

How can the European Union best uphold its democratic values in a world order increasingly challenged by autocratic tendencies?

In recent years, autocratic tendencies are arising. According to the 2025 V-Dem Report, for the first time in more than two decades, the number of autocracies (91) in the world exceeds that of democracies (88). Given that autocracies are more likely to trigger conflicts, spread disinformation, and engage in cross-border cyber-attacks, this represents an existential threat to democratic life. As Eoghan Gilmartin puts it, contemporary politics “consists of a confrontation of models, values and worldviews”.

The origin of democracy dates back to ancient Greece, where the concept of government by the people was born. The value of democracy has changed over time until it reached the form we know today. The main elements of democracy are: the rule of law, a governing principle according to which everyone is accountable under the law, free elections, protection of fundamental rights and freedoms and the separation of powers, which divides state authority into three types of state power: the legislative, which is responsible for approving laws; the executive, which implement laws; and the judicial, which interprets and applies laws.

Indeed, democracy is a fundamental value of the European Union, written in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). It focuses on the idea that citizens should have a say in how they are governed. In the European Union, democracy is more than just elections. It encourages citizens to be involved in making decisions and shaping policies at the European level. The EU promotes democracy within its member countries. For example, the European Parliament, which is directly elected by EU citizens, plays an important role in representing them in EU decision-making.

Furthermore, the EU has addressed this issue by implementing some measures. For instance, the European commission adopted the European Democracy Action plan (EDAP) in 2020 (reviewed in 2023) which aims to address threats constantly posed to democracy. It mainly consists of three core aspects: promoting free and fair elections, key actions in this area include legislation to ensure transparency in political advertising, revision of the Regulation on the funding of European political parties and a new joint system for ensuring elections are resistant to threats; Strengthening media freedom, with a set of rules like the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA); and opposing disinformation by fostering cooperation and ensuring more accountability of online platforms.

In order to protect democratic values in member states and guarantee that they commit to them, article 7 of the Treaty on the EU can be activated when a member state breaches EU values with two mechanisms: Prevention procedure which is used when there is a risk and allows to make a formal warning and engage in a political dialogue; the Sanction procedure would be used when the breach has taken place. This decision must be taken by the European Council with the consent of the Parliament. However, successful implementation is a complex process due to possible alliances on the EUCO.

Considering its importance, it is crucial to take action and defend Democracy against nowadays increasing totalitarian tendencies as Abraham Lincoln said: *“Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people”*.

For this reason, this essay presents three proposals which are crucial to upholding democratic values based on three main pillars: **information, education and promotion**. Our suggestions are: the creation of a digital EU platform to inform and encourage citizen participation, the promotion of democratic knowledge in schools through educational programs, and the fostering of democratic principles through media campaigns.

To start with, nowadays, finding clear and reliable information about each political party is not easy, since disinformation has become widespread leading to the growing sense of disconnection between citizens and institutions. Therefore, we strongly believe that the creation of an application developed and designed by the European Union, incorporating the use of artificial intelligence, is particularly relevant, as it fosters democratic values and promotes accessibility. It would mainly consist of three sections:

Firstly, objective and truthful information about each political party would be provided including programs and proposals in different areas, such as economy, environment, health, education, etc. The application would rely on official data provided by the European Parliament to present accurate and transparent information about each political group and party. By using this institutional source, the app ensures that the information reflects verified positions, legislative activities, and policy priorities, in this way credibility would be ensured, leaving behind misinformation and fake news. By doing so, citizens can verify whether political actions match their electoral promises. Furthermore, artificial intelligence, by using fact checkers, would detect media that spread disinformation, applying sanctions if needed.

Secondly, electoral abstention is a growing phenomenon in contemporary democracies. Studies suggest that the main reason for this issue is the lack of interest, largely enhanced by the absence of reliable information which would be addressed with our first point of the application, since it would allow citizens to receive up-to-date information. Furthermore, through the integration of digital tools such as election date reminders, voting simulations, interactive explanations, and secure identification systems, the application can encourage voting, highlighting its importance to citizens. This could be the stem to develop a system for online voting in the future.

