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How Europe Wins on Democracy:

Renewing trust, delivery and democratic infrastructure

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Executive summary

European democracy is under growing pressure as illiberalism, weak political delivery, socioeconomic insecurity and declining trust reinforce one another. Defending democratic institutions and the rule of law remains essential, but protecting the status quo will not be sufficient if citizens increasingly perceive that democratic politics does not work for them.

Drawing on discussions at the European Forum Alpbach 2026, this report identifies four closely connected challenges. First, illiberal actors have moved from shaping political narratives to exercising power from within democratic institutions, increasing their capacity to weaken checks and balances and democratic safeguards. Second, a widening delivery gap separates ambitious political commitments from citizens' everyday experience, reflecting not only implementation problems but also a lack of political leadership willing to set priorities, confront trade-offs and sustain difficult choices. Third, rising living costs, unaffordable housing, inequality and intergenerational insecurity are weakening the social contract and creating fertile ground for political disengagement and support for anti-system forces. Finally, declining trust is concentrated less in democracy as a system than in political actors and parties, shaped by perceptions of weak delivery, socioeconomic insecurity and a lack of meaningful political voice.

Winning on democracy therefore requires rebuilding a wider democratic infrastructure. Institutions must be resilient against political capture but also capable of delivering; citizens need meaningful opportunities to shape decisions; and economic security, civic space, independent media, democratic education and locally rooted participation must form part of democratic renewal. Ultimately, Europe needs a renewed political contract connecting democratic rights and participation with institutional capacity, socioeconomic security and shared responsibility across society. Political leadership will be central to turning that contract into practice and rebuilding a democracy that protects freedom and pluralism while giving citizens both meaningful agency and confidence that institutions can deliver.

1. Introduction

Democracy in Europe is under pressure. For years, democracy has been challenged by attacks on the rule of law in member states, external interference and the electoral success of anti-democratic forces. In past years, however, we have seen a much broader weakening of the political, economic and societal conditions on which liberal democracy depends. Illiberal actors are gaining influence from within democratic institutions; governments struggle to translate political ambition into tangible results; growing socioeconomic insecurity is testing the social contract; and trust in political actors and institutions is waning.

Democratic institutions, the rule of law, independent media and civic space need protection against deliberate erosion. But defending the status quo will not be sufficient if citizens increasingly perceive that the status quo does not work for them. Democratic resilience requires demonstrating that democratic systems can respond to change, deliver tangible improvements, provide citizens with meaningful agency and maintain the openness, pluralism and accountability that distinguish democracy from its alternatives.

Europe needs a comprehensive discussion on renewing its democratic promise. Reflecting on the annual theme of the European Forum Alpbach 2026 "How Europe Wins", this paper draws on the insights from the Forum, particularly focusing on the discussions in the Democracy Track. It approaches that challenge of how Europe can win on democracy through four closely connected dimensions: First, it examines the **rise of illiberalism** and the growing ability of anti-system actors to challenge democratic institutions from positions of political power. Second, it looks at Europe's **delivery gap and the lack of political leadership** hindering the translation of ambitious political commitments into visible results. Third, it considers the effects of **deteriorating socioeconomic conditions** on democracy, from housing and living costs to inequality and intergenerational insecurity. Finally, it examines the **erosion and changing nature of political trust**, asking why citizens lose confidence in those governing them and what forms of trust and critical scrutiny a resilient democracy actually requires.

Taken together, these challenges suggest that winning on democracy requires rebuilding the wider ecosystem in which democracy can function: institutions that withstand political capture, governments capable of delivering, a social contract that provides security and opportunity, and citizens who have both reasons to trust the democratic system and the means to hold those who govern it accountable.

2. Europe's four democratic challenges

2.1. RISE OF ILLIBERALISM

In 2025 the rise of illiberal movements globally reached a tipping point. According to the V-Dem institute, the world counted 91 autocracies against 88 democracies. In 2026 this trend has only consolidated, with 92 autocracies and 87 democracies, while autocracies continue to stabilise and harden their regimes. The rise and mainstreaming of support for illiberal parties and politicians among citizens in our societies has been taking root in Europe over the past decade, heavily influencing the political landscape in Europe. Whereas people are not necessarily rejecting the idea of democracy, there is growing support for authoritarian leaders and illiberal politics.

In Europe, far-right parties have grown substantially over the past years, forcing their way into positions of government in several countries and regions. This signifies a change from illiberal movements influencing the liberal political agenda mostly through effective framing and narratives, to having the political ability to erode democratic institutions and checks and balances from within. It is a development characterised by slow erosion of democratic pillars with attacks under the guise of populist reasoning and small policy changes that at first instance could be overlooked.

