



Strengthening Democracy from the Bottom Up

Addressing Democratic Backsliding in the European Union through Civil Society

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ABSTRACT

Democratic backsliding, which describes the process of progressive deterioration of democratic standards, is one of the most pressing challenges facing the European Union (EU). This paper investigates how the EU's framework for addressing democratic backsliding within its Member States can best be strengthened, improved, and/or supplemented. Although often undervalued (or overlooked) in traditional conceptions and measures of democracy, institutional and civic components are key creating to robust democratic systems. Yet, as our analysis shows, the latter aspect has largely been missing from the EU strategy. While we show that the present EU policy involves robust measures to remedy backsliding in the institutional realm, we identify a gap in the current EU measures to strengthen and protect the civic pillars of democracy. Although some efforts have been made in recognition of the importance of civic components, such as the critical role of civil society organisations (CSOs) within democracies, this aspect of the EU's response remains underutilised and underdeveloped. Our novel approach, stressing the importance of these civil elements, helps explain the suboptimal policy outcomes of the EU strategy and its failure to halt and/or reverse anti-democratic trends. We conclude with policy proposals that go beyond protection of the formal institutions of liberal democracy to facilitate the promotion and protection of democracy from the bottom-up through civil society. Our proposed measures involve (i) Establishing a CSO Funding Mechanism for EU Member States, (ii) Promotion of Civil Society Self-Sufficiency, (iii) Establishing an Ombudsman for Civic Space, and (iv) Developing Civic Education Initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION: THE MISSING ASPECT OF EU RESPONSE TO DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Supplementing a Top-Down Institutional Approach

In its 2019 report on democracy around the world, *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem, 2019) labelled Hungary as an “electoral autocracy”—the first time that a European Union (EU) member state has been demoted from a democracy status under the V-Dem categorisation. In 2020, the organisation also reported that Poland only qualified as an “electoral democracy”, a significant drop from the more robust category of liberal democracy (Ibid, 2020). Poland and Hungary, under the leadership of, respectively, Law and Justice (PiS) and Fidesz governments, have seen attempts at undermining the independence of the judiciary and extending executive power, assisted by efforts to control the media and reducing the space for civil society (Śledzińska-Simon, 2019; Kinowska-Mazaraki, 2021, Tavares, 2013). Threats to democracy are also at risk of spreading to other EU member states (Orenstein & Bugarič, 2020). In light of these recent developments, it is clear that the EU measures have been insufficient in addressing democratic backsliding—the process of progressive deterioration of democratic standards—within its member states. In order to meaningfully address this issue, it is imperative that the EU establishes an impartial and ex-ante framework that facilitates the identification, prevention, and, when necessary, correction of democratic backsliding. Moreover, the EU requires a wide range of measures within its toolkit to address democratic backsliding in all of its manifestations. The following research questions have guided our investigation and corresponding policy proposals: What are some possible shortcomings of the current EU policies to curtail democratic backsliding? Moreover, how can the EU’s framework best be strengthened, improved, and/or supplemented?

Upon examination of the current legislation and non-binding recommendations—which focus primarily on preventing erosion of the institutional components of democracy—we identify a number of complementary solutions to current mechanisms. We emphasise the importance of empowering local actors to reinforce and re-establish democratic norms, particularly in the areas of participatory and deliberative democracy. In this way, rather than implementing solely top-down strategies, we suggest that the EU also adopt a complementary bottom-up approach. Our policy report continues as follows: first, drawing upon a robust body of academic work on democracy and institutional change, we list four mutually constitutive categories of democratic principles that are affected by democratic backsliding: electoral, liberal, participatory, and deliberative (V-Dem). Grouping the electoral and liberal categorizations together, we define these principles collectively as institutional components, whereas the participatory and deliberative categories are jointly defined as civic components. Using V-Dem data, we provide an overview of institutional and civic democratic backsliding in the EU member

states, thereby developing a comprehensive framework for analysing the current EU policy response. Second, after outlining current measures—which primarily address institutional components—we highlight the issue of protection of civic space as one area for improvement in the EU’s approach. Specifically, we investigate civic participation as particularly pertinent to a functional and free democracy and show that it can be strengthened through EU engagement. We include Hungary and Poland as case studies, as these countries arguably represent the most egregious cases of democratic backsliding. Nevertheless, we maintain that the phenomenon of democratic backsliding is by no means limited to these two countries, or to newly incorporated member states. We analyse current EU measures and proposals, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses as well as the opportunities and threats, which can influence their outcome. Finally, after identifying shortcomings of the current measures, we include a set of policy recommendations for the EU aimed at strengthening the civil component of democracy.

Recognizing the limitations of any top-down institutional approach on its own, we maintain that a bottom-up approach focused on civic democracy remains underexplored and underutilised. Furthermore, acknowledging the sensitivity of navigating the balance between member state sovereignty and adherence to EU law, we view our recommendations as a contribution to current measures that work to strengthen and complement them. By focusing on civil society engagement and civic participation, our proposal offers the EU an opportunity to empower local actors in line with the EU principle of “ensuring a level of homogeneity among Member States, while still respecting their national identities” (European Union, 2012) in addition to other more orthodox mechanisms to safeguard democracy.

DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Principles of Democracy

The V-Dem Varieties of Democracy index outlines four¹ mutually constitutive principles of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, and deliberative. The first **electoral principle** (or electoral legitimacy) refers to “agreed upon international conventions and universal standards about elections” that are maintained “throughout the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath,” (Norris, 2014). Electoral democracies are defined by the presence of multiple parties, the potential for electoral “turnover,” or the ability for opposition parties to take office (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). The electoral principle defines the minimalist understanding of democracy and, therefore, is seen as a fundamental and necessary element of any more comprehensive conceptions of democracy (Dahl, 2008). Second, the **liberal principle** (defining liberal democracies) describes the institutional structures which assign and regulate power, including horizontal checks on executive discretion and enforcement of the rule of law (Eckstein, 1973). This pertains to the concept of a self-limiting government (Elster, 1995), which exhibits a clear separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Additionally, a liberal democracy entails the constitutionally enshrined protection of basic political rights and civil liberties, such as the freedom of speech, association, and assembly, as well as minority rights². Notably, liberal democracies are defined by the fulfilment of both the electoral and liberal principles (Dahl, 2008; Lührmann et al., 2018).

Principles of Democracy

Our classification	Institutional Components		Civic Components	
V-Dem	Electoral	Liberal	Participatory	Deliberative

Figure 2a. Principles of democracy.

¹ V-Dem outlines five principles of democracy, but as no data on egalitarianism has been collected since 2012 in the examined countries, and as socioeconomic equality falls outside the scope of our research, we focus on the other four principles (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative).

² Notably, civil rights are distinct from human rights. Although democratic backsliding has often been associated with “demonization of adversaries and assaults on the rights of ethnic, racial, religious, or sexual minorities as well,” (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) the issue of human rights remains outside the scope of our study. Some examples will be briefly mentioned when relevant.