Thirdly, it could also include an initiative-based activity, accessible to all European citizens. A “citizens’ mailbox” would be created, consisting of a platform where suggestions and requests would be sent from across Europe directly to the European Parliament. These suggestions would then be analysed to ensure that the EU is truly aware of the most pressing issues that citizens are facing at a given moment. In addition, artificial intelligence would monitor them and propose possible solutions to these requests. In this way, citizens’ voices would be amplified, promoting “people’s power”.

The aim of a true educational system is, according to Condorcet, to make equality between citizens real, and to make all mankind better. Therefore, education at schools is basic as we believe democratic values *can and should* be taught in all subjects of the curriculum. When history is distorted, democracy becomes misinterpreted. For this reason, schools should include political education and democratic values, as well as help them develop critical thinking skills. It is well-known that education is a supporting and coordinating competence of the EU, which means that the EU can support member states, but cannot harmonize national laws in this field. Therefore, the EU could use established programs such as Erasmus+, etwinning and already existing platforms that provide teachers' materials like the European School Education Platform (ESEP) to enhance the teaching of democratic values in school through projects.

Mock elections projects where students experience the election voting process could be promoted at schools. Learning about the different European parties and groups could be achieved through talks. This would help them to understand the voting process and the importance of voting in elections. Projects like Model European Union to learn about how they legislate in the EU could be suggested to all schools across the European Union with a final session in the European Parliament in Brussels or Strasbourg. Students would not only learn the legislation procedure but also the impact the laws that are passed in the European Union have in their lives, but also how important it is to reach agreements between different political parties. A survey targeting young people about voting under the age of 18 could be conducted in all member states to revise this voting age and act accordingly based on the results. Equality and tolerance should be taught combining understanding, experience and reflection.

Although we live in a democracy, not everyone feels represented or interested in it. It is believed this is a result, in many cases, of the lack of information about all the advantages democracy offers. It is a well-known fact that young people do not get information through traditional media sources such as television or newspaper, but through social media platforms. For this reason, our third proposal is based on the use of accessible communicative tools, to guarantee that democratic values reach all members of society.

Advertising is not only used for selling products, it can also inform citizens and foster participation as it has a huge reach among the population across all age groups, using different media such as TV, social media, radio or podcasts. For this reason, we believe it is essential that the EU should create informative and dynamic advertising. Some campaigns could create strong messages by including visual metaphors or storytelling to capture attention while others could feature experts or public figures to enhance credibility among citizens.

As we have mentioned above, social media has a huge impact on society, providing a platform where citizens' concerns can be communicated and potentially influence politics. To spread the word, influencers could be employed to promote democratic values across different platforms and social networks. For instance, TikTok could be used to show where public money is spent so people

would understand the importance of choosing who manages it and challenges could be created to show the positive impact of having a democracy. Secondly, on YouTube or Twitch, popular strategy video games could hold team tournaments with a common goal that requires them to discuss controversial issues. Thirdly, on Spotify, short ads or podcasts could be released in which people are asked challenging questions about democratic values. Finally, on Instagram, they could post polls related to democracy.

However, we strongly believe that young people should be involved in the promotion of democratic values. Given the rise of autocratic tendencies, empowering young people is essential, as they represent the future of our society. For instance, campaigns related to democratic values could be promoted to all adolescents and children, from different levels of complexity or including participation in communication-based activities, which ensure the spread of knowledge regarding democracy. In this way, we have an important multiplier effect as it goes beyond the initial audience and can reach a larger impact with the chain reaction.

In conclusion, several measures must be taken to defend democratic values. Democracy is a system that requires constant participation from its members to work, something that is rapidly declining. The proposals our class has presented aim to reduce disinformation and combat political apathy, making the citizen's voices louder than ever. By educating our population, especially younger generations, we can contribute to making our democracy more resilient, standing strong against the threat of autocratic tendencies. We have developed several ideas on how to achieve this, insisting on accessible and modern technology, dynamic advertising campaigns as well as proper political education for everyone. We strongly believe these suggestions are not only helpful, but also rather necessary. They can shape our society towards one which is more democratic at its core, with citizens who fight to defend democracy, day after day, thanks to their knowledge and inclusion in the political system.

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