During their rise, far-right parties in Europe have been extremely successful in mainstreaming their agenda and influence the overall political discourse. They have done so mostly by effective communication. While right-wing parties aimed to outrun far-right parties by adopting some of their agenda, such as on migration issues and gender policy, in many cases, they ended up reinforcing them.

Illiberal parties have been gaining large support in several member states of the European Union (EU). Many elements of the illiberal playbook were implemented in member states such as Poland and Hungary in the past few years. Far-right parties have also increased their share of seats in the European Parliament, changing the unwritten rules of EU politics. They have been able to establish their power within the EU institutions and are challenging the democratic process from positions of influence. These include the European Parliament's scrutiny group on NGO transparency and via the influence of a growing number of think tanks promoting the illiberal agenda.

On top, the far-right increasingly is well organised internationally and in Europe. Currently there are two European party families that can be classified as far-right working together, participating in each other's leadership summits and reinforcing their narratives. Transatlantic collaboration is also increasing. Trump's decision to cut the USAID programme not only stopped funding to support democracy in Europe, but the US government is now also redirecting parts of these funds into so-called 'nationalisation and civilisation projects in Europe.'

Recent elections in Poland, Hungary and Serbia show that reversing these trends is possible, and provide an opportunity to draw lessons and best practices. Beyond a strategic alliance of opposition parties, **mobilisation by civil society and efforts towards providing a reliable and sustained check on government action have turned out to be crucial** in reversing illiberalism.

But even after elections have been won, new governments face the challenging task of restoring a weakened rule of law. Building back institutions and replacing civil servants and officials loyal to the previous government can become a slippery slope, not least because it risks handing the far right an easy narrative of political revanchism or interference. Poland was highlighted during the Forum's discussions as a cautionary example: when the Tusk government replaced the leadership of the public broadcaster, critics portrayed the move as partisan capture, while EU funds were released on the basis of a reform plan rather than on the basis of demonstrated results that have been hard to come by since.

The rise of extremist and anti-system forces can also constrain governments' capacity to act. As political competition becomes increasingly shaped by the need to contain or win back voters from the extremes, attention and political capital are diverted from longer-term reforms and difficult policy choices. This creates a growing tension between what governments know is necessary and what they believe is electorally beneficial. As former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker was paraphrased by 'Mr. Single Market' Enrico Letta during the opening session of the European Forum Alpbach: "We know what we need to do; we just don't know how to get re-elected afterwards."

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2.2. THE EU'S DELIVERY GAP AND LACK OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

One of the central challenges facing European democracy is the growing gap between political ambition and political delivery. European and national politics are full of large narratives of change: the green transition, competitiveness, security, digitalisation, social resilience and democratic renewal. Yet for many citizens, these ambitions are difficult to reconcile with their everyday experience. Housing remains unaffordable, public services are strained, economic insecurity persists and political decisions often take years to translate into visible improvements.

Europe is often better at defining political ambitions than turning them into tangible results. Political signalling increasingly comes before policy design. Priorities are set under pressure, consultation is compressed, difficult trade-offs are left unresolved and implementation constraints are considered too late. At the same time, there is a tendency to assume that incremental policy steps will be enough even when the scale and speed of change require much more. Policies are agreed, but the administrative capacity, resources and coordination needed to deliver them do not always follow. Too often, political leadership also falls short of what these transformations require: setting a clear direction, making difficult choices and sustaining them through implementation.

This creates a widening distance between the promise of political change and what people experience, as citizens do not encounter democracy primarily through legislation or institutional processes. They experience it through whether public services work, whether housing is accessible, whether they feel economically and physically secure and whether governments can respond when circumstances change. As discussions at the European Forum Alpbach covered repeatedly, what delivery means differs from one person or community to another, but the basic expectation remains: politics should be capable of acting on everyday problems.

Democratic systems therefore need to become more capable of acting. Governments need to think about implementation from the beginning: whether policies can realistically be administered, scaled and applied consistently; what resources they require; who will have to deliver them; and what their cumulative effects will be. Feedback from implementation also needs to shape future political priorities rather than politics moving continuously from one new announcement to the next.

At the same time, democracies need to become quicker and deeper. Citizens need meaningful opportunities to shape decisions, while governments need the capacity to turn decisions into action. Participation without visible results will eventually have the opposite result and feed the undemocratic narrative. Delivery that ignores participation, accountability and affected communities risks creating new forms of detachment. Civil society,

local actors and citizens can also contribute to finding and implementing solutions, particularly in regard to local lived realities.