Thirdly, the **participatory principle** moves beyond foundational institutional components of democracy to emphasise “active participation by citizens in all political processes, electoral and non-electoral,” (International Democracy Community). The V-Dem Country Radar Chart, which offers a participatory democratic index, indicates how many legal channels of participation a country offers to its citizens and how easy it is for the citizens to utilise them. This broadly entails citizen participation (Maiani, 2011) and emphasises civil society engagement and pluralism at all levels of the political system, especially at the grassroots level. A final and closely related component is the **deliberative principle** of democracy which captures “the process by which decisions are reached in a polity,” (International Democracy Community). In a deliberative democracy, political participation occurs under the circumstances of open dialogue, communication, and political argumentation, which are seen as multilevel processes among informed participants who are open to persuasion and free from coercion or manipulation (Olson, 2011). Political decisions should be consensus-based and formed by public reasoning focused on the common good. Participatory and deliberative regimes build on the electoral and liberal principles, whose fulfilment is taken for granted, and account for social relations on top of political institutions.

Together, electoral and liberal principles comprise what we classify as **institutional components** of democracy. These elements are particularly important for regulation, or the institutional constraints put on the executive which limit the power of the government and allow for accountability and protection of essential civil rights and liberties (Mechkova et al., 2017). Similarly, the deliberative and participatory principles together constitute what we call the **civic components** of democracy. The civic components, reinforced by robust protection of civil liberties under the liberal principle, are particularly critical for contestation, which captures citizens’ ability to not just criticise the incumbent government and compete against it, but also to actively put forward their policy preferences and have them considered equally by the government (Coppedge et al., 2008). Both regulation and contestation are regarded as crucial elements of robust democratic systems.

The relationship between electoral democracy and the other principles is relatively straightforward: As electoral integrity is the cornerstone of any democratic system, the electoral principle is seen as a necessary component in order for a political system to pass the threshold of what is considered (at least minimally) a democratic regime. Hence, liberal democracy as well as participatory and deliberative democracy are all dependent upon the foundational electoral principle.

The civic components, participatory and deliberative principles, are closely related and highly interdependent and, as such, are illustrated here as one collective “sphere” or area of democratic space. Although also considerably interrelated, as illustrated by the overlap between the two spheres, the

relationship between the liberal and participatory/deliberative principles is more nuanced. The institutional components (electoral and liberal principles) must, to a significant extent, be met in order to enable robust participation and deliberation within a democracy. However, as civic participation can still be maintained in systems where civil liberties have been significantly eroded or even lost (Klicperova-Baker & Košťál, 2017), it would be overly simplistic to imagine them as merely well-defined and mutually exclusive levels of democracy. It is typical of countries that experience democratic backsliding that participatory, deliberative, and liberal principles grow and/or shrink in tandem; backsliding in one sphere likely entails backsliding in other spheres as well (V-Dem, 2020).

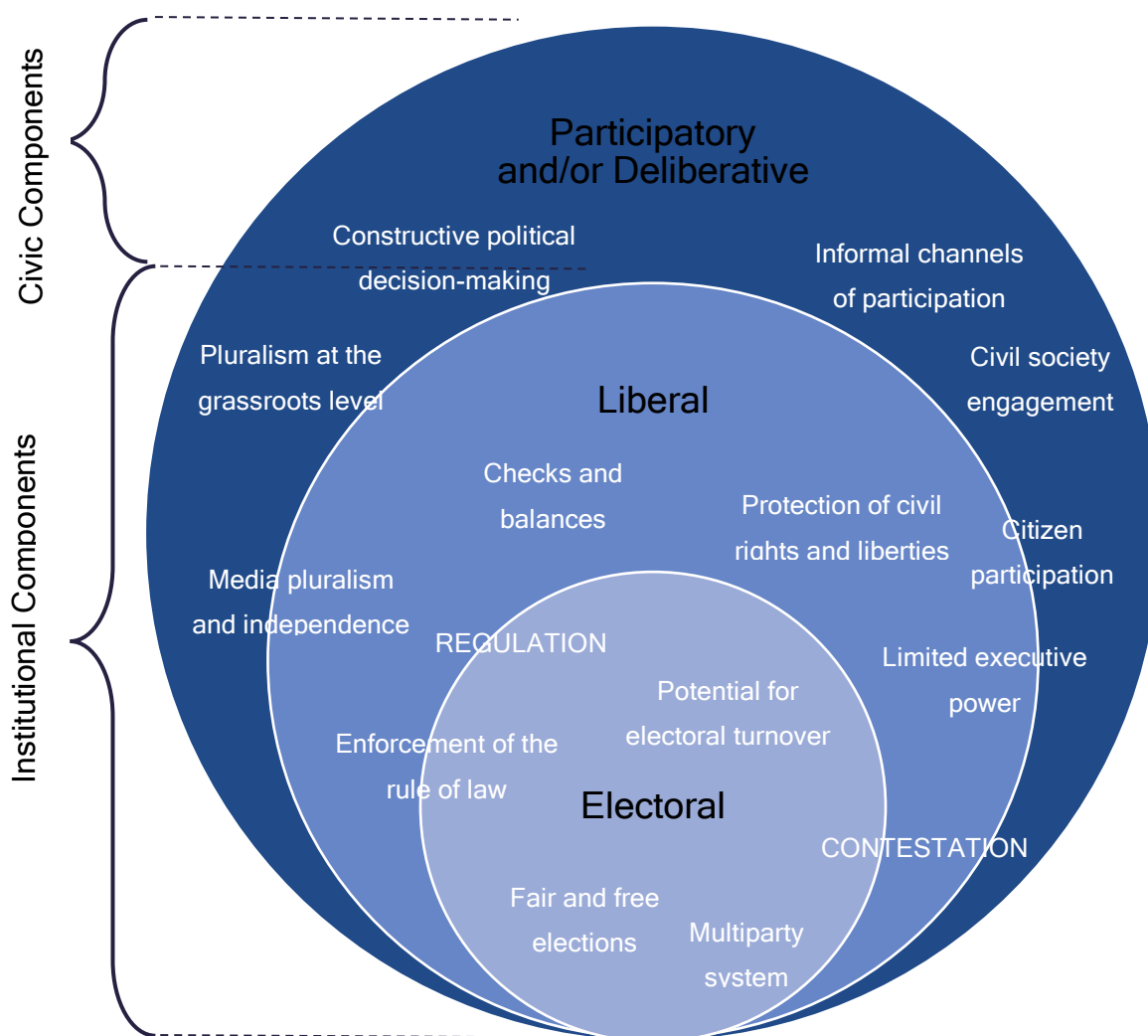


Figure 2b. Principles of democracy: The components in relation.

What is Democratic Backsliding?

