidly accelerate towards collapse unless proactive steps were taken.

Muddling Through:

In this scenario, EU institutions maintain a functional but weakened status quo. Existing rule of law tools both hard (i.e. rule of law conditionality) and soft (i.e. rule of law annual report) persist but are increasingly symbolic, leading to a slow erosion of democratic norms and legitimacy both in member

states and at the EU level. Amongst survey respondents, 12% saw ‘muddling through and stasis’ as the most likely path for the next two decades, with a further 25% believing that ‘muddling through and relative decline’ was the most plausible future scenario. Participants in the workshop tended to see this as the current trajectory of the EU, driven by political caution and inertia of the current situation (March 2025). Practitioners and researchers alike see the perpetual ‘muddling through’ as a deliberate EU strategy.

Transformation:

Survey respondents were hopeful that reform was possible for the future. One fifth of survey respondents (22%) were optimistic that ‘reform and transformation’ was the most likely future scenario. In this situation workshop respondents described the possibility of disruptive and destructive dissensus to catalyse constructive reform. Crises spur the EU to enhance democratic accountability, enforce rule of law mechanisms more consistently, and re-energize and even democratize supranational governance. Civil society and citizen participation expand, and the EU reasserts itself as a global democratic leader. Though ambitious, this scenario was viewed as both desirable and potentially achievable through concerted political will and structural reform, while including the possibility of a two-speed Europe. A further 38% (the largest number overall) agreed that reform was the most likely, they felt a more moderate ‘reform and adaptation’ rather than a transformation would be the most likely future outcome.

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Implications for the future:

From the three scenarios explored, it is clear that the majority of our expert survey and foresight workshop participants perceived the EU to be heading towards a weak muddling or adaption response to dissensus over liberal democracy, rather than seeking an active path of reform and transformation. We recommend that the EU immediately pursue a transformation strategy through to ensure dissensus is most effectively addressed, including: Strengthening rule of law enforcement; reinvigorating supranationalism; enhancing civic engagement ; addressing external threats, and planning for crisis resilience.

Report context

The Foresight Policy Report is written within the framework of the Horizon Europe-funded research project, [Respond to Emerging Dissensus: Supranational Instruments and Norms of Liberal European Democracy \(RED-SPINEL\)](#).¹

In recent years, the foundational principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law within the European Union have experienced increasing strain, with pronounced dissensus among various political, legal and social actors as well as within member states and EU institutions. This report explores how key actors across political, legal, and civil society sectors perceive the EU's capacity to manage this dissensus over liberal democracy—and to forecast what might occur in three different future scenarios to establish potential outcomes examines the nature and potential implications of this growing dissensus and its interaction with EU instruments, utilising structured scenario forecasting and expert analysis.

The concept of dissensus over liberal democracy, as articulated by the RED-SPINEL Horizon Europe research project, encompasses social, political, and legal conflicts driven by a multitude of actors operating across both institutional and extra-institutional arenas. These actors aim variously to maintain, reform, or fundamentally replace existing liberal democratic institutions and/or values.

¹ This Report (Milestone 39) builds on the outcomes of Milestones 16 and 34 and falls within Work Package 6 of the project on “Capacity-building promoting democratic deliberation and problem-solving”, co-led by the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and the University of Warwick (UoW). The objectives of Work Package 6 are to develop a set of original training sessions and toolkits aimed at supporting European citizens and policymakers.

What is RED-SPINEL

The RED-SPINEL - **R**espond to **E**merging **D**issensus: **S**upranational Instruments and **N**orms of **E**uropean **L**iberal **D**emocracy - Project is funded by the European Union (EU) through Horizon Europe, and is executed under the authority of the European Research Executive Agency (REA) of the European Commission. The Project started in the autumn of 2022 and runs till the first quarter of 2026.

RED-SPINEL seeks to shed light on the growing dissensus surrounding liberal democracy and the rule of law within and beyond the EU. The Project examines how policy instruments and legal mechanisms at the EU level have evolved in response to dissensus surrounding liberal democracy and its constitutive dimensions.

Overall, the Project seeks to tackle three transversal questions:

1. What is the nature of the current dissensus and how disruptive is it to the EU?
2. How have EU institutional actors and instruments contributed and responded to this increased dissensus?
3. What are the implications of this dissensus for policy instruments at EU and member state levels?

In answering these questions, the project aims to:

- > define the normative contours of dissensus as an empirical concept.
- > develop a typology of current forms of dissensus in the EU, rooted in their relative impacts on the EU's instruments.

- > map the actors (political, social, legal) and their networks, which are driving the dissensus; and
- > identify the mechanisms that actors of dissensus bring to bear when contesting liberal democracy.

RED-SPINEL's ambition is not to provide a new theory of democracy based on normative assumptions, but to foster conceptual innovation on the nature of dissensus over liberal democracy and its implications for the EU capacity to act in its internal and external policies. The concept of dissensus is at the core of the research agenda. It is examined both as an independent and dependent variable to be able to assess its impact on the EU's internal and external policies and instruments. The contribution of RED-SPINEL to existing academic debates is threefold:

- a. To shed light on how liberal democracy is being contested through producing theoretically innovative understandings of the nature of the current dissensus over liberal democracy in the EU and beyond.
- b. To produce innovative empirical findings by studying dissensus over liberal democracy and its implications at the national and supranational levels, in EU member states and beyond and in different internal and external policy areas.
- c. To develop recommendations about how to restore the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracy in the EU.

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The Project brings together academics and researchers from seven universities

- > Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB, BE)
- > University of Amsterdam (UvA, NL)
- > Libera Università Internazionale Degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli (LUISS, IT)
- > Babes-Bolyai University (UBB, RO)
- > University of Warwick (UoW, UK)
- > Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu (NKU PL)
- > HEC Paris (HEC, FR)

and four nonacademic institutions:

- > Peace Action Training and Research Institute (PATRIR, RO)
- > Milieu Consulting (MILIEUR, BE)
- > Magyar Helsinki Bizottság / Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC, HU)
- > Stichting Nederlands Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen (Clingendael, NL)

What is dissensus over liberal democracy

- > **Ramona Coman**, ULB, CEVIPOL, IEE, Ramona.coman@ulb.be
- > **Nathalie Brack**, ULB, CEVIPOL, IEE, Nathalie.brack@ulb.be

Dissensus is not a new concept. It has found its way directly or indirectly into all works on democracy. Politics is about disagreement: about ‘who should get what’, about how collective decisions should be made, and about how power and resources should be distributed in society. Because all societies are characterised by opposing interests and rival opinions, politics implies contestation and competition between divergent forces reflecting a diversity of preferences, interests, or needs. If dissensus is the essence of politics, encapsulating the idea of non-agreement toward a prevailing idea, politics, in contrast, is a process through which competing views are reconciled with one another.

Defining a concept is without a doubt a challenging and ambitious exercise. As Peter Mair (2008: 179) reminds us, ‘sometimes we specify our concepts based on observations, which is when we deal with empirical concepts; sometimes we specify them on a more abstract basis, which is when we deal with theoretical concepts.’

Tracing the evolution of dissensus in different fields of research – from political theory to political science and EU studies and law – it appears that the most advanced reflections have been anchored in political theory, while the empirical dimensions of dissensus have remained fluid.

Although dissensus is an inherent component of democratic societies, current trends suggest that dissensus over liberal democracy takes many forms, ranging from mild to severe, but also disruptive and even destructive, as defined by Coman and Brack (2025). Predominantly, populist and far-right political actors have emerged as central figures challenging core democratic norms such as judicial independence, electoral integrity, media freedom, and fundamental human rights. However, liberal democracy is no longer just a target for radical-right parties; there is also dissatisfaction on the left and radical left, as well as at the centre (Coman and Brack 2025)². Actors internal and external to the EU are perceived to exacerbate dissensus over liberal democracy and its effects on the EU’s functioning.

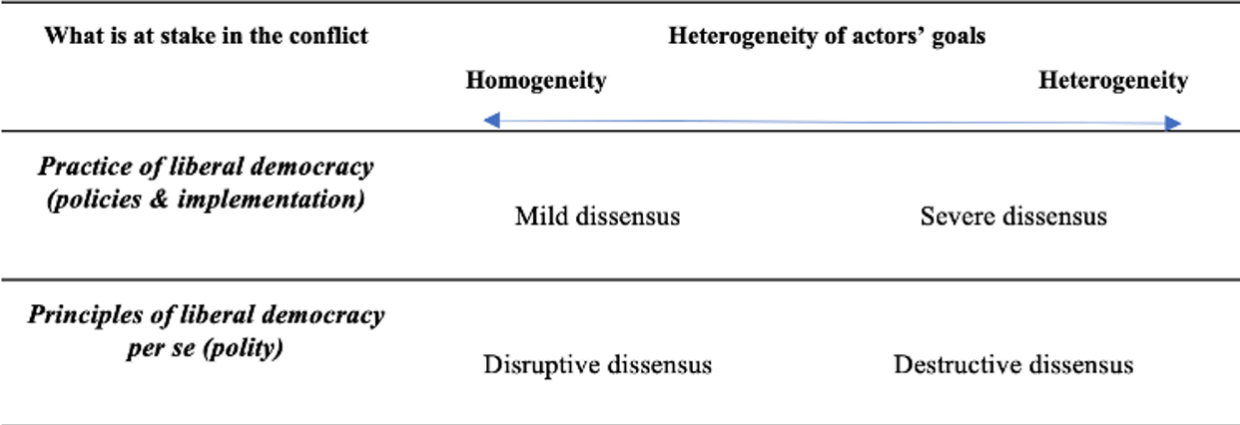
²Coman, R., Brack, N. Dissensus over liberal democracy: concept-building and typology. *Eur Polit Sci* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00539-3>

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Dissensus over liberal democracy can be understood through two dimensions (Coman and Brack 2025): First, the focus of the conflict, as it can target the ideal of liberal democracy and its core institutions or its practice as reflected by its policies and their performance; and second, the actors’ goals and their homogeneity/heterogeneity. The combination of these two dimensions gives rise to typologies of dissensus as shown in the illustration below.

Figure 1: Typology of Dissensus (Coman & Brack 2025)



Methodology

This report adopts a comprehensive two-phase methodological framework with a survey followed by a forecasting workshop session.

Forecasting Survey Methodology

Firstly, an extensive forecasting survey was conducted by research and polling company Survation between January and April 2025, incorporating data from 246 participants, including policymakers, legal scholars, civil society representatives, and academics.

The aim of the survey was to develop a comprehensive picture of how politicians, practitioners and relevant experts understand the EU's instruments concerning rule of law and democracy, their (in)effectiveness in tackling dissensus over liberal democracy, and potential outcomes for the EU both internally and within the global order. The preliminary results from the survey were also used as background and to stimulate further discussion during the workshops on the 19th of March 2025 at the Institut d'études européennes of the Université libre de Bruxelles.

To those ends, the survey was targeted towards the following groups³:

- > Legislature
 - > Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)
 - > Members of national legislatures in EU member states
- > Executive
 - > Council
 - > Commissioners' Offices
 - > Permanent Representations of member states to the EU
- > Judiciary
 - > Court of Justice of the EU
 - > National courts
- > Civil Society
 - > Think tanks/NGOs at the EU and national level
 - > Academia

³A more detailed sampling frame can be found as an appendix.

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The survey included a mixture of:

- > Several slider scale questions allowing respondents to rate an answer option on a numerical scale;
- > A number of close-ended questions (checkboxes) to provide for statistically significant stats on respondents' familiarity with the topic and the concepts/instruments covered.
- > A limited number of open-ended questions, exploratory in nature, and aimed at collecting qualitative data on the participant's future expectation.

This combination of approaches to data collection enabled us to analyse respondents' answers in a number of different ways and ensured that the broadest possible range of views were well-represented.