Most importantly, however, a large part of the delivery gap comes down to political leadership. EU decision-making often appears cautious, reactive and dominated by short-term crisis management. Leaders are frequently better at announcing priorities than at driving the difficult political and institutional changes required to realise them. Major transformations involve difficult choices, competing interests and real costs. Political leadership means setting priorities, articulating trade-offs, explaining why change is necessary and building coalitions capable of carrying decisions through over time.

This kind of leadership is often missing, where political courage and ownership is needed. Europe needs more political entrepreneurship: leaders willing to challenge established routines, take responsibility for difficult decisions and push institutions towards delivering at the scale that circumstances require. It also means resisting the temptation to postpone difficult choices or dilute ambition until it becomes politically easier but practically insufficient.

Rebuilding trust will depend to a large extent on whether democratic politics can demonstrate that it is capable of responding to citizens' needs. Better narratives and better communication matter, but they will have limited effect if the experience of politics remains one of repeated announcements, slow implementation and modest results. Confidence in democracy will depend on whether people can see that political institutions understand the pressures they face, that political leaders are willing to make difficult choices, and that these choices can be translated into tangible change. Socioeconomic elements will be most crucial and urgent to address in this context.

2.3. DETERIORATING SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

Across Europe, the cost of living is increasing and inequality is widening. Prices are rising, access to housing is becoming increasingly difficult, and wages are not catching up with inflation.

This has aggravated particularly since the pandemic. In 2022, the annual inflation rate more than tripled in the EU, reaching the highest level ever measured at 9.2%. Meanwhile, wages only increased by 4.4%. Increasing prices and cost of living are one of the main concerns for European citizens. In fact, this was the main reason (42%) that motivated European citizens to participate in the 2024 EU elections, followed by the economic situation (41%).

Since the mid-20th century, every European generation has progressed economically. While in Eastern Europe this continues to be the case, in Western Europe the dynamic has changed. Now younger generations are poorer than their predecessors. The conversation about intergenerational fairness is becoming increasingly present in today's politics, to make sure that today's decisions do not jeopardise future generations. In response, in March 2026, the Commission adopted for the first time an EU Intergenerational Fairness Strategy.

The affordability crisis is crystalising into housing movements, translating frustration into street protests. These movements have been growing over the past years, as access to housing is becoming increasingly unaffordable, becoming one of the most serious crises in Europe. Finding affordable housing is increasingly challenging, even for people with stable jobs. In the past ten years, house prices in the EU have increased by over 50%. Renting rose by over 25% between 2010 and 2015, with increases of over 200% in the case of Estonia.

Rents are rising at a faster pace than salaries, and the share of their wage that citizens have to dedicate to housing continues to grow. Every tenth EU citizen spends over 40% of their salary on housing with people with lower incomes being the most affected. In cities, rising prices are forcing people to leave the areas where they grew up and move to more affordable ones. Currently, in none of the major European cities can one third of the average salary cover the cost of rent. In the case of Lisbon, more than an entire average salary is needed to pay rent. In cities such as Barcelona, Madrid, Milan, Rome and Dublin, over two thirds of the average salary is needed.

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This phenomenon not only has implications for the individuals affected, but it has broader effects on territories, changing a city's landscape and erasing its distinctive character. The expulsion of citizens from certain areas of a city has a direct impact on social cohesion, people's support networks, cultural and artistic expression, civic social and political engagement, and citizens' trust in institutions and politics.

Housing has become an EU-wide challenge. In 2024, the European Commission appointed a Commissioner for Housing, shared with the Energy portfolio. In December 2025, the European Affordable Housing Plan (EAHP) was launched to help EU member states, regions and cities tackle the housing crisis. In September 2026, a number of European organisations launched a citizens' initiative to make sure access to housing is affordable, sustainable and fair. The petition proposes, for instance, to regulate short-term rentals, turn empty buildings into houses and tackle speculation.

Meanwhile overall socioeconomic inequality also persists in Europe. 70% of people in the world's largest economies consider that inequality in their country has gone too far.

Economic precarity and inequality fuel the belief that the democratic system does not work, as it is incapable of ensuring people's material conditions. The far right capitalises on these beliefs, emerging as the alternative to the mainstream parties that have not been able to address people's concerns. Support for the far right is growing even among people that are not necessarily culturally conservative who used to vote for left-wing options. Despite the fact that immigration is squarely at the centre of the far-right discourse, research indicates that it is socioeconomic inequality that drives voters to the far right.