As the term democratic backsliding has been used in a variety of different ways, a rigorous definition of the phenomenon will be provided to clarify the basis of the policy suggestions in this brief³. In contemporary political science, the term democratic backsliding is used to refer primarily to “changes in formal or informal institutions that move the polity” away from democratic principles and “in the direction of a hybrid or authoritarian regime” (Cianetti et al., 2018). It is distinct from the concept of a democratic deficit, as it entails a regression from previous measures of democracy and democratic principles. Democratic backsliding can best be conceptualised as an active process of democratic regression driven by incumbent politicians that, if extreme enough, can lead to democratic breakdown into autocracy, or autocratisation (Lührmann et al., 2018). Building on the V-Dem principles (2019; 2020) as well as the Regimes of the World (RoW) classification (Lührmann et al., 2018), we conceptualise democratic backsliding as follows:

Illustration of Democratic Backsliding

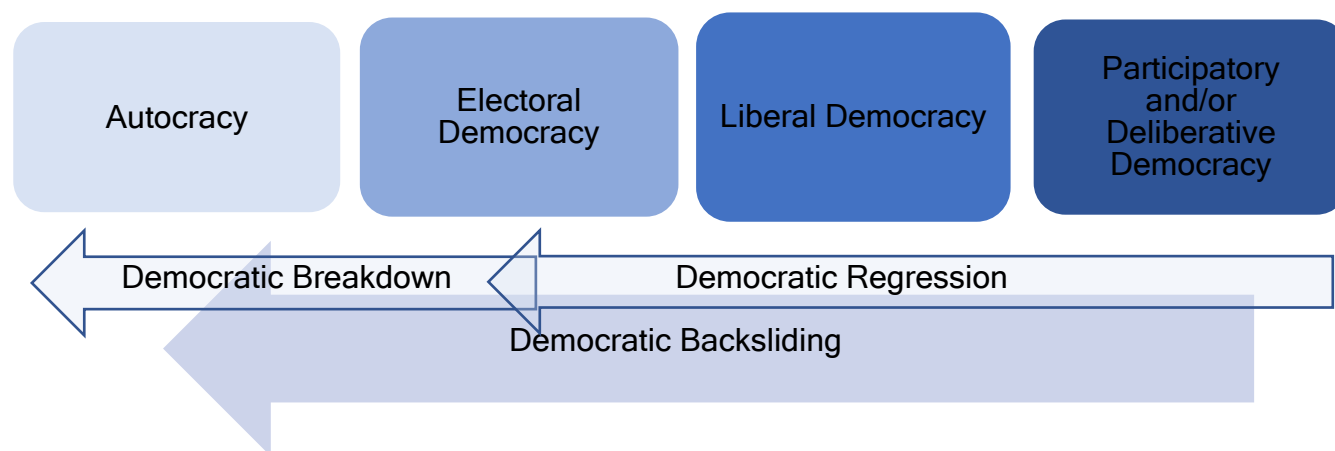


Figure 2c. Illustration of Democratic Backsliding.

At the formal, institutional, level democratic backsliding is taken to be a definite institutional movement away from liberal democracy (Cassani & Tomini, 2020). In the EU, such debilitation takes place primarily in the form of “executive aggrandisement”, whereby elected politicians persistently weaken the checks on their executive power, eventually leading to withering away of the possibility of regulating the

³ Yet it is important to note that many of these definitions are contested and/or require further research, as they are ongoing developments.

government (Coppedge, 2017). Parallel to the institutional trends, civic space is also coming under threat in a growing number of countries. This happens as previously open civic space is being shrunk by “restrictive legislation, repression of dissent, and/or political violence” as well as through co-optation, or “conquering,” of civil society by illiberal parties, leaders, and supporters of the regime in power (Greskovits, 2015; Klicperova-Baker & Košťál, 2017). The changes reduce the capacity and space for contestation and weaken the participatory and deliberative democratic principles (Bugarič, 2015).

The transformation entailed by democratic backsliding may take place in a relatively short period of time, but it is often characterised by a large number of seemingly unproblematic, incremental alterations to the law that combine to form a decisive effect (Scheppelle, 2013)⁴. As all four democratic principles overlap and interact, democratic backsliding is neither a linear nor a regular process; for example, power-holders can actively undermine civil society engagement (participatory), strength of the rule of law (liberal), and electoral legitimacy (electoral) simultaneously. However, as electoral democracy is the most rudimentary principle of democracy, it is seen as the threshold between regimes classified as democratic or autocratic (Lührmann et al., 2018; cf V-Dem, 2019). In practice therefore, democratic backsliding is recognised as a “state-led debilitation or elimination” of any of these aspects of democracy (Bermeo, 2016). Ultimately, as illustrated by Figure 2c, the process of democratic backsliding can be visualised as one of deliberative shrinking of civic and institutional democratic space.

⁴ It is important to note that typically such antidemocratic measures are, at least initially, supported by a strong electoral mandate and are done through purely legal channels (Bermeo, 2016).

EU RESPONSE TO DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING: OVERVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

Overview: Current EU Response

The distinction between institutional and civic aspects of democracy guides our assessment of the current EU policy response to democratic backsliding. Analysing the EU policies, mechanisms, and recommendations, we therefore distinguish between (i) top-down measures addressing institutional components of democracy and (ii) bottom-up measures addressing civic components of democracy⁵.

Institutional Components | Top-Down Response

Currently, the European Union articulates issues with democratic backsliding primarily within the language of protection of the “rule of law” (Garrido & Castillo, 2019). The different EU organs therefore strive in practice to protect the citizens of member states from arbitrary use of power by incumbent politicians and promote processes of lawfulness in each country. It goes beyond simply the application of law to promote “spirit of the law” which would be based on fundamental rights of the citizens and fairness of the legal process. It should ultimately result in “proper equality before the law,” (Reding, 2013). The Venice Commission more concretely has put forward these core concepts for the general notion of Rule of Law (Carrera et al., 2013): “(i) Legality, (ii) legal certainty, (iii) prohibition of arbitrariness ..., (iv) access to justice for those subject to administrative action before independent and impartial courts; (v) respect for human rights ..., [and] (vi.) non-discrimination and equality before the law.”

The EU policy that aims to uphold these concepts is twofold (European Union, 2020a). On the one hand, prevention and promotion measures include policies aiming to prevent breaches of the rule of law based on an assessment of the situation in member states as well as promotion of the core democratic values of the EU. On the other hand, response and correction measures represent responses to actual breaches of the rule of law. Therefore, they should be used only in the case of failure of the former set of measures (European Union, 2020b). There are several different mechanisms, frameworks, treaties, and reports that fall within these two categories of EU policy and—

⁵ Measures in effect are identifiable in bold print.

although they all work towards the same goal and are largely complementary—they do not form a uniform policy apparatus.

The objectives of the first type of mechanisms—which aim at pre-emptively prohibiting breaches of the rule of law as well as other illiberal measures—are *prevention* of democratic backsliding and *promotion* of democratic principles. The most significant of these measures is the **European Rule of Law Mechanism**. This legislative mechanism serves to facilitate an annual dialogue between the Commission, Parliament, Council and the member states, together with members of civil society on the rule of law. At its heart lies the annual **Rule of Law Report** (European Commission 2020a), which through cooperation among all 27 member states and different stakeholders looks at the developments in the following areas: (i) justice systems, (ii) the anti-corruption framework, (iii) media pluralism and freedom (European Commission 2020b). Correspondingly, the **Cooperation and Verification Mechanism** is a more specific monitoring mechanism invoked by the European Commission for Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 when the two joined the EU, as they still showed shortcomings in the fields of judicial reform, corruption, and organised crime (Amado, 2007). Other monitoring tools include the **EU Justice Scoreboard**, which is an annual comparative information tool focusing on the effectiveness of the justice system (European Commission, 2015). Along with EU inter-institutional annual reporting on fundamental rights and the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** consisting of several EU funded reports which provide different non-binding data outcomes concerning the current state of fundamental rights in member states (Carrera et al., 2013).