The survey took place over a three-month period (22nd January - 14th April 2025). The survey was disseminated online, with invites being sent out to MEPs and national MPs by Survation (using publicly available contact information), and to elite practitioners and members of civil society by RED-SPINEL coordinating team, using their organisation's network and contacts.

A final sample of 246 was achieved, of which 138 had completed the survey in full. Figure 2 below shows the profile of survey respondents. 54 were from the European Parliament including MEPs. 30 respondents were National MPs. 45 respondents were academics and a further 38 were researchers/students. Civil society organisations made up 51 participants. The remaining were from courts, journalists and the European Commission.

Figure 2: Profile of survey respondents



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Figure 3 below shows the survey participant respondent's area of expertise, the largest areas of expertise were within the rule of law, fundamental rights and EU institutional policies.

Figure 3: Survey respondents area of expertise

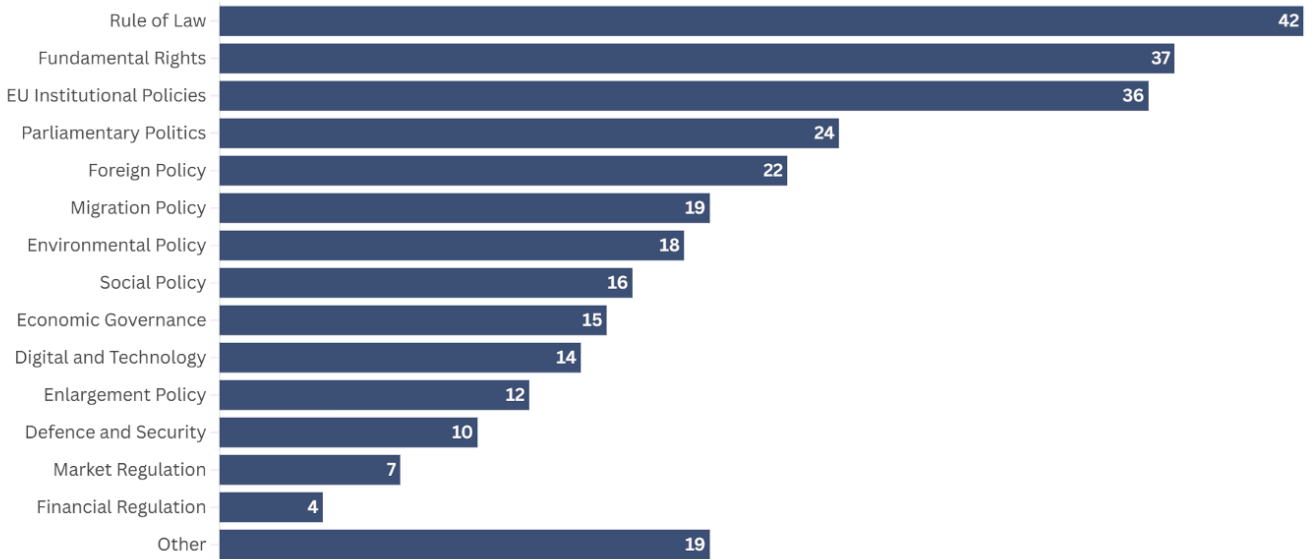
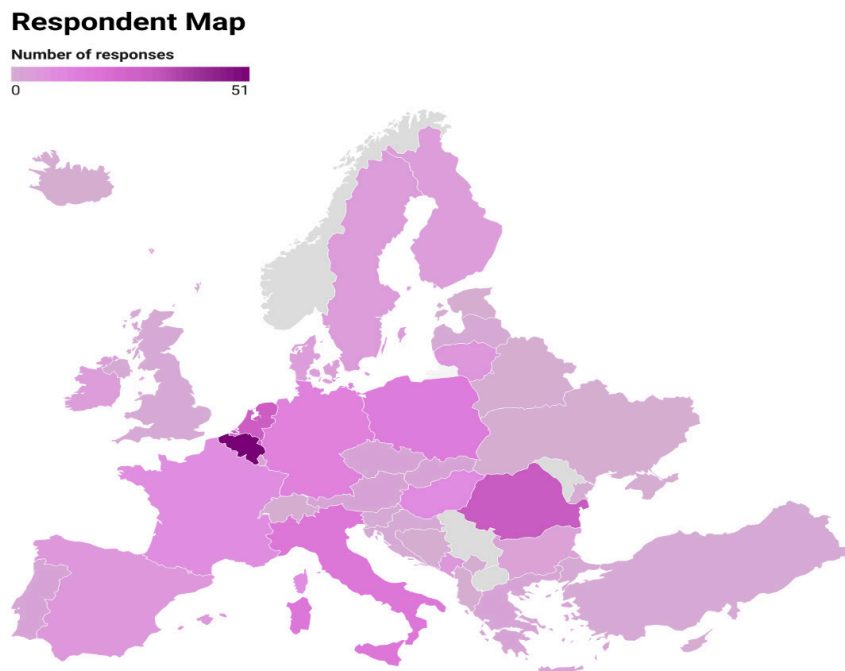


Figure 4 shows the geographical location of participants.

Figure 4: Location of survey respondents



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Forecasting Workshop Methodology

A forecasting workshop day was run on 19th of March 2025 at the Institut d'études européennes, Université libre de Bruxelles. Participants were drawn from academics in the RED-SPINEL network, as well as representatives from the EU Commission, Council, European Parliament and civil society.

The forecasting workshop began by grounding participants in the purpose and approach of exploratory scenario planning: rather than predicting the single most likely future, the workshop focused on three distinct futures that illuminate how uncertainties around liberal democracy and the rule of law in Europe might interact and unfold in the next 20 years.

Participants first received a concise orientation to each scenario and its likely drivers, each of which was articulated in three contrasting states. For example, the “efficiency of EU internal instruments” may prove impotent, incidental, or potent, while the “emerging global order” might cast the EU as a rule-taker, a pole among others, or a central rule-maker. By systematically mapping these alternative outcomes, the workshop ensured that discussions explored the full range of plausible evolutions, rather than settling on incremental forecasts.

Three broad scenarios were designed and used to structure each of the three workshop sessions:

	Collapse of the EU rule of law and democracy instruments	Muddling through with existing rule of law and democracy instruments	New European approaches to rule of law and democracy for EU's internal and external policies
Summary	Collapse scenario for EU internal and external policy instruments for democracy and the rule of law, that is a continued paralysis/ retrenchment of EU instruments in the face of growing dissensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law.	Status quo/Continuing with existing internal and external instruments, that is a relatively steady state for EU instruments in the face of severe dissensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law.	Renewal scenario for EU internal and external policy instruments for democracy and the rule of law, supported by a paradigmatic shift transforming EU instruments in a context of constructive dissensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law.
Intensity of Dissensus at the EU level	Destructive	Severe	Disruptive
Intensity of Dissensus in member states	Destructive	Severe	Disruptive
Efficiency of EU internal instruments	Impotent	Incidental	Potent
Efficiency of EU External Instruments	Impotent	Incidental	Potent
EU in the Emerging Global Order	EU as a Rule-Taker	A Pole Among others	A Central Rule-Maker
EU Relative Capacity to Respond	Mere Virtue Signalling	Catalyst for Relative Change	Effective Enforcer of Common Norms

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Each scenario was presented in a two-page outline, including narrative premises, key uncertainties, and targeted discussion prompts.

The half-day workshop unfolded in four stages. After a thirty-minute opening brief, including a presentation of the preliminary results from the forecasting survey, participants convened for three sequential, hour-long roundtables—one per scenario—under Chatham House rules (as a result, quotes are not attributed). A facilitator from Survation introduced each scenario outline, then moderated open discussion among 15-20 participants. Audio recording preserved the richness of debate while safeguarding anonymity for later analysis.

Throughout the sessions, the chair ensured that each scenario's implications for EU policy were explored in depth: How could existing instruments be adapted or redesigned? What new alliances or coalitions might emerge? Which policy fields—such as migration, security, trade, or the environment—are most vulnerable to the scenario's dynamics? Participants' insights were captured in real time, highlighting both points of agreement and areas where participants with different professional experiences had unique perspectives.

Following the workshop, recordings were anonymized and synthesized into this foresight report. In this report, we will go on to distill the core themes, contrast participant visions across scenarios, and offer actionable recommendations.

Survey research findings

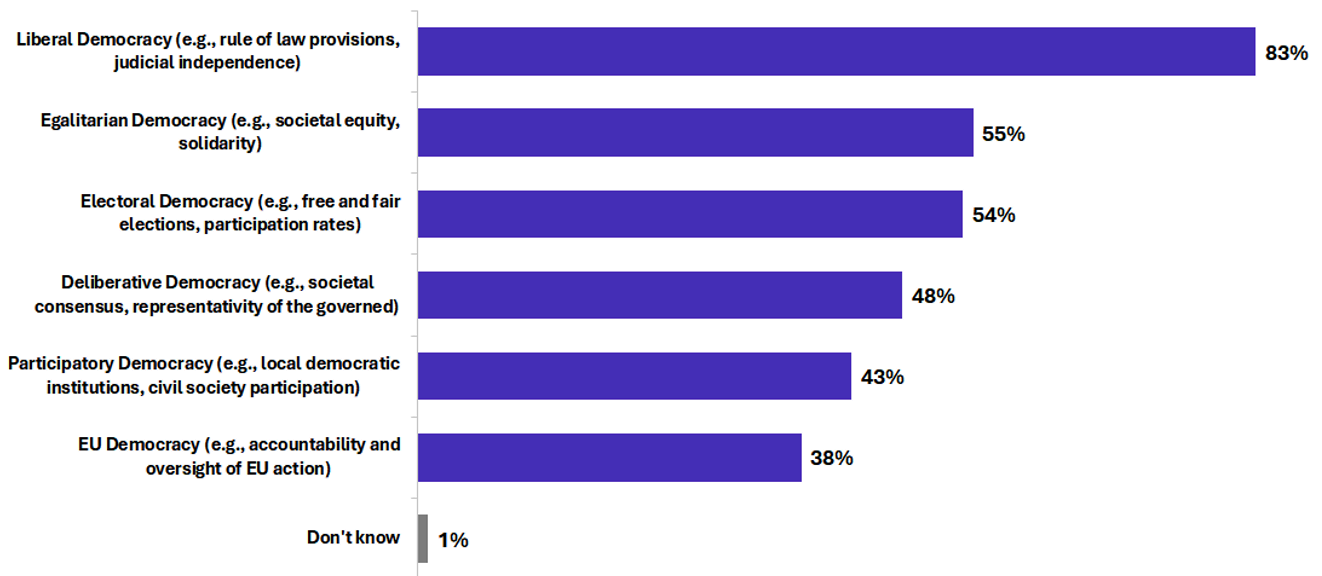
Online Survey Findings

Perceptions of dissensus over liberal democracy in the EU

We observed a growing concern among survey respondents about the state of dissensus over liberal democracy in the EU and the threats it poses to democracy and rule of law. An overwhelming majority (88%) believe that democracy is at risk in Europe, and a further 76% said that they encounter challenges to democracy and rule of law in their professional lives.

When asked which traditional dimensions of democracy are most at risk (figure 5), respondents were most likely (83%) to point to institutions related to the rule of law provisions. Over half (55%) considered egalitarian democracy such as societal solidarity and equity to be at risk and the majority of respondents (54%) also said that they consider free and fair elections - once believed to be a given in the EU - to be at risk.