Economic inequality leads to political inequality, as it excludes some citizens from institutional and non-institutional political participation. Stable economic security is a pre-condition for free engagement in civic and political life and when material conditions are not met, citizens are less likely to participate in political and social life, leading to civic disengagement. This undermines one of the key elements of a healthy democracy, which is an active citizenry, weakening democratic resilience and laying the ground for rule of law deterioration.

2.4. LACK OF TRUST

With the rise of illiberal thought in Europe and a growing gap between what governments promise and what they deliver, trust has become a central element in analyses of the crisis of democracy. The ability of governments to deliver is a decisive factor in whether citizens trust them – as the EFA 2024 democracy track report already highlighted. A high level of trust in public institutions has long been considered a sign of a healthy democracy, and a low level of trust a sign of problems facing the same. The reality, however, is more complex.

Local governments are the ones citizens trust the most. The EU follows, while national governments are at the bottom. Trust in local and regional authorities has increased steadily and now exceeds 60% in cities, towns and rural areas alike. National governments show the opposite trend: only 36% of Europeans trusted their national government and 37% their national parliament. Meanwhile, trust in the EU has recovered since the euro crisis. It rose from 31% in 2013 to 52% in 2025, its highest level since 2008.

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The decline in trust in politics overall, however, is concentrated in the people within the system rather than in the system itself. Ten rounds of the European Social Survey (2002–2020) show that satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament, the legal system and the police increased, while trust in politicians and political parties fell. The results of the latest IPSOS study on deepening distrust in politics and elites show that on average, 64% of people across 31 countries feel that traditional parties and politicians do not care about people like them.

But higher trust does not automatically mean a healthier democracy. The positive link between political trust and democratic quality holds mainly in established liberal democracies, whereas in illiberal democracies and electoral autocracies, trusting the system often means trusting those in power. In Hungary after 2010 and in Poland after 2015, democratic standards declined while political trust increased, driven largely by supporters of the ruling parties.

A healthy democracy should therefore be seen as a balancing act between different forms of trust. First, a degree of critical distrust towards those in power is needed. Active citizens who question their representatives' motives and delivery until proven otherwise hold the system and office-holders accountable. This scepticism is also what drives civic action and mobilisation. Second, trust in the system as such is needed for high turnout in elections and for democratic participation. Third, trust in the media and civil society is needed for a healthy public debate and public sphere.

The risk lies in the tipping point. The same scepticism that keeps a liberal democracy accountable can become fertile soil for mobilising distrust against the system as a whole. In democracies, falls in political trust tend to come before declines in democratic quality, which makes declining trust an early warning sign. In Hungary, trust fell sharply during the 2000s, before Fidesz won in 2010 and began to dismantle checks and balances, and similar patterns can be seen all across Europe with the rise of far-right parties. These different forms of trust need to be considered separately to complete our picture of how trust in democracy can be rebuilt.

Feeling not heard or not having a voice is the main reason citizens give for distrusting governments. In the OECD survey on trust, 68% of people believe that voting influences government but only 31% feel that people like them have a say in what a government does. Among those who do feel heard, 69% trust their government, compared with 22% of those who do not. It must be concluded that voting alone is not sufficient for citizens to feel represented. Rebalancing and building trust requires more continuous and inclusive forms of participation between elections.

Secondly, as discussed earlier, trust erodes due to the delivery gap and socioeconomic insecurity. Trust in national governments is lower where people worry about their household's economic situation. And according to the IPSOS Study on trust, in 29 of 31 countries a majority believes the economy is rigged to benefit the rich and powerful.

Thirdly, the changing media landscape in Europe and the extreme predominance of addictive and hate-spreading algorithms are changing the public space for debating and building collective discourse, creating one based on distrust and polarisation with disinformation campaigns spreading aggressively. Trust in traditional media has seen a sharp decline, while more people are receiving their news from social media accounts spreading mis- and disinformation. At the same time, media ownership in Europe is becoming smaller, meaning more control being exerted by a handful of publishers.

Lack of trust is a strong predictor of voting for the far right. Citizens who are distrustful and dissatisfied are more likely to support parties that promise to replace failing political elites. At the same time, trust is increasingly polarised between groups. Whether people trust the government depends heavily on whether they see themselves represented in it and whether the parties they voted for hold power. Ironically, as anti-establishment parties enter government, they become the establishment themselves. It is in the end not the concept of democracy or the institutions of democracy that are losing trust, it is the political parties and politicians that have lost it.