Response and *correction* of the erosion of democratic principles and institutions are the objectives of the second type of EU policy addressing democratic backsliding, the most vital policy instruments of which have been primarily concerned with response to the breaches of rule of law. The most robust responsive policy tool is the **Rule of Law Framework**, which allows the European Commission to work with Member States in the case of a systemic threat to the rule of law. It is triggered in the case when the EC decides based on various information sources (including the Rule of Law report) that the authorities in a certain Member State are negatively affecting integrity, stability, or the proper functioning of the key institutions which secure the rule of law. After the triggering point there are three stages (European Commission, 2014): (i) Assessment Stage; (ii) Recommendation Stage (iii) Proposing the usage of Article 7. **Article 7 of the TEU** is the “nuclear option” of the EU response to breaches of rule of law and is resorted to only when the Rule of Law Framework has failed. The Council acting as a qualified majority may suspend certain rights of the Member State in question (Article 7 TEU, 2012). Supplementing this are the **Infringement Procedures**. These empower the European Commission to transform breaches of the rule of law into legal proceedings in front of the European Court of Justice against the suspected Member State. If the Member State fails to comply with the Judgement under

Article 260 the Commission proposes financial penalties as a disincentive for the Member State to change its behaviour (European Commission, 2013).

Civic Components | Bottom-Up Response

The EU has made moderate efforts to promote the civic component of democracy. Different European institutions have recognised the importance of civil society organisations (CSOs) in various ways. Civil society organisations in established democracies have multiple positive effects on the quality of democracy (Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013; Uhlin, 2009). First, on the institutional level, they connect citizens to the political systems through representations of social groups and articulations of their interests. In the articulation process, they are the intermediaries between the state and society. They can also control and limit the state power by being a countervailing force, thus enhancing government accountability. Thirdly, they consolidate democracy by strengthening the public support for democratic norms. Scholars have pointed out that attitudes towards democracy are to a large extent developed within civil society. They can also strengthen the individual capacity for political participation. From a participatory democracy standpoint, it is a crucial pillar.

There are various forms of CSOs. For example, advocacy civil society and recreational civil society (Uhlin, 2009), which provide equally important but different pro-democratic functions. The *advocacy civil society* tends to have moderately large organisations involved in political and/or social activities concentrating on representing interest groups or constituencies and interacting between the state and the political society. For instance, these civil society organisations may focus on human rights, social welfare, the environment and women's rights. They are crucial for the institutional aspect of democracy as they are particularly significant in the interest articulation functions as well as in checking and limiting the state power. Thus, they are important in dealing with politics in general but barely affect the individual perspectives of democracy. The *recreational civil society* is made up of rather small organisations concentrating on apolitical and recreational activities that enhance individuals to use their voice. These organisations perform as a “school of democracy” where people can strengthen democracy through the promotion of democratic norms and improving the individual capacity for political participation. Consequently, both types of civil society organisations have democratic-strengthening qualities and are needed in an established democracy.

The European efforts on promoting good governance democracy have primarily focused on the EU's *development and neighbourhood policies* (Krajewski et al., 2020). The European Council has adopted a number of initiatives such as the “Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations” and “The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations”. The EU's engagement with CSOs in external relations have shown that the EU is committed

to a resilient and empowered civil society, as they are crucial to support good governance and the rule of law in any democracy. The *European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights* (EIDHR) finances human rights, democratic reforms and political participation and representation projects and programmes, as well as grants funds for CSOs, non-governmental organisations, and human rights defenders outside of the EU. Others such as the European Endowment for Democracy, the European Neighbourhood Instrument, and the Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility provide financial backing for civil society actors in third countries.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) recognised that civic democracy remains underutilised and unexplored against the illiberal political forces that offer a reinterpretation of principles such as democracy (European Commission, 2020). The Committee has fully acknowledged that democratic backsliding has become a severe threat in several Member States, and therefore has called for a more comprehensive mechanism that focuses on the civil components. A few measures have been implemented. First, the EESC set up the *Liaison Group* to provide a framework for political dialogue and cooperation between CSOs and European institutions, improving civil dialogue and promoting participatory and deliberative democracy (European Economic and Social Committee, 2017). Thus, CSOs can discuss and shape the EU agenda and decision-making process. Second, the EESC created the ad hoc group on *Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law* (FRRL) in 2018 as a horizontal body. The FRRL set out to enhance the contribution of CSOs in strengthening fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law and countering the phenomenon of shrinking civic space. The group covers the following areas: freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression (including freedom of media), non-discrimination, and the rule of law as the guarantor of fundamental rights. The group intends to provide a report on every Member States, but so far has examined Romania, Poland, Hungary, Austria, France, Bulgaria and Italy. Crucially, the FRRL does not provide exhaustive responses or final conclusions on any given topic (EESC, 2020). It solely seeks to highlight trends and promote European and national dialogues on fundamental rights and the rule of law. However, this development of dialogue between EU institutions, national authority and civil societies does not provide comprehensive policies to counter democratic backsliding.

Despite these measures, addressing the civic components of democracy has remained limited to recommendations. The EESC (2017) has called for better civil dialogue and access to funds, underlining that financial backing for CSOs is crucial for participatory democracy, and a genuine dialogue with civil society must be implemented. The Committee has also called for the establishment of a political and legal framework at the EU and national level to protect the development and the independence of European CSOs. Additionally, the EECs has recommended the creation of an EU Ombudsman on civic space freedom to whom CSOs report any problems related to harassments or obstructions of their work; this would require the Commission to react swiftly with significant measures, including infringement

procedures against countries, when national administrative and legal provisions hinder the open-access of national CSOs to EU funds. Moreover, the EESC (2017) has also called upon the budget authorities to increase resources, including grants and multi-annual financing and to guarantee that voluntary work is fairly valued in the financial regulations. Similar to the European Endowment for Democracy, the EESC recommends that the Commission establish a “European Fund for Democracy, Human Rights, and Values” within the EU with ambitious financing which is directly accessible for CSOs across Europe. Finally, the Committee recommended that the Europe for Citizens programme should be resourced with a budget of EUR 500 million under the new MFF. However, the European Commission only invested EUR 305 million in the new programme, which is even less than the financial envelope for the 2014-2020 MFF that amounts to 377 million (European Parliament, 2020).

Assessment of the Current EU Response: The Missing Civic Component

Overall, the EU response to efforts to undermine the institutional components of democracy in Member States, primarily the rule of law, has been largely comprehensive. The limited effectiveness of the EU policy therefore should not solely be attributed to the weaknesses of the measures employed in the institutional realm. Rather, as discussed in detail below, what explains it is the EU’s sole focus on the institutional realm of democracy and its failure to see beyond the institutional components of democracy. Hence, in order to ensure greater effectiveness of EU policy—both with respect to prevention and response to backsliding—the institutional measures discussed above need to be complemented by bottom-up mechanisms to protect civic components of democracy. While some efforts have been made in recognition of the importance of civic components, such as CSOs’ critical role within democracies, this aspect of the EU’s response remains underutilised and underdeveloped.

Institutional Components: Comprehensive Response, Limited Effectiveness

The aforementioned mechanisms represent a robust set of measures intended to uphold the rule of law and democratic values within the European Union. Several advantages of this comprehensive approach taken by the EU are specifically worth flagging. First, the EU deserves credit for mobilising a range of different policy tools to achieve these goals. Be it through “social” measures under the Rule of Law Framework or the Justice Scoreboard, or measures threatening more serious material consequences—such as the infringement procedures or Article 7 TEU—the EU has sought to influence Member States to refrain from actions that might have negative implications for democracy. This has maximised the

chances of achieving meaningful policy change in Member States as well as demonstrated the EU determination to safeguard rule of law and democracy. Notably, the use of these measures has been highly public, potentially deterring other states from undertaking illiberal reforms at home. It is also important to note that the incremental nature of EU policy response has meant that countries have had room to improve their policy, without risking further condemnation from the EU. At the same time, governments which have continued undermining checks and balances at home, have been made aware that continued violations will be met by an increasingly harsh response.