Figure 5: Dimensions of liberal democracy most at risk



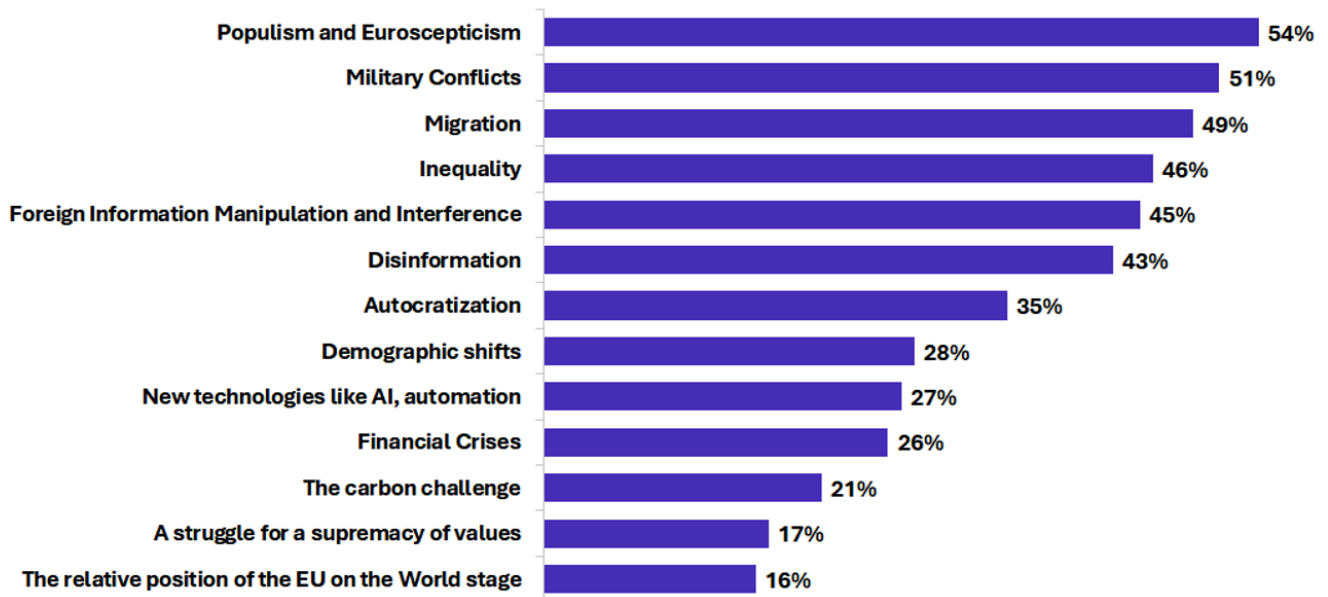
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For those in civil society, EU Democracy (accountability and oversight of EU action) was a greater concern than for other respondents, with 56% of civil society respondents saying it was one of the most at risk, vs. 38% among all participants.

Survey respondents typically associated the rise in dissensus over liberal democracy with being provoked by actors on the right of the political spectrum (mean 7.8/10), rather than those on the left (mean 5/10). This view is reinforced by the issues which respondents most associated with dissensus over liberal democracy in Europe - migration (49%), populism/Euroscepticism (54%), and questions around conflict (51%) and disinformation (45%) vis-à-vis Russia and China.

Figure 6: Which of the broader societal factors will be the most determining in shaping future forms of dissensus



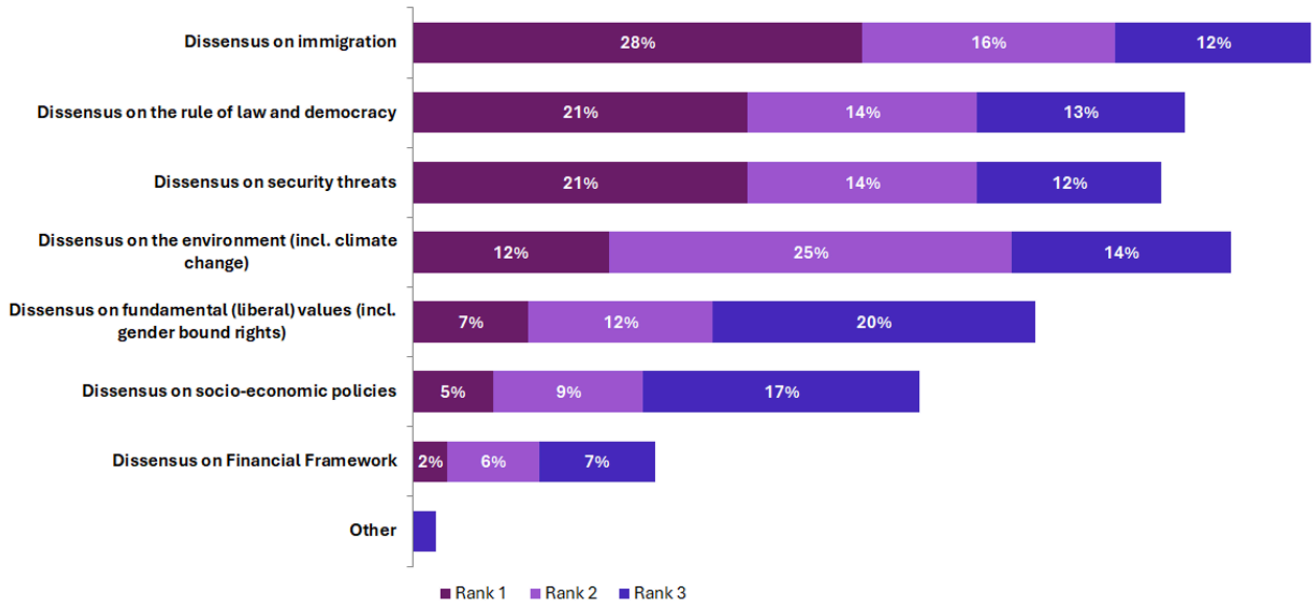
The pattern was much the same looking forward to the coming two decades when asked to rank different forms of dissensus by order of the challenge they pose to the EU (where the highest-ranked, 1, was the greatest challenge, and the lowest rank, in this case 8, was the most insignificant challenge). The chart below (Figure 7) shows the top three rankings, showing dissensus on immigration perceived as the top-ranking

issue for 28% of respondents, and ranked as a top 3 issue by 56%. Dissensus on the rule of law was ranked the second largest challenge, ranked 1st by 21% and within the top 3 concerns by 48%. Dissensus on security threats was perceived as the third largest challenge, with 21% placing it as the most significant challenge and 47% having it as a top 3 challenge.

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Figure 7: Areas of dissensus is the biggest challenge facing the EU in coming decades



Financial and socio-economic concerns were generally overlooked by respondents to the survey when they ranked future challenges, viewing them as peripheral issues relative to the hot-button topics of migration and security, especially as causes of dissensus over liberal democracy.

Challenges of enforcement and threats to EU instruments

Most respondents (62%) think that the level of dissensus over liberal democracy that the EU faces is having a negative impact on its functioning.

Respondents were pessimistic about the prospects of the EU overcoming the challenges it faces from growing dissensus. We asked respondents about different sources of dissensus, and for each one we asked them to rate 0-10:

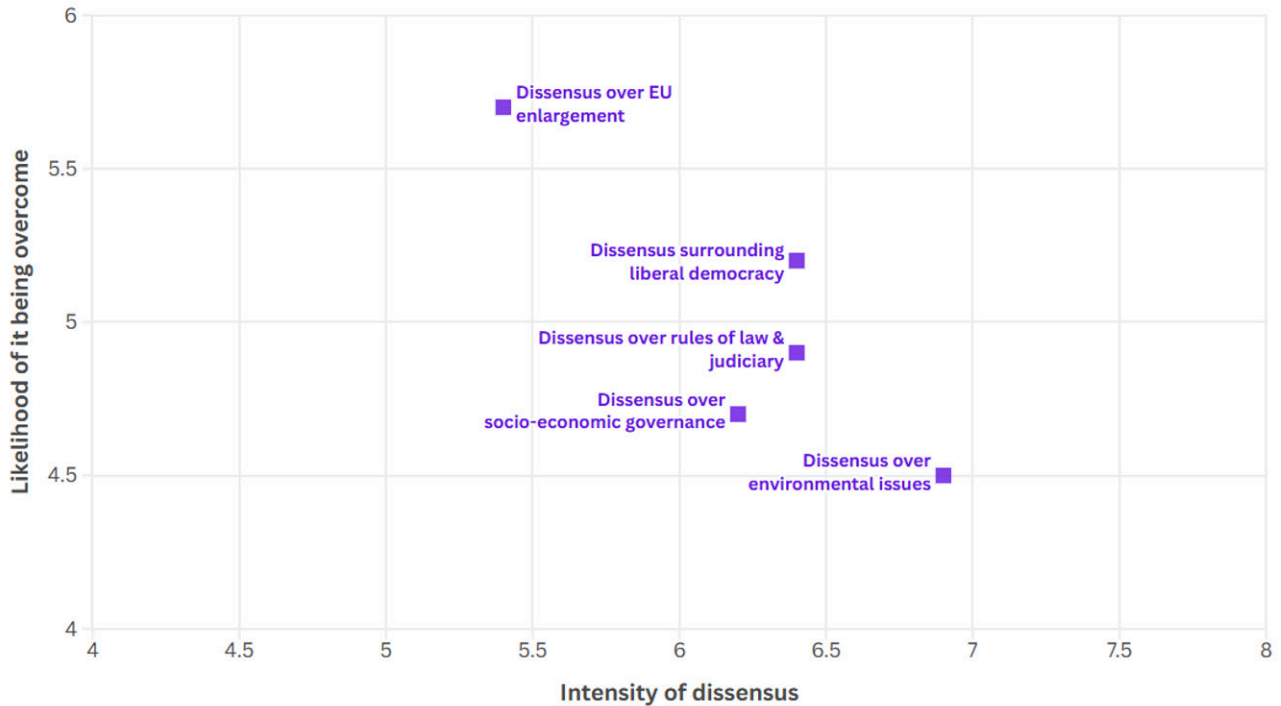
- the intensity of the dissensus on this issue and
- the likelihood of this dissensus being overcome.

Figure 8 shows that across all the sources we prompted, except for the debates over EU enlargement, respondents indicated that they believed the dissensus to be severe (mean score of more than 6/10), and the EU being less than likely to deal with it. There were three areas where intensity of dissensus was strong (more than 6/10) and likelihood of it being overcome scores less than 5/10. These were dissensus over rules of law and judiciary, dissensus over socio-economic governance and dissensus over environmental issues. The starkest disparity was concerning dissensus over environmental issues, where respondents rated the intensity of dissensus an average of 6.9/10, and the likelihood of it being overcome at only 4.5/10.

Figure 8: Prospect of EU overcoming the challenges it faces from growing dissensus

Prospects of the EU overcoming the challenges it faces from growing dissensus of different sources

Scale of 0-10 where 0 is not impactful/not likely at all and 10 is highly impactful/highly likely. Results displayed are means.