3. Solutions: How can democracy win?

Overcoming these challenges and ultimately winning on democracy requires rebuilding the wider ecosystem in which democracy will thrive again. This ecosystem includes institutions that withstand political capture, governments that deliver, economic security and opportunity, and citizens who have both reasons to trust the democratic system and the means to hold those who govern it accountable.

But winning on democracy is a long game. Building a new functional ecosystem will require time, patience, vision and radical change. Democratic pillars, such as the rule of law, civil society, media freedom, fundamental rights, equality and fair elections will all have to be adapted to new challenges and opportunities. What Europe needs are not short-term technocratic solutions, but a longer-term vision for democratic renewal and political leadership capable of turning that vision into practice.

BUILDING ON THE WHOLE OF SOCIETY

Such a long-term vision for democratic renewal will first have to be built on a whole-of-society approach, creating ownership and buy-in from the bottom up. A key element to achieve this is to renew the art of mobilisation. This is a mobilisation that needs to go beyond mobilising citizens to vote to renew the buy-in from various stakeholders. It requires alliances stretching from businesses and financial markets to local associations, volunteer organisations and concerned citizens. This was at the centre of a three-year EFA Lab on "Responsible Leadership – Business, Civil Society & Politics: Partners in Changing Times".

It needs to become clear not only that everyone has a role to play but also that everyone has a stake in democratic renewal. Businesses, in particular, depend on predictable institutions, the rule of law, social stability and public trust, and at the same time need to be example-setters. Democratic resilience is therefore not only a political or civic concern, but a wider societal and economic interest.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

An active citizenry is a crucial pillar in democratic resilience and in a healthy democracy. Civil society organisations are at the frontline of democratic defence, acting as watchdogs representing public interest, providing trustworthy information to the public debate and holding institutions to account. On top of that, they act as a bridge between citizens and institutions, bringing politics closer to citizens. This was strongly underlined by the discussion on "The Democratic Comeback: How the Rule of Law Wins".

Yet, throughout the EU, the environment for civil society is worsening and civic space is shrinking due to administrative hurdles and a lack of funding. EU institutions and member states must take actions to protect and invest in Europe's civic space, and promote citizen engagement at the community level to strengthen the rule of law resilience resources. The new Multiannual Financial Framework will be a litmus test in this regard. As other funders withdraw support from civil society, the EU must remain a central actor in enabling civic space to fulfil its democratic functions.

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

For institutions, politicians and political parties to regain citizens' trust, citizens need to see that institutions listen and deliver. Restoring that relationship needs to start at the closest level to citizens, where trust in public institutions is often strongest and where the consequences of political decisions are most directly

experienced. Cities, urban regions and rural areas therefore have a critical role in restoring trust, but also in delivering socioeconomic change and closing the delivery gap. Only a close collaboration between and across the EU, national and regional levels can deliver on the challenges ahead.

The mobilisation of the whole of society and the creation of a thriving citizenry will only work if they are anchored locally. It is at the local level that people meet, become involved, organise themselves and experience democracy in practice. Local democracy is therefore not simply one level of governance among many, but rather is one of the principal spaces in which democratic trust can be rebuilt.

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATION

Rebuilding democratic trust also requires creating spaces in which citizens encounter one another across political and social divides. One important way of reducing polarisation is therefore to bring people together offline, stimulate in-person discussion and strengthen democratic education.

Citizens' panels and other forms of meaningful participation with direct political influence can contribute to this. They can be organised at all levels of political decision-making, but particularly at the local level they can provide spaces to deliberate on contested issues, expose citizens to different perspectives and connect participation to tangible political outcomes. Done well, they can serve not only as instruments of participation, but also as tools for depolarisation and democratic learning.

On the EU level, institutions have experimented extensively with participatory instruments, most prominently through the Conference on the Future of Europe and European Citizens' Panels on key legislative proposals. Making the latter a permanent element of European policymaking is a step in the right direction. But they can only provide meaningful input into major legislative initiatives if they take place early enough in processes, are connected to existing consultation mechanisms and are accompanied by transparent political follow-up.

Education is equally important as was stressed during the EFA session 'Polarised youth: Gender, algorithms, and the future of democracy'. Differences in support for authoritarian leaders and illiberal ideas are often associated with levels of education, gender and social mobility. Democratic education should therefore become a more systematic part of schooling, helping young people understand how democracy functions, how institutions make decisions and how information can be critically assessed. Media literacy and the protection of independent journalism are also critical in maintaining a healthy public debate. This is increasingly important for building resilience against disinformation, political manipulation and illiberal narratives.