Nevertheless, despite its comprehensive scope and engagement of different tools and EU bodies, this approach produced limited effects. The failure of the preventative framework is perhaps best illustrated by the need to trigger a number of responsive measures in order to halt continued violations in countries such as Poland and Hungary, and, to a lesser extent, Czechia and Slovakia. Such limited effectiveness, however, shows that insufficient attention has been paid to embedding strong democratic norms and institutions, as opposed to intervening once these have been undermined. The EU needs to take a more proactive approach in order to prevent future violations. Furthermore, some of the measures intended to deter member states from violations have suffered from a credibility deficit. For example, due to a range of political and institutional obstacles, Article 7 TEU has long been considered to be largely out of reach (Sedelmeier, 2014). In light of the recent Polish-Hungarian alliance—both of which have vowed to veto deployment of sanctions against their ally—introducing sanctioning measures under Article 7 has become virtually impossible. This challenge is closely related to the negative aspect of the high publicity of EU policy—as other countries have witnessed EU’s failures, this has further diminished the deterrent effect of this measure. Furthermore, the time-consuming and bureaucratic nature of the process has meant that an effective response to rule of law backsliding had often been unnecessarily delayed, which allowed countries to embed reforms to rule of law institutions in the meantime (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). In the recent years, however, the EU has both improved the speed of its response to democratic backsliding in the institutional realm as well as broadened the range of policy option, e.g., by resorting to the use of infringement procedures in response for calls from the scholars and policy experts to do so (Ibid).

Civic Components: Limited Response, Limited Effectiveness

Democratic backsliding with respect to the civic components of democracy has often received less attention from the media, international organisations, and academic literature as compared to the institutional components. Perhaps unsurprisingly, so too has the erosion of civic space “long stayed under the radar of the EU,” (Greskovits, 2015). Despite the comprehensive response to institutional components of democratic backsliding, policies aimed at addressing the civic components of democracy

have remained mostly limited to recommendations, which are yet to materialise into binding and enforceable measures. Although the EU has various established and well-funded mechanisms to finance CSOs and promote civic space in third countries, the EESC (2017) has underlined the EU's shortcomings in resourcing CSOs within Member States. The well-established and generously funded EIDHR, European Endowment for Democracy, European Neighbourhood Instrument, and Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility all indicate the EU's recognition of the importance of civic space and CSOs in the of promotion democracy, but these funds and resources have only remained available to third countries, leaving little room for the protection of civic democracy within the EU. Currently, CSOs within EU Member States cannot benefit from EU financing for their programmes as structural funding. Access to EU financial support is quite challenging for many organisations as the procedures are cumbersome. Projects that can enhance the participatory democracy component at the EU level are not well financially backed. Additionally, the EU struggles with transparency and consistency with audit procedures due to differing interpretation of regulations and lack of harmonisation. Overall, comprehensive measures to strengthen the civic component of democracy have therefore been missing from the EU strategy, which helps explain the limited effects of EU policy. Addressing this gap in EU policy is therefore crucial to the success of EU measures to remedy democratic backsliding, and therefore to fostering a culture defined by democratic norms and values within the EU.

Case Studies: Democratic Backsliding in EU Member States

Poland

In response to the actions of the Polish government, the European Union has taken significant measures to protect Polish democracy. While these efforts have been unprecedented in their scale, they have nevertheless only addressed a limited range of issues and have brought about unsatisfactory results. The bulk of the measures taken by the EU has concerned the judicial reforms and rule of law violations. On three occasions throughout 2016-2017, the EU issued Rule of Law Recommendations to the Polish government, citing systemic threat to the rule of law in Poland (EC 2017). In December 2017, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe adopted two landmark opinions on the judicial reforms in

Poland, critical of the reforms. In the same month, the EU triggered the Article 7(1) TEU, supported by a resolution by the European Parliament (EC 2017). The EU has also launched four infringement procedures in total, which have addressed, respectively, the Law on Ordinary Courts, the Law on the Supreme Court, the disciplinary regime for judges, and the legislation prohibiting judges from criticising the judicial reforms (European Commission, 2020; Wanat, 2020). The Court of Justice of the EU has also repeatedly ruled against Poland, ordering it to halt or reverse portions of the reform. Most recently, in April 2020, a CJEU ruling ordered the suspension of the functioning of the Disciplinary Chamber of the Polish Supreme Court. These measures, however,

have had limited success. With the exception of the changes made to the Law on the Supreme Court, following an CJEU ruling on this issue, the Polish government had not acted on the measures launched by either body of the EU and has continued to push on with the reforms in violation of the European law (Ejchart-Dubois, 2019; Jałoszewski, 2020; Stankiewicz, 2018). While, as shown above, the EU has taken a wide range of measures designed to safeguard democracy in Poland, the topical scope of these actions has in fact been very narrow. Indeed, these pertain only to issues of the rule of law. No serious actions have been taken by the EU to protect other key aspects of the democratic system such as the exercise of civil liberties, media pluralism, or space for civil society. While EU representatives and institutions have expressed concern over some of the abuses of the Polish government in these respects, there has been no effort to exert tangible pressure on the Polish government. Notably, when these issues are addressed, it is in relation to the rule of law and institutional reforms. For example, in the 2020 Rule of Law Report limited effort is made to elaborate on these issues. While the report touches on issues such as media pluralism, however, it focuses largely on the legal framework which provides for its existence as well as laws that pre-date the PiS government and does not deal with the repeated recent attempts at reducing pluralism and increasing political control. Such overlooking of the issues of civil liberties and civic participation represents an important weakness of the EU strategy to safeguard democracy in Poland.

Hungary

The EU is gradually alert to the ongoing systematic challenges to the rule of law in Hungary, however, it has not taken significant steps to protect the Hungarian democracy. The divergence of Hungary from democratic norms was first highlighted by the Tavares report adopted by the European Parliament in 2013 (Ágh, 2016) which criticised Hungary's Fundamental Laws and its subsequent amendments, arguing that they were in violation of the European fundamental values of liberty, democracy and the rule of law. The Tavares (2013) report highlighted the need to resolve the so-called "Copenhagen dilemma"—i.e., that the EU requires a strong commitment and compliance with common values and standards on the part of candidate countries but lacks effective monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms once they have joined—through establishing the Copenhagen Commission which could guarantee member states' compliance with common values proclaimed by Article 2 TEU. Similarly, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe provided various opinions and forced the Hungarian government to amend laws. For instance, following the Commission opinion, the provisions of the Media Act relating to the appointment and dismissal of the chairperson and members of the Media Council were amended. More recently, in September 2018, the European Parliament initiated the procedure related to Article 7 (1) of the Treaty on the European Union by voting on the Sargentini Report. The report prepared by Green MP Judith Sargentini highlights the most important violations that

have happened in the country, including “concerns regarding the constitutional and electoral system; the independence of the judiciary, corruption; privacy and data protection; freedom of expression; academic independence; freedom of religion and association; the right to equal treatment; the rights of minorities, migrants, asylum seekers

and refugees; and the abolition of economic and social rights,” (Sargentini, 2018). It served as a strong warning for the Hungarian Government that its autocratic actions are not tolerated within the EU. Nevertheless, triggering Article 7 failed to have a significant impact on democratic backsliding in Hungary.