When asked to rank which EU instruments were most effective when it comes to respect for the rule of law, EU Rule of Law Conditionality is the highest ranking, with 48% ranking it as top three in importance, with ECJ rulings in second place with 42% ranking as top 3 importance. There is quite a drop to 29% ranking economic conditionalities as the third most effective in relation to respect of the rule of law, with pressure from members states in council (28%) and Article 7 TEU (26%) following close behind

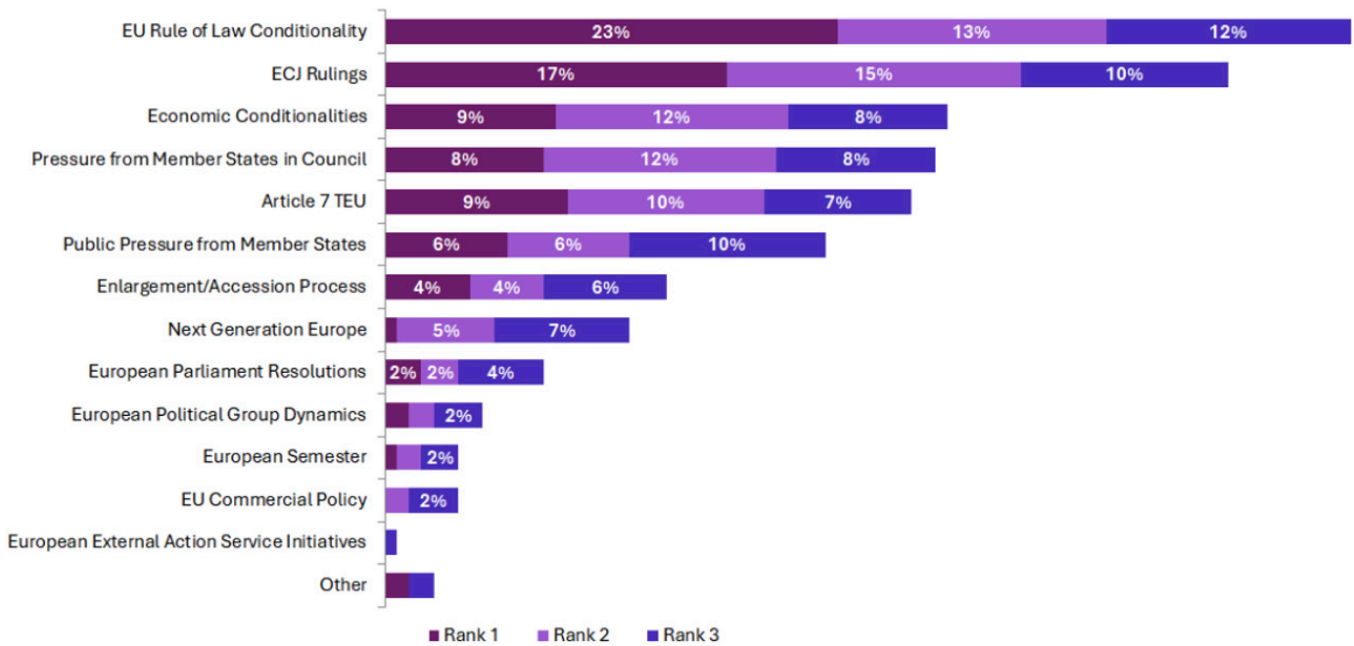
Respondents consider these to be by far the most important institutions and instruments in enforcing rule of law and liberal democratic values in the EU; by the same token, respondents felt that these instruments are underutilised and not widely enforced. This not only permits and emboldens democratic backsliding, but it also weakens the authority of the very institutions designed to prevent it.

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Figure 9: EU instruments most effective when it comes to respect of the rule of law

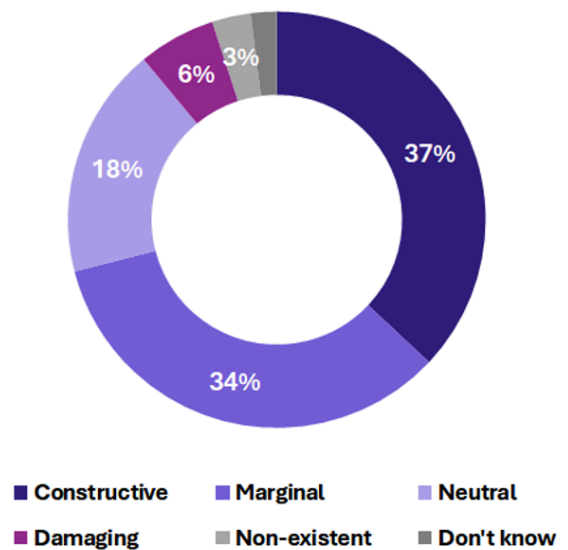
Which of the following EU instruments would you deem the most effective when it comes to the respect of the rule of law?



Overall, respondents’ feelings towards EU action to protect liberal democracy and the rule of law are mixed, with most taking a neutral viewpoint. When asked “How would you qualify EU action on the whole aimed at promoting liberal democracy and safeguarding the rule of law?”, only 1 in 3 (37%) said they thought it was constructive, while 52% thought it was marginal or neutral, and 6% said that it had been damaging.

Figure 10: EU action aimed at promoting liberal democracy

How would you qualify EU action on the whole aimed at promoting liberal democracy and safeguarding the rule of law?



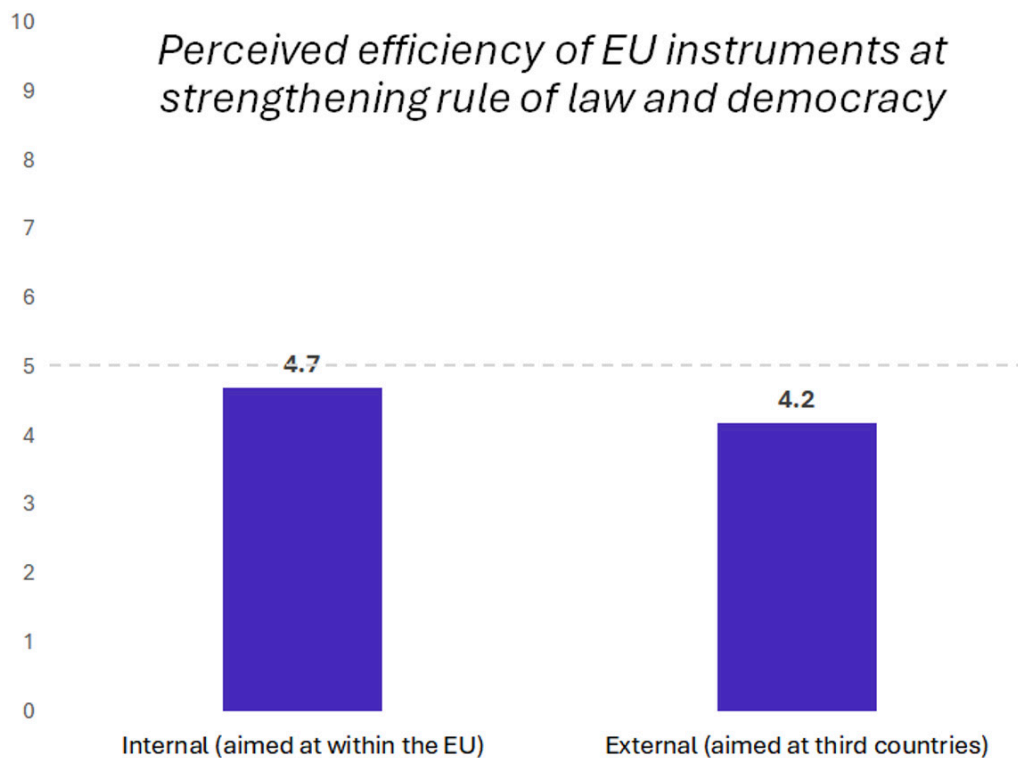
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This issue of EU action being marginal or imperceptible was a consistent theme throughout the survey. Researchers and practitioners alike believe that EU instruments are either unused or misused, being applied selectively or not at all, leaving gaps in enforcement that can be exploited by member states, undermining the entire rule of law framework and the EU's overall authority.

When asked how efficient they felt EU instruments were internally and externally on a scale of 0-10, respondents perceived both as being below average on both measures, suggesting a lack of confidence in the efficiency of EU instruments both within the EU and aimed at third countries.

Figure 11: Perceived efficiency of EU instruments



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Outcomes: Diminished liberal values, enduring Europe

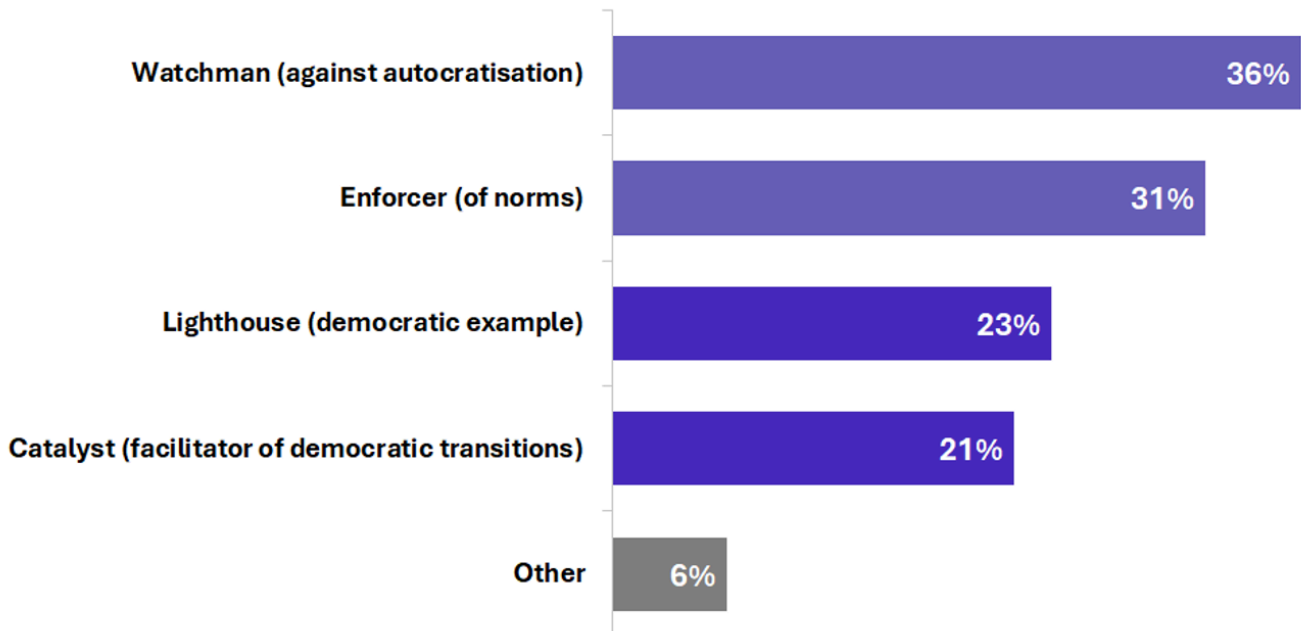
Our respondents' confidence in the EU's ability to manage dissensus over liberal democracy is low, but few believe that this will necessarily damage the EU's integrity and global standing to a significant extent. This is likely due to:

- > A changing global order in which a struggling EU would still be highly influential
- > A belief that existing EU instruments are not necessarily weak, but merely underutilized

Most respondents assume that the EU will remain on the defensive with regards to dissensus over liberal democracy for the foreseeable future. When asked Which is the most likely role for EU institutions in tackling the challenge of dissensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law over the next two decades?, our sample were less likely to think the EU would be a standard-bearer of democratic values, and more likely to think it will have to fight to maintain the values it currently has.

Figure 12: The likely role for EU institutions in tackling the challenge of dissensus

Which is the most likely role for EU institutions in tackling the challenge of dissensus surrounding democracy and the rule of law over the next two decades?

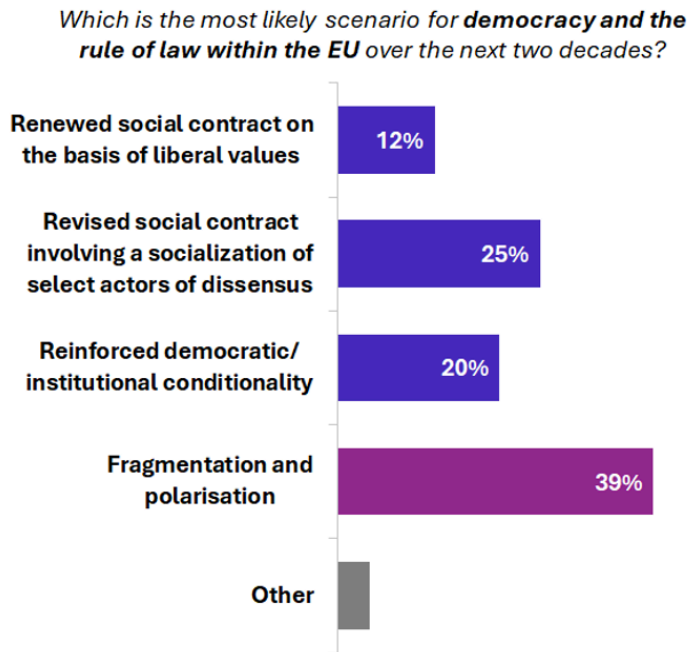


Similarly, democracy and rule of law are assumed to be in a worse state in 20 years' time than they are now. Inadequate enforcement and weak central authority are expected to permit backsliding in (peripheral) member states and paralysis in Brussels.