INSTITUTIONAL RENEWAL AND DEMOCRATIC DELIVERY

Although participation can improve democratic decision-making, it is not a panacea. Democratic renewal therefore also requires institutions that are both resilient and capable: able to protect democratic principles while responding effectively to the challenges citizens expect politics to address.

Democracy inevitably takes time, but slow democracy must ultimately lead to real delivery. Citizens are unlikely to value extensive democratic processes if political decisions repeatedly fail to translate into meaningful outcomes. The main obstacle to this is not necessarily the EU's policymaking machinery itself. The EU has developed a highly sophisticated legislative and regulatory system, with extensive consultation, impact assessment and scrutiny procedures that compare favourably with international standards of good governance. As the Forum's debate on "Efficiency vs Legitimacy: The Trade-Offs of "Cutting Red Tape" pointed out, improving delivery therefore cannot simply mean adding more procedures – or removing them in the name of speed. Regulation and simplification alike must follow democratic principles, be evidence-based and allow those affected meaningful opportunities to contribute.

Democracy inevitably takes time, but slow democracy must ultimately lead to real delivery.

Better delivery requires political leadership capable of setting priorities, confronting trade-offs and sustaining decisions through implementation. That means acting with urgency where necessary, but doing so responsibly, without cutting corners, bypassing democratic safeguards or treating consultation and accountability as obstacles to action. Democracy will ultimately be judged not only by the quality of its procedures but also by whether those procedures produce decisions that are legitimate, implementable and capable of improving people's lives.

TACKLING SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

This capacity to deliver is particularly important when it comes to socioeconomic insecurity. Ambitious social policies tackling precarity and inequality are indispensable if democratic forces want to address some of the conditions that contribute to support for the far right and illiberal politics. This was a significant insight from the EFA panel on "Inequality, Discontent, and a New Social Contract", with political philosopher Lea Ypi.

Democratic forces need to redirect the political discourse towards these issues, and deliver policies to ensure job security, wages in line with the costs of living, affordable housing, social protection, good quality of public services, including health and education, restoring the perception that institutions can actually deliver for citizens and ensure material conditions.

A NEW POLITICAL CONTRACT

Taken together, these elements point towards the need for a new political contract for Europe. Democratic renewal cannot be achieved through individual reforms pursued in isolation. It requires a broader framework connecting political participation, institutional capacity, economic security, civic engagement, accountability and democratic rights. Such a contract should clarify what citizens can expect from democratic institutions, as well as how citizens, civil society, businesses and other societal actors can contribute to sustaining them.

President von der Leyen's proposal to convene a new Congress of Europe in 2027, seventy years after the Treaty of Rome, could provide an opportunity to begin this conversation. The Commission President has presented the Congress as a moment to develop a vision capable of inspiring a new generation. The ambition is welcome. Indeed, European democracy needs to be reinvented in a world that is very different from the political circumstances in which it was established.

But if the Congress is to contribute to democratic renewal, it should go beyond articulating another vision for Europe. It should become an opportunity for a much broader discussion about the political and social contract underpinning European democracy: what democratic institutions must deliver, what citizens should be able to expect from them, and what responsibilities different parts of society have in sustaining democracy. As such, it should establish a clear connection between its vision and subsequent action. Otherwise, the Congress risks becoming another moment of political signalling without sufficient follow-through.

The discussions at the European Forum Alpbach 2026 made it clear that how Europe wins on democracy will ultimately depend on its ability to develop such a renewed political contract and turn it into practice. Europe needs to rebuild and redesign a democracy that works for European citizens, one that protects freedom and pluralism, provides economic security, gives citizens meaningful opportunities to shape decisions and equips democratic institutions with the capacity to deliver.

NOTES

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The **Transnationalisation Programme** (TN) facilitates a transnationalised debate on Europe's key challenges through enhancing collaboration with think tanks and civil society across Europe. Today's global and societal challenges require transnational policy responses. European think tanks and civil society play an important role in connecting debates across borders and strengthening exchanges between decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders.

Since 1945, the **European Forum Alpbach** is a space and place for the emergence of reflection and action. It brings together young people from Europe and from all over the world with the most innovative minds from politics, business, civil society, culture, and science to drive ideas for a strong, united and democratic Europe. With this diverse, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary community, the Forum influences key actors throughout the European continent to facilitate their learning and decisions.

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