SWOT Analysis of EU policy

The following matrix (Figure 3a) and table (Figure 3b) comprise the results of our SWOT analysis of the EU’s response to democratic backsliding in its Member States. SWOT analysis is a strategic planning technique used to identify the following four characteristics of policy: (i) *strengths*, i.e. internal characteristics that represent the advantageous elements of policy, (ii) *weaknesses*, i.e. negative elements internal to a policy strategy, (iii) *opportunities*, i.e. favourable elements of the external environment which can be used to build successful policy, (iv) *threats*, i.e. the elements of the external environment that can be unfavourable or harmful to the project. Conclusions are addressed in the next section along with recommendations in the form of policy proposals.

SWOT Matrix

	Helpful To achieving the objective	Harmful To achieving the objective
Internal: Attributable to the policy	Strengths 1. Various tools for exerting pressure. 2. The incremental approach of the policy. 3. External Arbitration. 4. Multiple institutional channels 5. Direct engagement with member states. 6. Visibility of the process. 7. Democratic values are entrenched in EU policy.	Weaknesses 1. Limited scope of the policy. 2. The policy is primarily negative. 3. The possibility of national backlash. 4. The process is bureaucratic and time-consuming. 5. The particular interest of political agents might undermine the process.
External: Attributable to the environment	Opportunities	Threats

	1. Room to engage more actors. 2. Room for a more comprehensive strategy.	1. Limited legitimacy. 2. Policy capture. 3. Counter-deterrence.
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Figure 3a. The SWOT matrix.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths	1. Various tools for exerting pressure. The EU legislative framework offers myriad tools to apply different forms of pressure. These can be broadly categorised into material pressure (including CJEU rulings, Infringement Procedures, Article 7 framework), which threaten economic and political consequences, and social pressure (including the Rule of Law dialogue, EP resolutions, The EU Justice Scoreboard) which operates through discourse and social sanctions (Sedelmeier, 2017). 2. The incremental approach of the policy. This variety of forms of pressure allows the EU to approach democratic backsliding incrementally and with local sensitivity. More serious transgressions are to be met with harder forms of sanctions which gives states time to respond and make domestic changes before more serious measures are put in place. There is also the possibility of addressing specific sectors (e.g., the media, the judiciary, etc.). 3. External Arbitration. The European Commission, the primary institution in charge of the implementation of EU measures such as sanctions, acts as an external, unbiased actor, as specified by the European Union Treaties (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012). This reduced politicisation of the body lends legitimacy to its actions. 4. Multiple institutional channels. The legitimacy of the proceedings of the European Union is further enhanced by the significant number of different channels that can exert influence, including the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Court of Justice and the Court of Justice of the European Union. The involvement of various channels ensure that the policy is applied in a broad and comprehensive manner, and that no state is treated differently. 5. Direct engagement with member states. The EU has the ability to engage directly with individual member states and provide assistance (mainly in terms of policy recommendations) to address context-specific issues. This has been particularly successful in the case of the perceived breach of EU values in Romania (2012), where the EC has presented a list of 11 measures to President Ponta, which were seen as necessary to restore the rule of law (Sedelmeier, 2014). 6. The visibility of the process. The EU policy is highly publicised, which creates visibility and transparency of specific EU measures and sheds light on the transgressions of particular regimes. Such public nature of the EU measures puts social pressure on member states to adhere to EU recommendations, while deterring other governments from engaging in transgressions in the future.
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	7. Democratic values are entrenched in EU policy. The policy for safeguarding against democratic backsliding is firmly entrenched within a wider system of European Values (Article 2 TEU, 2012). This makes it possible to make a deep-rooted assessment of particular government behaviour against firmly stated benchmarks, such as commitment to human rights, equality, and democracy (Scheppele et al., 2020).
Weaknesses	1. Limited scope of the policy. The EU's legal framework focuses primarily on the rule of law in the member states when dealing with democratic backsliding, which means that it is not comprehensive. Emphasis on building a vibrant civil society or improvement of the quality of deliberation within the countries are absent from the framework (Gora & Wilde, 2020). 2. The policy is primarily negative. The EU policy is largely passive, focusing on responding to transgressions rather than active preventative efforts. The EU employs the policy primarily through different forms of pressure, but under-emphasises positive endeavours that might aid entrenchment of democratic values in individual member states (Blauberger and Kelemen, 2016). 3. The possibility of national backlash. External intervention from the European Union might be interpreted as infringing upon sovereignty of a given member state. This might further impede the legitimacy of the process, leading the population to rally behind the transgressing government in response, potentially leading to unintended consequences and threatening anti-EU backlash (Schlipphak and Treib, 2016). 4. The process is bureaucratic and time-consuming. Particularly the material sanctions under Article 7 are difficult to use due to the technical nature of the voting procedure (unanimity rule) as well as other institutional and political obstacles (Sedelmeier, 2014). 5. Particular interests of political agents might undermine the process. The policy efficiency might be hindered by actions of parties in the European Parliament or by member states themselves, who seek to achieve their particular political objectives. The issue has been especially salient in the recent veto of the EU covid budget by Hungary and Poland over the “Rule of Law clause.”
Opportunities	1. Room to engage more actors. The EU policy is currently a product primarily of its internal policy-making processes, whose transparency is often limited, as well as political processes, i.e. negotiations between member states. There are, however, a number of actors—such as local civil society actors, including non-governmental organisations—who have expressed their openness to working with the EU and who could greatly contribute to EU efforts. The EU could seek their expertise to gain a better understanding of the situation on the ground as well as possible solutions that would best suit the complex and unique local contexts. 2. Room for more comprehensive efforts (especially of bottom-up nature). The EU policy is currently limited to primarily addressing institutional symptoms of democratic backsliding. There is room for the EU to expand these efforts stimulating the

	deliberative and participatory elements of democracy, most notably through direct engagement with civil society organisations, which can help both prevent further backsliding and establish a stable bedrock of sustainable democratic systems by protecting individual and civil rights.
Threats	1. Risk of limited legitimacy. The EU policy is currently at risk of gaining only limited legitimacy among member-state governments and non-governmental actors as well as the public opinion. This is primarily due to the threat of perceived infringement on the sovereignty of individual member states. 2. Threat of policy capture. Policy capture by member-state governments or other actors—e.g., through blocking policy using the veto power—threatens derailing the EU efforts at introducing comprehensive policy, specifically one which requires unanimous agreement. 3. Counter-deterrence. The public nature of the EU policy means that any policy failure will be observed by member states. Specifically, failure to respond in a timely and effective manner to democratic backsliding risks undermining the credibility of such efforts in the future, and therefore diminishing the deterrence effect. At the same time, shedding light on violations of individual states which are not met by EU sanctions might inspire other states to follow their path, causing a “counter-deterrence” effect.

Figure 3b. SWOT analysis.

BEYOND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the analysis of the EU policy response to democratic backsliding has shown, while the EU has put in place comprehensive measures intended to halt backsliding at the institutional level, a bottom-up approach focused on civic democracy remains underexplored and underutilised. In Member States experiencing democratic backsliding, CSOs are increasingly met with opposition from national governments and/or have insufficient resources. This has prevented them from playing an active role in the socio-political sphere, resulting in setbacks to working for the specific causes an organization is fighting for. In light of these findings, we develop four policy proposals as concrete recommendations for the EU that go beyond protection of the formal institutions of liberal democracy to facilitate the promotion and protection of democracy from the bottom-up through civil society.