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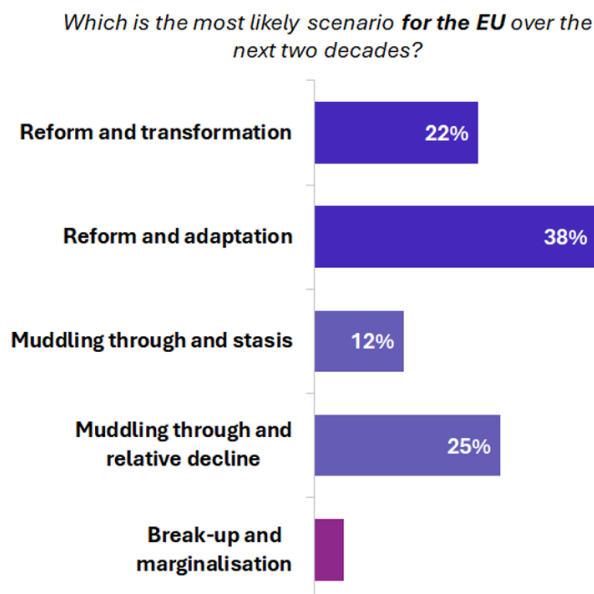
Figure 13: The most likely scenario for democracy and rule of law within the EU in the next two decades



Despite this pessimism about the future of internal EU functionality, when presented with a list of possible outcomes from reform and transformation to break up and marginalisation, only very few respondents believed that a total collapse was a realistic outcome for Europe. Only 4% said that break

up and marginalisation was the most likely outcome for the EU in the next two decades (though, it should be noted, this was as high as 10% among MEPs). Respondents were much more likely to lean towards reform or muddling-through being the most probable scenario.

Figure 14: The most likely scenario for the EU over the next two decades



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This cautious optimism is reflected in how respondents predicted the world order would likely be structured in the future, and where the EU would fit in it. Things are not expected to remain the same - only 4% of our respondents expect to see a continued rules-based multilateral system in 20 years' time. Instead, people expect there to be a shake-up in the world order, presenting an opportunity for the EU to assume a more prominent position. Nearly one in three (30%)

believe that a multipolar world order is most likely, while another 25% expect a (revised) rules-based system to remain in place. An alarming number of respondents felt that open conflict is a realistic outcome - 17%, and as high as 21% among academics. Nonetheless, most respondents believe the EU will be in a strong position globally that aligns with its values - either a constituent member of a 'democratic pole' (36%) or one of the global poles on its own merit (22%).

Figure 15: Which global order do you foresee

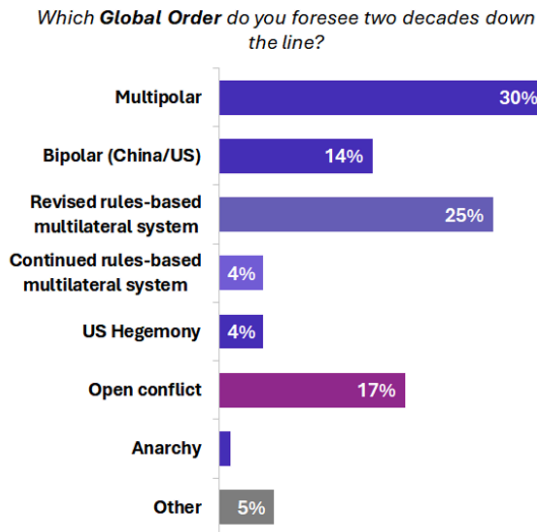
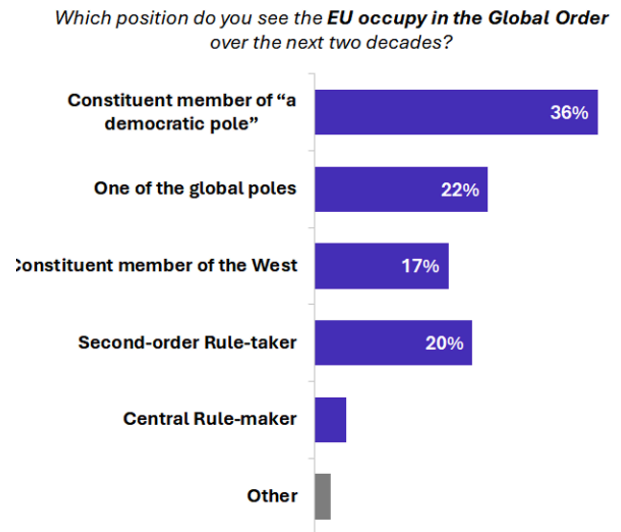


Figure 16: Position of the EU in the global order



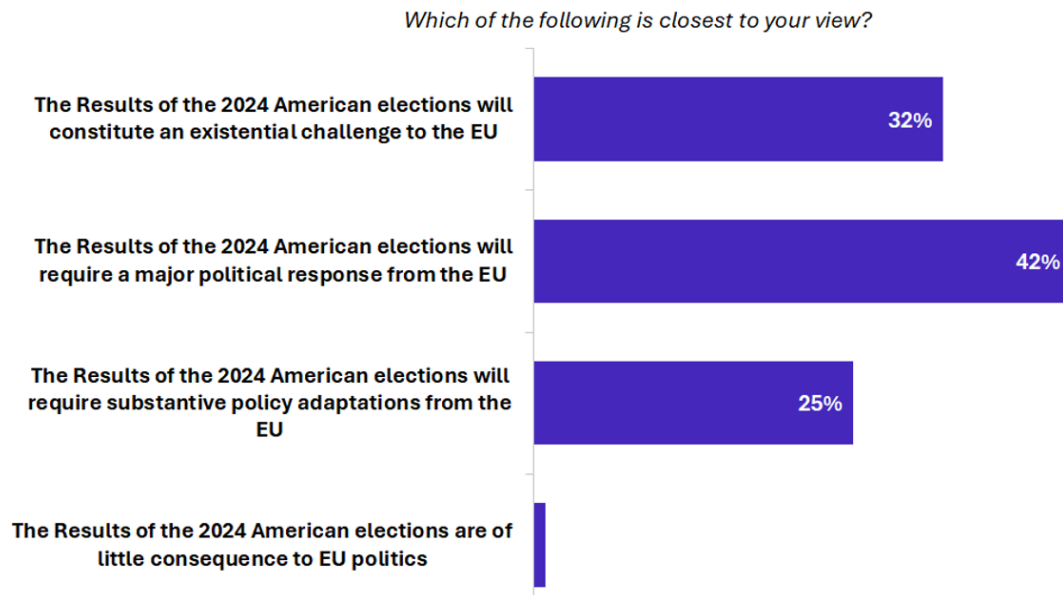
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One possible explanation for measured confidence among respondents is that the EU's internal democratic bona fides would matter less in a world order which places less emphasis on democracy overall. A multipolar structure organised by rising powers in China, Russia, India and Brazil may well encourage

trade and economic cooperation, but afford less privilege for democratic values ([Lindberg, 2023](#); [Young et al., 2024](#)). A United States waning in influence and interest in global affairs could similarly be a factor. The re-election of Donald Trump on 5th November 2024, as President looms large for our respondents:

Figure 16: Respondents views of the 2024 American Presidential Election



It is worth noting that within our sample, the actors in EU governance and civil society (practitioners) did not always share the views of academics and researchers. While there is broad agreement on the state of dissensus over liberal democracy in Europe, and the EU's (in)ability to manage it, the practitioners we polled were more optimistic with regards to potential outcomes for EU democracy and the instruments behind it. When asked about what position they think the EU will occupy in the global order in two decades'

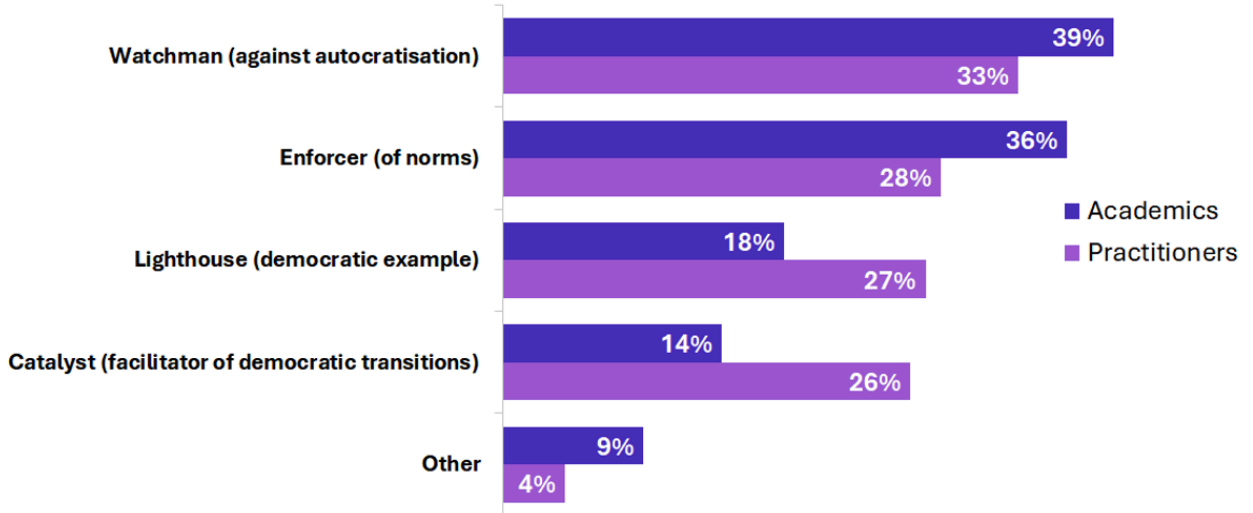
time, practitioners were more likely to believe that the EU will be a constituent member of a 'democratic pole' (44%, vs. 36% overall), and less likely to believe it would be a 'second-order rule-taker' (15% vs. 20% overall). Similarly, practitioners held a considerably more favourable view on the EU's role in managing dissensus over the rule of law and democracy - being a 'city on the hill' example and promoter of democracy - and marginally less likely to think the EU will be preoccupied with 'putting out fires' among its own member states.

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Figure 17: The most likely role for EU institutions in tackling dissensus in the next two decades

Which is the most likely role for EU institutions in tackling the challenge of dissensus surrounding democracy and the rule of law over the next two decades?

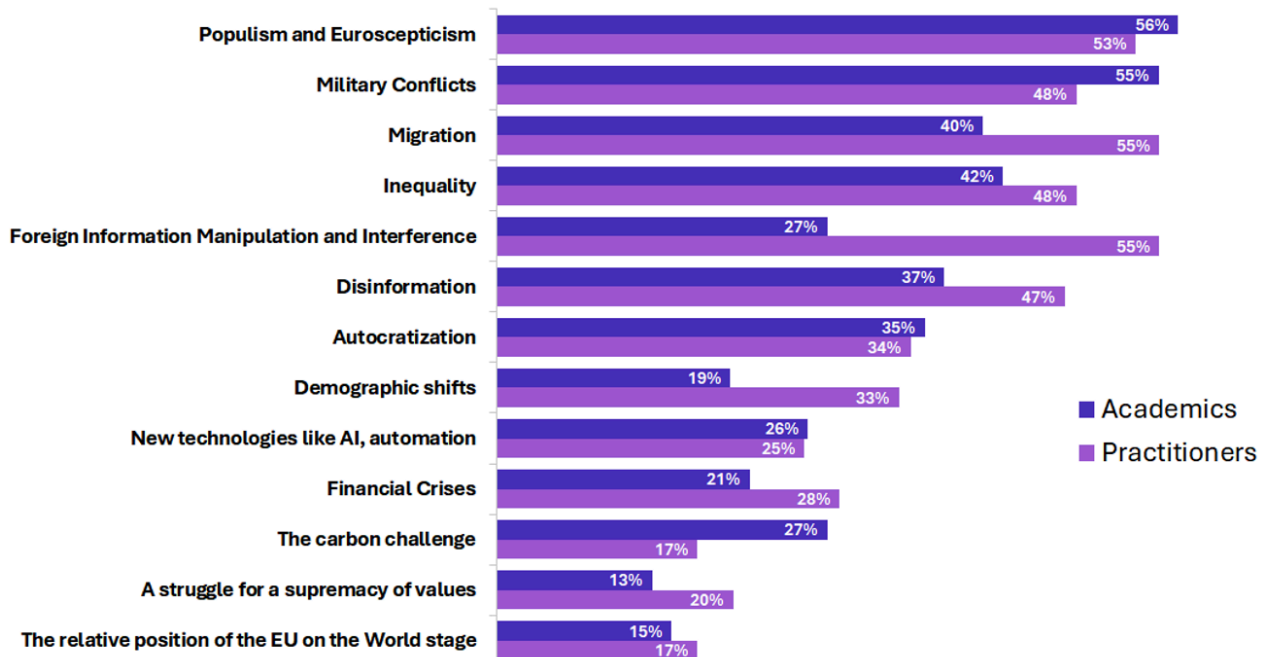


When asked about factors spurring dissensus over liberal democracy, practitioners were more likely than academics or researchers to point to foreign manipulation/disinformation, migration, and demographic changes within the EU. Among those in the European

Parliament in particular migration was one of their top concerns (62%), significantly higher than their second-highest choice of foreign information manipulation and interference (46%).

Figure 18: Which broader societal factors will be determinant in shaping future forms of dissensus

Which of the following broader societal factors will be the most determining in shaping future forms of dissensus? Please select up to 5 options



Forecasting workshop findings

Forecasting workshops were structured around three scenarios, presented to participants for discussion of the factors that would lead to the scenario, the impact that this would have on the EU instruments and the wider European and global context as well as the opportunities that this scenario could present for liberal democracy and the rule of law.

Collapse of EU rule of law and democracy instruments

This scenario involves growing destructive forms of dissensus leading to a collapse scenario for EU instruments in both internal and external policies.

Definition

Destructive dissensus occurs when both the ideal of democracy and its practice are at the heart of the conflict and the goals of the actors are very heterogeneous and fundamentally irreconcilable. In this type of dissensus, actors seeking to replace liberal democracy with non-democratic forms of government (i.e. illiberal regimes) would prevail and compete with actors seeking to preserve the status quo or to restructure liberal democracy (Coman and Brack, 2025).

This scenario assumes that destructive dissensus would overcome the ineffective rule of law and democracy instruments and embolden illiberal, non-democratic practices in member states, pulling the structure of the EU apart.

Overview of the Key drivers

The Intensity of Dissensus at the EU level	Destructive
The Intensity of Dissensus in EU Member States	Destructive
Efficiency of EU Internal Instruments	Impotent
Efficiency of EU External Instruments	Impotent
Emerging Global Order	EU as a Rule-Taker
EU Relative Capacity to Respond	Mere Virtue Signalling

Echoing the survey findings, workshop participants initially viewed the “collapse” scenario as a remote and less likely possibility but came to see it as more plausible throughout the workshop. It came to be seen as a possible outcome in which a combination of profound internal divisions, external pressures and lack of political willingness dismantle the EU’s foundational democratic and legal frameworks. Central

“... not only in the near future, but already here, from foreign actors and economic interference, [threats to] anti-corruption networks... the independence of justice, and more generally, pressures and chilling effects on NGOs and public institutions. All these things are actually very easy to achieve. It [collapse] takes very little effort to achieve.”

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to participants concerns was the notion that internal systemic dissensus would intensify, rendering EU governance ineffective, decision making wholly blocked, and weakening institutional legitimacy to critical levels. Participants frequently emphasised the pivotal role of national courts, suggesting a scenario where courts cease to adhere to CJEU rulings, undermining mutual legal trust and potentially triggering legal fragmentation and erosion of the internal market.

The discussions highlighted that this scenario would reflect a severe shift in the perception of the EU—from a unique supranational entity to merely another international organisation without enforceable authority vis-à-vis its member states. Participants agreed that the effectiveness and legitimacy of EU institutions like the CJEU, the Commission, and Parliament depend heavily on compliance and respect from member states. Once this respect diminishes, the institutions risk becoming powerless, described metaphorically by participants as akin to organizations like the OECD—technically present but largely symbolic.

“...in the EU context, there’s nothing that prevents lower courts from ignoring higher courts. So that might be one way one sees the unraveling start... What does that mean if national courts stop referring to the ECJ, or ECJ references are not taken into account? It could be the end of the internal market for one.”

“A good example would be the progressive phasing out of rule of law conditionality and the rule of law reports in favor of the rule of law dialoge within the European Council, which is a very, very soft instrument. You could see that play out in this example, but also in a lot of other areas, such as, for example, anti-corruption, where the European prosecutors office could slowly be replaced by more intergovernmental cooperation.”

“...they de-facto devolve to member states, national governments, and even if the EU ostensibly assumes responsibilities centralized in practice... it lacks any ability to enforce them. Member states don’t take on instructions or recommendations, and it’s technically an existing body, but in practice it is completely implicit, something like the OECD.”

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Two-speed Europe again came into the picture, with some participants identifying the formation of ad-hoc/informal coalitions as being a cyclical formation/collapse process in lieu of proper centralised authority in Brussels.

The participants identified the internal rise of illiberal political forces as a major driver toward collapse, expressing particular concern about scenarios where populist or radical and far right parties might gain control of critical EU institutions. Discussions referenced Hungary frequently as a current example, demonstrating how democratic erosion within member states could become normalized or even replicated elsewhere. This internal transformation was seen as likely to begin subtly, through incremental weakening of democratic safeguards like judicial independence, media freedom, and anti-corruption measures.

Participants also recognised significant external influences as potential accelerators toward collapse, specifically mentioning interference from major global powers such as Russia, China, and potentially the US under a populist administration. They suggested that external interference could amplify existing internal divisions, encouraging nationalist and anti-EU narratives that undermine collective European identity and values, as well as introducing the possibility of member states negotiating trade deals with third countries, without involving the EU.

“[There would be] concentrations of interest groups at the national level, European level, regional level, and so on, gathering and working in a certain direction, and all these directions would be very confused, and that would be the problem. There won’t be a vector anymore, because this vector will be composed out of very different directions implemented by these ad hoc coalitions... They organize around topics for a couple of months or a year, and then collapse, and then there is reorganization around the next topic in line, and so on.”

“I think the real collapse would be what Orbán is saying, “we’re going to occupy you. We’re going to seize the institutions and use them for our purposes”, and there you would not have a values policy anymore.”

“European alternative narrative circulating from Hungary throughout Slovakia, in other parts of Europe, but everywhere, replaces, to some extent, the existing situation of the EU... [The instruments of the EU] are considered to be oppression, oppressive instruments and abusive kind of federation.”

“...say Trump strikes a grand bargain with Russia, and they start blackmailing new member states to strike bilateral trade agreements with the US... at some point, maybe we’ll have empty chairs at the European Council, I don’t know, or just some acrimonious words.”

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Economically, participants debated the resilience of trade and the internal market. Some argued that the internal market might be among the first pillars to collapse due to a loss of trust and inability to enforce mutual standards. Others believed external trade, given its economic necessity, would be among the last elements to fail, though it could shift from the EU being a regulatory standard-setter to merely reacting to external rules.

Collapse would also open the door to regulatory capture and domination of the EU by multi-national corporations in Big Oil, Tech, Pharma, etc.

In terms of consequences, the participants foresaw a fragmented governance structure emerging, characterised by ad hoc coalitions rather than stable, unified policies. Such a scenario would drastically reduce the EU's global influence, transforming it into a "rule-taker" rather than a "rule-maker," diminishing its role in shaping international norms and defending liberal democratic values globally.

Despite this bleak picture, participants identified some areas of resilience and opportunity. They pointed to the potential for core groups of committed democracies within Europe to pursue closer integration independently. In this case, two-speed Europe was seen in a positive light.

"...if I don't like Italian pesticides, and I believe that Italy is not enforcing certain rules on pesticides, and I, as Germany, think I'm closing the border... But that doesn't mean that we're breaking up a trade deal."

"But I don't think these pockets of non-compliance immediately make the stone collapse."

"If the EU collapses alongside its regulatory regime, or this system that we know today in the EU collapses, then it will embolden big corporations who are already very heavily lobbying against certain regulations."

"[Without the EU], all the states would be rule-takers with possible trade agreements with other countries."

"One possibility could be - before these forces take over the European Union - to re-establish the union among a limited group of member states and exclude the member states that have gone too far... dismantle the European Union that we know in order to protect it."

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Additionally, civil society, civic activism, and legal resistance were noted as having the ability to be critical sources of resilience capable of maintaining pockets of democratic practice and advocacy even amid institutional collapse. Some participants raised the possibility that member states would recognise their economic dependence on one another and preserve their ties. Participants also suggested that this period could potentially open avenues for deeper reform and reconstruction of regional democratic governance in the long term.

It was also discussed that collapses of liberal institutions/regimes outside the EU framework could provoke the EU to take a more pivotal and proactive role in defending liberal democracy.

In any case, even if some participants still found the collapse scenario unlikely, many believed it would be prudent for the EU to prepare for the eventuality, building resilience against internal and external pressures. Collapse could be avoided if prepared for by facing up to the challenges allowing new solutions to be found. Academic participants, drawing from the recent experiences of their colleagues in the US, highlighted the risks of not taking a threat seriously and being unprepared.

“I think even if Europe were to become more of a dwarf than it already is in the world order, the idea of liberal democracy will remain a popular one, and especially for some people within the liberal regimes... the idea that they have their own rights, that they have their own voice, that could be, should be heard, is something that will remain compelling.”

“I’m thinking that there are countervailing forces, simply the streets and civil society that I expect would mobilize over time. I mean, it’s not like the liberal democracy muscle is suddenly leaving our bodies. So I think that this will remain an element.”

“Take the example of climate change: Paris Agreement, UN resolutions. I think that at this stage, we are already in the collapse scenario, and the EU is trying to do something in this configuration. So it is important to have this dimension in mind, and here the EU still plays a role.”

“I think preparation is essential, both because preparation improves resilience, but also because there’s a lot that can be done in anticipation of a severe collapse... This is one example that academics can also learn from other experiences, you can see that in the US, the universities have a very muted response to what is actually happening to them right now, which is something that could probably be avoided if they had prepared for such scenarios.”

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Overall, the workshop participants regarded the collapse scenario as deeply concerning, highlighting profound vulnerabilities in current EU structures and emphasizing the urgent need for proactive measures to prevent such outcomes. Participants once again drew from the current EU experience and envisioned the ‘collapse’ scenario as a potential consequence of muddling through. Much like in the survey, participants were able to game out many ways in which the scenario could be brought about, but overall, maintained the belief that the EU would somehow, in some capacity, manage to survive before reaching this point.

“You could already think that the muddling through indeed is a sort of slow motion collapse, so that when it comes to values, when you’re compromising the values and trading them off, you’re already collapsing in your protection of the values, because they are foundational and they should not be traded off for other things.”

Muddling through with existing rule of law and EU democracy instruments

This scenario involves status quo and severe dissensus leading to a relative steady state for EU instruments.