Policy Proposals

Policy Recommendations: An Overview

<i>CSO Funding Mechanism for EU Member States</i>	This policy proposes: (i) creating an application-based funding scheme for European civil society organizations that directly transfers the awarded funds to the organization representative who completed the application, (ii) ensuring that the proposed funding scheme reaches all corners of the EU, and to also ensure that it reaches organizations that need these funds the most (have faced national oppression and/or seizure of funds/resources).
<i>Promoting Civil Society Self-Sufficiency</i>	To prevent and resolve the implications of resource restrictions, this proposal focuses on strengthening the self-sufficiency of CSOs in order to intensify their resilience under economic pressures. The means introduced follow a twofold approach: steering the provision of services by the CSOs as well as incentivising CSO donations within a philanthropic-oriented environment.

<i>Ombudsman for Civic Space</i>	This initiative proposes the creation of an Ombudsman for civic space in EU Member States, linked to the Rule of Law Report, that would ensure the protection of civic space and safeguard participatory and deliberative democracy in member states.
<i>Civic Education Initiatives</i>	This policy proposal introduces the organization of exchanges and interactive learning, the exploration of Youth European Identity and the support of educational workforce and exchange as ways to tackle democratic backsliding by promoting civic culture and developing a European identity in EU member states through educational reforms.

Figure 4a. A summary of the policy recommendations.

Policy Proposal 1: CSO Funding Mechanism for EU Member States

EU-sponsored funding and grants that are directly given to such organizations would help ensure that national governments do not have the ability to interfere or block funding to CSOs. In 2017, the European and Economic Social Committee (EESC) recommended that the European Commission support EU relations with civil society and community organizations (European Economic and Social Committee, 2017). Currently, the Commission is working to establish funding opportunities under the 2021-2027 Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV). The CERV initiative along with a CSO Funding Mechanism should be implemented in a timely manner and the protection of democracy through civil engagement should be prioritised (European Commission, 2018). This objective is to create available funds that are specifically geared towards CSOs operating in EU Member States to concentrate funding for the targeted type of civil organizations. In addition to the funding scheme, the EU itself should publish details of how organizations can apply online including more information about the application process. A bottom up approach to encourage civic engagement would aid the outcome of increased democratic participation in member states, and support such as an EU-sponsored funding scheme would securely encourage and financially guide civil society groups with the goal of reaching underserved organizations in some member states.

Objective 1.1: Develop a funding scheme to support civil society organisations

The EU should create an application-based funding scheme for European civil society organizations that directly transfers awarded funds to the organization, bypassing politically-motivated interference from national governments. When such organizations are properly funded and supported, they operate more effectively and help to strengthen participatory and deliberative elements of democracy. This, in

turn, fosters a bottom-up approach in Member States that are facing democratic backsliding. The scheme is targeted toward CSOs in Member States that face bureaucratic or political challenges and/or blocking of funds from national governments, but applications are open to organisations from any member states. Therefore, precedence should be given to the Member States facing the most acute threats to civic democracy.

CSOs operating in EU Member States whose mission and work increase democratic participation and/or civil competence would be eligible to apply. Modelled partially after the EU's strategic funding mechanism to promote democracy and human rights in third countries, the proposed internal funding body should provide funding that "support[s] civil society organisations in the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms," (European Union, 2014). This funding scheme could be modelled after the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, which provides ad-hoc grants of up to €10,000 to CSOs in third countries and which had a 2014-2020 budget of €1.332 billion (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2021). Amounts of €10,000 - €30,000 should be offered and, depending on the number of applications, the funding will be distributed appropriately on a needs-basis and decided upon by a neutral committee.

Objective 1.2: Ensure funding scheme is published online for transparency & accessibility, along with monitoring of funds & fund outcomes

It should be ensured that the proposed funding scheme reaches all Member States of the EU and also that it reaches organizations that need these funds the most (have faced national oppression and/or seizure of funds/resources). An EU-official website containing all terms of the scheme and application details such as the application due date and explanation of why this scheme exists will be included. The webpage shall be translated in all EU languages to ensure equal access across Europe. After applications are collected, a neutral committee will decide upon grant allocations on a needs-basis. Awarded grant funding is to be directly given to the organisation, and a follow-up report regarding the usage of the awarded funds could be provided to the EU during and after the duration of the grant.

To assist with monitoring of funds, an Integrity Pact can be included in the terms of applying in the case of securing a grant, perhaps provided by the organization Transparency International (Transparency International, 2021). Integrity Pacts are already in use in EU countries in coordination with Transparency International, acting as a mechanism that commits the receiving party "to comply with best practice and maximum transparency" (ibid). This would help to assure the EU that funds are being properly utilised by the CSO recipients.

Policy Proposal 2: Promoting Civil Society Self-Sufficiency

CSOs have been the target of discriminatory measures employed by governments and resulting in their destabilisation, degradation of output and, eventually, manipulation through weaponisation of public funding. Perceiving CSOs as a threat is another indication of democratic backsliding, since, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Assembly and Association and the Venice Commission, the right to access funding is intertwined with the right of freedom of association (Human Rights House Foundation, 2019; Negri, 2020). To prevent and resolve the implications of resource restrictions, the proposal focuses on strengthening the self-sufficiency of CSOs in order to intensify their resilience under economic pressure. The means introduced follow a two-fold approach; steering the provision of services by the CSOs as well as incentivising CSO donations in Member States through philanthropic-oriented incentives for donors.

Objective 2.1: Steering the provision of diversified services by CSOs

As a way of minimising dependency on nationally-allocated public funding, CSOs could diversify their fundraising strategies. Some examples of income generation activities that could contribute towards the goal of self-sufficiency are membership fees, service fees, sales of goods, renting of premises, and development of online platforms for international donors (Divjak & Forbici, 2017). However, the lack of specialised personnel and seed capital as well as the unfavourable economic conditions of some Member States may hinder any novel activities. Comprehensive guidelines could be the product of consultation between the CSOs and the EESC ensuring the adjustment of the guidelines to the needs and capabilities of each CSOs. After the launch of the economic activity, the EESC could continue monitoring, and consult the CSOs in terms of best practices, technical advice, and exchange of information.

Objective 2.2: EU encouragement of stronger philanthropic culture in recipient states

As a way to promote CSOs' self-sufficiency, a set of guidelines should be created and promoted by the EU to be implemented by Member States. Firstly, the guidelines could touch upon the tax policy of Member States. As an example, the German model introduces tax incentives to free profits of public benefit organizations from corporate and commercial tax (Sator, 2010). Drawing on these tax policies, similar incentives could be developed for raising the funding available for CSOs and, hence, their self-sufficiency in other Member States. Furthermore, private funding increases the independence of CSOs from the government and therefore, it is essential in making CSOs resilient against challenges to civic space. Therefore, Member States could encourage corporate and private philanthropy by providing organisations and individuals providing monetary contributions to CSOs with tax benefits. Moreover, governments should also engage in raising national appeals for CSOs and in the conduct of awareness campaigns on existing tax incentives. The guidelines should also encourage cooperation with and inclusion of CSOs in policymaking.