Definition

Severe dissensus reflects a conflict which pertains to the practice of liberal democracy but where the actors' goals are heterogeneous, with actors seeking to preserve or change/restructure rules/practices and correct the failures of liberal democracy, while keeping them in line with this political ideal (Coman and Brack 2025).

This scenario presents a future as a continued status quo, continuing with existing internal and external instruments, that is a relatively steady state for EU instruments in the face of severe dissensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law.

Overview of the Key drivers

The Intensity of Dissensus at the EU level	Severe
The Intensity of Dissensus in EU Member States	Severe
Efficiency of EU Internal Instruments	Incidental
Efficiency of EU External Instruments	Incidental
Emerging Global Order	A Pole Among others
EU Relative Capacity to Respond	Catalyst for Relative Change

Across both workshops, participants broadly agreed that the “muddling through” scenario—marked by inertia, selective enforcement, and avoidance of deep reform—poses a sustained challenge to the EU’s liberal democratic framework in the future. In this scenario EU mechanisms for upholding the rule of law and democracy remain formally intact but are increasingly hollowed out through political compromise, underuse, or strategic avoidance. While supranational tools like conditionality regulations, infringement procedures, and CJEU rulings exist, they are either inconsistently applied or politically diluted. Member states’ reluctance to confront illiberal trends—due to internal political costs, strategic dependencies, or

public opinion volatility—has led to a quiet normalization of illiberal practices. Meanwhile, the Commission’s role has been weakened, becoming more reactive than assertive, and the Council is dominated by blocking dynamics. The result is a European Union that survives institutionally but risks sacrificing the very democratic norms it was built to uphold.

“...the union will survive as long as a couple of big member states have an interest in its survival, even in its most minimalist form. The issue is what kind of union would survive.”

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Despite this bleak trajectory, some participants pointed to opportunities arising from the muddling through scenario. These include, enhanced cooperation, refined conditionality, improved legal follow-up, and renewed commitment to supranational principles as potential tools for defending liberal democracy under pressure.

In the “muddling through” scenario, workshop participants highlighted severe internal dissensus within the EU, largely due to conflicting national dynamics and institutional inertia. Participants frequently expressed concerns over the EU’s inability or reluctance to effectively confront illiberal practices among member states, primarily due to sovereignty considerations and political sensitivities. One participant notably described the EU institutional dynamic as marked by immobilism, emphasizing how national interests and EU institutions block each other, preventing substantial progress.

Participants identified a critical tension at the EU level, particularly between the reluctance of institutions such as the Commission and Council to intervene decisively in national politics and the rising pressures from member states adopting illiberal measures. They pointed out how the Council and Commission continue to employ instruments like conditionality and Treaty on European Union (TEU) Article 7 proceedings largely symbolically, without meaningful enforcement or consistency. The case of Hungary was repeatedly mentioned as illustrative of strategic compliance that minimizes the practical impact of EU measures.

“...there is maybe another consensus growing within Europe, which is not illiberal as such, but maybe more tolerant of some forms of illiberalism.”

“[Don’t just think about] the rule of law as an instrument. The rule of law is something that happens every day. It’s a physical reality which is slowly eroded when EU law is not applied across all of the 27 member states and on that, there’s almost no attention”

“...the Commission has been extremely shy in applying these instruments. So the gatekeeper is sort of containing action from the start within the commission. It means the commission has internalized the intergovernmental setup of union politics.”

“...those dynamics [inertia within EU institutions] have not fundamentally changed. It’s the pressure from below [from the member states] which has become more and more intense.”

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Some participants characterized this inertia (and muddling through more generally) as not being a case of incompetence or lack of motivation, but a deliberate political choice that Brussels has judged to be the best option among a range of worse choices - an effort to preserve the basic functions of the EU at the expense of others (at any cost). The “Merkel era” was described by some as being one of intergovernmentalism as a matter of pragmatism.

Several participants emphasized external geopolitical pressures as factors contributing to internal EU dissensus over liberal democracy. The war in Ukraine, the global rise of illiberal politics exemplified by Trumpism in the US, and migration issues were highlighted as both potential unifying and divisive elements. Specifically, external crises occasionally galvanise member states around common interests, yet participants expressed concern that these external issues often distract from addressing fundamental internal problems, resulting in likeness to muddle through rather than reform.

The impact of public opinion and populist electoral pressures on EU actions was another significant point of discussion. Participants expressed worry about how populist narratives portray the EU negatively, contributing to voter pressure that restrains politicians from taking robust pro-democratic stances. This electoral volatility was seen as reinforcing cautiousness among EU institutions and member states alike.

“...during the Merkel era, the Union was transformed... the intergovernmental dimension of the Union was reinforced at the expense of the distinct integrational characters of the European construction, and this has severely constrained the union’s capacity to act...”

“...the North Star is always institutional survival. And all these other threats we were talking about, initially existential threats, or external threats or internal value debates are almost second order concerns to the systemic survival of the system”

“...the anti-EU narrative, which, in Romania for instance, is related to a lack of political culture, a lack of democratic political culture, lack of strategic communication about what EU is and what EU membership is, and it’s an absence which has characterized this whole period in which Romania has been a member of the EU. So it’s very easy for a sovereignist discourse to take over and become very popular, and people, although at the same time they can say, “we want to be in the EU”, but at the same time they can vote for somebody who is against the EU.”

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Participants also discussed institutional erosion as a significant risk. The Commission was described as increasingly reactive rather than proactive, having internalised an intergovernmental logic limiting its autonomy. Additionally, the credibility of the CJEU was noted as diminishing, as member states frequently fail to implement its rulings without significant consequences.

Furthermore, the role of civil society was discussed extensively. Some participants challenged the assumption that civil society always supports liberal democratic values, noting the rise of conservative and illiberal civil society groups on the national and local level (Romania, Hungary and Poland were highlighted as examples of this) that actively undermine liberal democracy and EU cohesion. This shift complicates the role of civil society as a stabilising factor.

Despite these challenges, participants suggested several opportunities to reinforce EU resilience. They proposed enhanced cooperation among like-minded member states, improved follow-up mechanisms for court rulings, and strategic, consistent enforcement of conditionality mechanisms in clearer, more winnable cases. Additionally, participants suggested refining the EU's strategic communications to counteract populist narratives and emphasised the importance of supranational principles to reinforce EU legitimacy.

“I think there is something dangerous linked specifically to muddling through - reaching these compromises without the wider population seeing it as legitimation... compromise is no longer seen as a positive value.”

“...when you have this kind of political discourse in a country where the media is very weak, and you don't really have independent, powerful media, or a very powerful NGO sector to be in competition with the political discourse, the EU [gets characterized as] the bad guy, and it's very easy to turn EU into the bad guy.”

“...we should really know how countries vote [in the Council]. We should really discuss it more. The media should make more of an effort [to ensure] that you can't say 'yes' in Brussels, then go home and say 'I voted against it', and that's what we still have.”

“...doubling down and committing to supranationalism versus intergovernmentalism could be the possible way forward to counteract these protests and actually enforce the rule of law, double down on the treaties, make use of those many communities, and really enforce the rule of law as a matter of as a principle that has higher standing than any other principle in the legal framework.”

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In what was a recurring theme in these workshops, a ‘two-speed Europe’ idea was put forward as a possible solution, with like-minded member states (as well as non-members in some cases) working together outside the EU framework when it becomes blocked.

In summary, workshop participants saw the “muddling through” scenario as likely but inherently unstable. While institutional continuity is maintained, participants expressed significant concerns over the incremental erosion of democratic norms and the strategic accommodation of illiberal practices, cautioning that sustained muddling through could lead the EU into deeper structural and legitimacy crises. Despite this being a hypothetical future scenario, participants found it easy to draw parallels with the EU’s current state of affairs, mostly in a negative framing.

“I’m not sure whether more intergovernmentalism necessarily increases more blockage by unanimity, because you can have intergovernmentalism which is not unanimous... we’re seeing this now on defense and security, where the idea of doing something outside the treaties is specifically in order to bring in some non member states who are important for development and security - Norway, UK - and to exclude some member states who are a problem - Hungary, and potentially Slovakia... And this is not necessarily against European integration.”

New European approaches to rule of law and democracy

Scenario 3 involves disruptive dissensus¹ enabled by renewed and innovative EU instruments in the field.

Definition

Disruptive dissensus pertains to the core foundations of liberal democracy. The conflict is about the core constitutional values, rights and norms of the polity, as new claims or new actors start to challenge the rules of the political game at both the EU and national levels. Conflicts are disruptive as they target key foundations such as constitutions (for Member States) or Treaties (for the EU), yet the preferences of the actors tend to remain in the limits of the existing political ideal seeking to restructure liberal democracy instead of replacing it by non-democratic regimes (Coman and Brack, 2025).

This final scenario puts forward the possibility that disruptive dissensus prompts the EU to make dramatic reforms, with renewed and innovative EU instruments. Dissensus challenges core constitutional aspects of the EU but will tend towards restructuring liberal democracy instead of replacing it with non-democratic regimes.

Overview of the Key drivers	
The Intensity of Dissensus at the EU level	Disruptive
The Intensity of Dissensus in EU Member States	Disruptive
Efficiency of EU Internal Instruments	Potent
Efficiency of EU External Instruments	Potent
Emerging Global Order	A Central Rule-Maker
EU Relative Capacity to Respond	Effective Enforcer of Common Norms

Workshop participants engaged enthusiastically with the “Transformation” scenario, highlighting the potential for disruptive dissensus to drive significant and constructive reform within the EU. Central to their discussions was the concept of constructive dissensus—persistent conflicts that, rather than paralysing the EU, catalyse substantial adaptation and institutional evolution. Participants agreed that severe external crises, such as geopolitical

realignments due to the war in Ukraine, or economic turmoil from US policies under Trump could serve as critical catalysts for reform. Change in the EU was envisioned as either being a steady progressive package towards reform and reconciliation, or as a major traumatic crisis triggering immediate and necessary change.

One widely discussed idea was the potential wherein budget and financial crises lead to deeper financial integration and innovative

¹ though disruptive in the sense that it challenges the foundations of liberal democracy.

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governance mechanisms. Participants noted that these shifts would not necessarily be revolutionary but rather a series of cumulative reforms aimed at improving institutional efficiency and democratic responsiveness. They also highlighted the importance of public opinion and civic awareness, suggesting that a greater consciousness among citizens about EU-level democratic mechanisms could foster broader engagement and support for reforms.

Institutionally, participants proposed significant adjustments to enhance democratic accountability and effectiveness. These reforms included streamlining existing EU tools, making TEU Article 7 procedures more actionable by removing unanimity requirements, and strengthening conditionality mechanisms by tying them more clearly to financial sanctions and oversight. They emphasised the importance of a proactive European Commission that could act decisively and coherently across its directorates, highlighting the need for simplification of overlapping instruments and greater institutional coordination.

But other participants stressed the point that internal bureaucratic culture must change for these instruments to be effective.

“I think that all this debate about erosion, decline, liberal democracy - I take the Romanian case as an example - allowed us citizens to understand what is at stake, and what the EU is doing... to know what are the tools, and then to make citizens more reactive in having recommendations, and those recommendations should be implemented... they can ask governments to be responsible and reactive to this kind of thing. So then, super optimistic, but also I think which I see as a possibility.”

“[TEU] Article Seven would not be subject to unanimity anymore. You would have maybe two thirds or four fifths for this so it would be usable”

“I think it’s the political culture and the way the institutions function that has to be renewed if there is to be this revival. It’s not a matter of what instruments, but what is the political culture prevailing among the institutions... If that doesn’t happen, you can have as many instruments as you want. They can be as sophisticated and well drafted as you want. They will not be used.”

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A robust debate arose around the role of supranationalism and political culture. Participants argued that a renewed commitment to supranational decision-making—reviving the “community method” and reducing the European Council’s dominance—was essential to overcoming institutional paralysis. They underscored the need to foster a political culture within EU institutions that prioritizes democratic legitimacy and responsiveness over bureaucratic risk-aversion and technocratic detachment.

Participants extensively discussed enhancing the role of civil society and direct citizen participation as crucial components of democratic renewal. They advocated for greater use of citizen assemblies and public deliberation platforms, suggesting these could meaningfully integrate public views into policymaking rather than merely serving as symbolic consultation tools.

The possibility of establishing a more direct relationship between EU institutions and individual citizens, particularly through tangible welfare and social policies, was another prominent theme. Participants saw significant potential in initiatives that would deliver direct socio-economic benefits, such as housing, healthcare, and employment support, thereby solidifying citizens’ connection to the EU and bolstering its legitimacy.

“... bureaucracy is already something that most people would agree is problematic, the level of bureaucratization in the EU for the reasons you mentioned, problematic because it stands in the way of problem solving, it stands in the way of connecting to citizens... but I do think that the EU also somehow functioned when we didn’t have this multiplication of bullsh*t jobs sustaining them. And everyone I know from the Commission has an excellent salary and an excellent pension and whatever else. But let’s say half of them are unhappy about the actual feeling of having an impact.”

“...one of the reforms needed is a direct relation, a direct welfare relationship, between the EU and its citizens, because that’s one area where the EU has no relay. It has a direct relationship in terms of rights. It has a direct relationship in terms of mobility. It even has a direct relationship in terms of subsidies for companies and universities and elites, but it doesn’t have a direct relationship with the welfare of individual citizens. If that can be done through housing, or that can be done through other mechanisms... it would be a revolutionary thing.”

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Externally, the EU's ability to effectively enforce common democratic norms and standards was seen as crucial. Participants argued for a more coherent and assertive EU presence in global affairs, positioning the bloc as a central "rule-maker" rather than a passive recipient of external policies. Strengthening the implementation and consistency of democratic and human rights clauses in external agreements, and enforcement of conditionality internally, was highlighted as vital for maintaining global credibility.

Participants considered the role of external triggers for reform. The cases of Ukraine (and more recently, the second Trump administration) were put forward as being external pressures which could galvanise the EU and unite member states to face an outside challenge.

"...inserting clauses into external instruments in relation to rule of law, in relation to human rights. So in this scenario, you could see how perhaps there might develop a more consistent way of implementing those particular clauses in relation to these specific issues in trade agreements, association agreements, through enlargement... the accession process..."

"If that [Trump admin] really explodes, if he overreaches himself, I think that could lead to much more of this kind of scenario where there's real arguments in Europe that we have really got to consolidate democracy and liberalism."

"The most positive scenario which could play out here seems to be a growing sense of European identity. Is probably a strong word, but inclusion... people belong to a polity more or less within the frontiers of the EU and a little bit beyond. That you could see very clearly in the reaction against the Ukraine war, against the current tariffs from the United States, and it's partly due to external factors and the growing sense that there is a need for collective response."

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Finally, the role of academia and intellectual engagement was identified as an essential driver of policy innovation and democratic resilience. Participants called for a renewed societal role for academia, emphasising the need for academics to engage directly with public discourse and policy debates, thereby contributing proactively to democratic renewal.

“[In] the Irish abortion referendum... where they had proper citizen assembly, so they invited not only affected people, but also expert testimonies, like doctors telling them what happens when there’s no abortion...meaningful spaces created for that information to be taken in, rather than just putting an academic on the BBC and hope that somebody watches... [there needs to be] proper interaction between academics and citizens on specific issues where what the academic says actually helps people understand a supranational, far removed, pluralistic, multilingual entity like the EU.”

Overall, workshop participants envisioned the “transformation” scenario as one where the EU, facing significant internal and external challenges, embraces bold, innovative reforms. These reforms would significantly reshape institutional structures and policies, emphasizing democratic accountability, supranational governance, civic participation, and direct socio-economic engagement with citizens, thereby reinforcing the EU’s democratic foundations and global influence.

Themes and implications from across scenarios

A number of common themes were discussed in relation to all three scenarios:

1. There was overall a greater sense of optimism for the future of liberal democracy than pessimism, but a sense that change from within the EU was needed to break a cycle of inertia and internal reliance on “muddling through” as a default position.
2. Typically, internal pressures were associated with gradual change, while external pressures were imagined arising in the form of more sudden shocks which could either jolt the EU into radical action to defend itself or serve as a catalyst to accelerate its decline. On balance participants were optimistic that the external pressures could lead to a more proactive action, but they also recognised that collapse was an outcome too.
3. In all three scenarios, it was external factors that were felt to be the biggest triggers, but participants felt across all scenarios that internal reform would

be needed to be more proactive about tacking dissensus over liberal democracy. Participants wanted a more pro-active approach than is being taken already.

4. The concept of ‘two-speed Europe’ is common in relation to all three scenarios discussed. In muddling through, a ‘two-speed approach’ was imagined as a means by which the EU could survive, albeit in a diminished form. In collapse, participants suggested that this could be one way in which the EU begins to break apart, as universal principles among member states are abandoned. And finally, in transformation, two-speed Europe was suggested to be a solution to blockages in the existing EU framework, introducing new approaches where they would otherwise be impossible.

The table below compares the three potential future scenarios for the EU: “Muddling Through,” “Collapse,” and “Reform & Adaptation,” summarising both the design of each scenario as well as the analysis and discussion that followed in the workshops.

Dimension	Muddling Through	Collapse	Reform & Adaptation
Triggering Dynamic	Political inertia; avoidance of confrontation; fear of escalation	Destructive dissensus; legal disintegration; takeover by illiberal actors	External crises trigger reform; constructive civic and institutional responses
Use of Rule of Law Tools	Symbolic or inconsistent enforcement; tools often traded off politically	Tools ignored or defunded; legal order breaks down	Enhanced, consistent enforcement; sanctions and oversight mechanisms strengthened
Commission Role	Reactive and cautious; internalises intergovernmental logic	Weak and marginalized; lacks initiative or legitimacy	Proactive; better coordination between DGs; more political and responsive

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Dimension	Muddling Through	Collapse	Reform & Adaptation
Council Dynamics	Vetoes dominate; key decisions diluted to lowest common denominator	Fragmented into nationalist coalitions; policy incoherence	Moves back to qualified majority voting; Council's dominance reduced
Supranationalism	Undermined by informal arrangements and national power plays	Displaced by sovereignty-first logic	Reinvigorated; return to Community Method and democratic legitimation
CJEU Authority	Rulings selectively implemented or delayed	Rulings widely ignored; primacy of EU law collapses	Enforcement strengthened; penalties scaled; linked to budget and conditionality
Civil Society Role	Selectively included; engagement often superficial	Suppressed or sidelined entirely; shrinking civic space	Actively engaged; empowered to monitor and co-enforce democratic norms
Public Opinion & Trust	Erodes due to opaque governance and weak accountability	Collapse of trust; populist narratives dominate	Rebuilt through participatory tools, visible benefits, and narrative renewal
European Identity	Fragmented; often framed in nationalist terms	Co-opted by illiberal actors (e.g., "Christian Europe")	Strengthened through inclusive values, Erasmus, shared social investment
Institutional Innovation	Avoided; institutions stagnate; duplication of tools	Instruments abandoned or captured	Tools are streamlined and consolidated; clear mandates and simplification
Democracy & Rights Narrative	Preserved in rhetoric, eroded in practice	Redefined in illiberal or authoritarian terms	Expanded to include welfare, equity, and civic responsibility
External Action	Handled through ad hoc coalitions, weakening EU coherence	EU becomes a global rule-taker, not rule-maker	EU repositions as global democracy defender and value-based actor
Opportunity for Change	Low; status quo resists disruption	Very limited; reform energies scattered or repressed	High; crisis enables transformation and strategic realignment toward democratic renewal

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Implications for the future:

From the three scenarios explored, it is clear that the majority of our expert survey and foresight workshop participants perceived the EU to be heading towards a weak muddling or adaption response to dissensus over liberal democracy, rather than seeking an active path of reform and transformation. We recommend that the EU immediately pursue a transformation strategy through implementing the following actions to ensure dissensus is most effectively addressed:

- > **Strengthen Rule of Law Enforcement:** EU tools must be applied consistently and linked to meaningful consequences (e.g., financial sanctions tied to compliance).
- > **Reinvigorate Supranationalism:** Reviving the supranational method and reducing member states veto power in the Council are critical for overcoming institutional blockage.
- > **Enhance Civic Engagement:** Expand citizen assemblies and establish direct welfare links between the EU and its citizens to build legitimacy and trust.
- > **Address External Threats:** A more assertive EU foreign policy, especially in democratic conditionality and trade, is necessary to counter foreign disinformation and illiberal influence.
- > **Plan for Crisis Resilience:** Preparing for potential collapse through scenario planning and institutional flexibility can help prevent it—or accelerate transformation when opportunity arises.

Appendix

For additional information on Dissensus over Liberal Democracy, situated within the research findings of the Horizon Europe RED-SPINEL Project, please consult the following resources:

- > Brack, N., Coman, R. (2025). Dissensus over liberal democracy in Europe: how does it shape policies and polity?. *Eur Polit Sci.* <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00546-4>
- > Capati, A., Christiansen, T. (2024). Enforcing the European Union's Rule of Law Through Economic Governance Mechanisms: The Role of the European Semester. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 189-205, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_12
- > Capati, A., Christiansen, T. (2025). Legitimacy and political dissensus in the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility: the case of Italy. *Eur Polit Sci.* <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00538-4>
- > Cecchetti, L. (2024). The Rising Value of the Preliminary Reference Procedure in the Rule of Law Protection. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 51-70, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_4
- > Cecchetti, L. (2024). Granting Rights, Preserving the Rule of Law? The Effectiveness of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 71-85, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_5
- > Citino, Y.M. (2024). The Prospective Impact of the Rule of Law Reports: A Tool to Be Fine-Tuned. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 173-185, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_11
- > Coman, R. (2024). Backsliding Populist Governments in the Council: The Case of the Hungarian Fidesz. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8161. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8161>
- > Coman, R., Brack, N. (2025). Dissensus over liberal democracy: concept-building and typology. *Eur Polit Sci.* <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00539-3>
- > Coman, R., Paulis, E., Puleo, L. et al. (2025). Building and legitimizing an illiberal transnational field: illiberal think tanks' struggle for cultural hegemony in Poland and Hungary. *Eur Polit Sci.* <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00544-6>

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- > Coman, R., Thinus, P. (2024). Key Political and Legal Debates on Article 7 TEU in Times of Dissensus Over the Rule of Law. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 21-37, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_2
- > Cseres, K.J. (2024). The Role of Competition Law in Defending Rule of Law Values in the EU. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 261-279, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_16
- > Deleixhe, M. (2025). Peoplehood, dissensus, and partisanship. The European Union as a case study. *Eur Polit Sci*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00543-7>
- > Dirri, A. (2024). The Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. The End of the “Exceptionalism”. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 87-104, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_6
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- > Eckes, C. (2025). Dissensus in Europe: climate protesters before court. *Eur Polit Sci*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-025-00540-w>
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- > Guerra, Y. (2024). Measuring Justice? The EU Justice Scoreboard in the Light of the Performance-Based Approach. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 157-171, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_10
- > Hegedus, D., Christiansen, T. (2024). Contesting the Rule of Law in the European Union: The Creation and Implementation of the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation. In: Fasone, C., Dirri, A., Guerra, Y. (eds) *EU Rule of Law Procedures at the Test Bench*. Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 225-241, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60008-1_14
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- > Website of the **Horizon Europe RED-SPINEL Project** for Working Papers, Reports, Country Level Reports, Policy Briefs, Podcasts and Newsletters: <https://redspinel.iee-ulb.eu>



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The logo for RED SPINEL, featuring the text "RED SPINEL" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a graphic consisting of several white circles of varying sizes, arranged in a roughly circular pattern, resembling a cluster of particles or a stylized globe.