Policy Proposal 3: Ombudsman for Civic Space

In order to facilitate democratic participation and civic engagement in member states of the European Union, an EU Ombudsman for Civic Space Freedoms should be established to help regulate and oversee developments in the nongovernmental and civil society organization (NGO/CSO) sphere. In line with the EU value of transparency, the Ombudsman would provide a mechanism of reporting maladministration of public authorities (in this case, national and subnational governments) to an independent and impartial body at the EU level. Complaints including, for example, “unreasonable delay, failure to follow established policy or procedures, lack of impartiality, unfairness, giving inaccurate information or advice, [or] inconsistency” as well as “harassment or restriction of” NGO and CSOs’ work would be processed and evaluated by the Ombudsman (European Economic and Social Committee, 2017; European Ombudsman, 2021). With existing support from the European Economic and Social Committee to create an EU Ombudsman, this initiative would aid a bottom-up approach to engaging civic participation by ensuring the protection of civic space and, hence, safeguarding participatory and deliberative democracy in member states (Ibid). Furthermore, linking an annual “Ombudsman Report”, which explicitly includes civic components, to the current Rule of Law Report would ensure both civic and institutional components of democracy are considered in the EU’s assessment of democratic backsliding in its Member States.

Objective 3.1: Establishment of EU Ombudsman for CSOs

Establish an official EU oversight body to support European CSOs and process incident reports from CSOs that have been targeted/restricted from carrying out their work. This body would serve as an EU-mandated body with which CSOs (and individuals in affiliation with CSOs) could register any incidents or violations. By creating a streamline and straightforward process for filing complaints, interference of CSOs’ work in EU Member States would be discouraged. There is already an established EU Ombudsman that covers protections of EU citizens if they have claims against an institutional body of the EU (European Ombudsman, 2021). We suggest extending the reach of the current EU Ombudsman to explicitly include CSOs. A section should be added to the EU Ombudsman website to inform ensure transparency and availability of information to European citizens and CSOs on the Ombudsman and how it can protect their civic space

Objective 3.2: Ombudsman Reporting Process

The proposed Ombudsman would produce yearly reports of the CSOs supported, including a history of incident reports with details of how they were resolved as well as parties involved. This contributes to maintaining the transparency and legitimacy of the Ombudsman while also analysing the tangible outcomes seen from their support. It would also provide transparent and accessible “best practices” for addressing encroachment on civic space freedoms. The Ombudsman Report could also be tied to the

Rule of Law Report to provide a more comprehensive overview of democratic backsliding in EU member states. Implemented in 2017, the Rule of Law Report was developed in response to democratic backsliding in EU Member States and “presents a synthesis of both the rule of law situation in the EU and an assessment of the situation in each Member State” as it pertains to “the justice system, the anti-corruption framework, media pluralism and other institutional issues related to checks and balances,” (European Commission, 2020). Hence, the Rule of Law Report is primarily concerned with institutional components of democracy. Civil society is mentioned only in relation to formal institutional components, like checks and balances, civil liberties, and media pluralism (European Commission. Directorate General for Justice and Consumers, 2020). By incorporating an Ombudsman Report specifically for civic space and CSOs, which would comprehensively address civic components of democracy and civic space freedoms, this would strengthen the Rule of Law Report as well as the EU’s overall approach to democratic backsliding.

Policy Proposal 4: Civic Education Initiatives

Education at all levels is a decisive component for the establishment of civic culture and the development of an active EU citizenship. The enhancement of these attributes could act as a preventive measure against democratic backsliding and subversion of the rule of law. The EU has an active role in the promotion of a European dimension in education, “the idea of education to, for and about Europe” (Diestro Fernández & Garcia Blanco, 2016). The European Education Area (EEA) encompasses the Commission’s initiatives for the fostering of participation in society. The resources for the realisation of these initiatives by 2025 are derived from the European structural and investment funds (European Commission, 2018a). An integral part of the EEA is the European policy cooperation in Education and Training that implements tools and instruments for the exchange of information and best practices among member states, aiming at the cultivation of active citizenship for all stages and contexts of education (European Commission, 2018b). Despite addressing identity and active citizenship objectives, the framework is lacking concrete proposals with a bottom-up approach. Consequently, the following policy recommendations aim to empower the organisational flexibility of extracurricular activities for the education institutions, employing some of the already existing EU projects.

Objective 4.1: Enhancing civic competencies to school students

Civic competencies are identified as the life-long skills contributing to the participation of an individual in their political life with an emphasis on one’s rights and duties (Print & Lange, 2013). A society based on democratic values, social responsibility and constructive interaction among its members is immune to any attempt of downgrading democracy and its institutions. Experiential learning activities in a multicultural context could enhance and promote the understanding of the students for their future role in society, and especially in the European community, as they exchange ideas and experiences with

other peers. Starting from the lower educational level, school is a fruitful ground for developing civic competencies for an active European citizenship from a young age. One of the existing projects aimed at the promotion of transnational contact is the E-twinning platform, funded by the Commission as part of the Erasmus+ project that connects schools from Europe and beyond in order to participate in common projects. Despite the flexibility of this online workplace, E-twinning lacks human interaction and active student engagement since teachers are the main point of contact between schools (Loncar, 2021). To tackle the shortcomings and build upon the already-existing E-twinning projects, schools could organise summer visits and extracurricular student exchanges with their E-twinning partners. Such engagements would allow students to learn about the customs of the visiting country and discuss on topics of the public sphere, developing their political awareness, critical thinking and multicultural understanding. The new initiative could fall under the Erasmus+ umbrella and be organised by the institutions themselves through the E-twinning platform.

An additional objective targeted at school students is the enhancement of their role as active European citizens, through cognitive mobilisation (Ciaglia et al., 2018). For dealing effectively with the knowledge gap about the EU and its contribution to the democratic ideals of solidarity, social justice, and equality, students could experience the working environment of the institutions in-person, by participating in job shadowing initiatives and summer short-term internships in Brussels, Strausberg, etc. Additionally, simulations of the EU institutional functions and processes for school students are an interactive way to experience the complexity of the institutions while developing critical thinking on the contemporary challenges of Europe. Hands-on involvement in societal challenges by partnership with local NGOs in the form of internships or project collaborations could further promote active citizenship and, consequently, strengthen grassroot movements. Finally, the realisation of the extracurricular projects as part of the EEA could be initiated by schools with the organizational support of their respective Ministries and the Commission, while funded by the European structural and investment funds.

Objective 4.2: Enhancing civic competencies among academic personnel

A further objective targeted at higher education is the development of a diverse, culturally knowledgeable workforce that has the capacity to promote civic competences and democratic values along with a European identity. The current EU programme for teachers' education is Erasmus+. This programme supports teaching abroad for knowledge exchange and exchange of best practices along with broadening teachers' perspectives. As a way to strengthen already existing EU measures for enhancing civic competencies and European identity of the academic personnel, drawing on Finland's PEDAFORUM initiative—a network of expertise in university pedagogy and academic development (*Finnish International ECEC Forum*, 2021)—a pan-European network for the academic development of the higher-education institutions, focused on the promotion of a European identity with emphasis on civic education and democratic values in both undergraduate and postgraduate curricula could be

established. The network would organise conferences and workshops for academic developers for encouraging a focus on civic education, enhancing the quality of university teaching and sharing pedagogical expertise whilst improving cooperation.

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