

Democracy demoted

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At a time when the European Union (EU) faces a surge of far-right parties and increasing threats to democracy, Ursula von der Leyen's new Commission lineup signals a clear devaluation of democracy and the rule of law as priorities. This shift reflects a specific understanding of the threats facing European democracy – focusing predominantly on external dangers like disinformation and foreign interference. While these are important priorities in today's geopolitical tempest, the securitisation of democracy risks overlooking significant internal challenges, thereby placing EU democracy on the defensive and absolving the Union from much-needed self-reflection. The upcoming hearings offer an opportunity to urge Commissioners towards more ambitious democratic reforms.

Democracy: A horizontal priority?

On paper, President-elect von der Leyen [presented](#) democracy – alongside security and prosperity – as one of the key themes, which will run horizontally through her entire Commission's work. Given Europe's state of [permacrisis](#), Russia's war in Ukraine, the erosion of the rule of law in some member states, and plans to expand the Union to potentially 30+ members, a significant strengthening of democratic structures seems essential. However, the envisaged structure leaves serious doubts about the role democracy will play for the Commission in the next five years.

In practice, democracy and the rule of law have clearly been demoted from the previous Commission. In 2019 von der Leyen appointed two vice-presidents – for Demography and Democracy and for Values and Transparency – to coordinate the work of several commissioners and implement the Conference on the Future of Europe, to see through institutional reforms and defend the rule of law. In her new Commission issues concerning democracy have been relegated to small elements in just two positions: democracy issues will be coordinated by Henna Virkkunen, the Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy, who will be primarily occupied with the digital transition and security policies. Other aspects of democracy have been merged with the justice portfolio, as Michael McGrath is taking on the role of Commissioner for Democracy, Justice and the Rule of Law. None of the nominees for these positions have any notable experience or reputation in working on institutional or rule of law issues.¹

Moreover, whereas clear responsibilities are assigned for other priority areas (prosperity and security), this has not been the case for the democracy agenda. It is positive that each mission letter outlines EU reform and a “[lasting culture of participative democracy](#)” as a cross-cutting issue for all commissioners to implement. But it remains unclear who will oversee it, define the priorities or monitor compliance. While embedding citizen participation across various fields is a positive step, and the [Youth Policy Dialogue](#) initiative and the high-level talk on democracy are promising beginnings, it risks becoming a diluted policy without clear accountability or dedicated oversight.

Securitising democracy

More significant than the general emphasis on democracy is how von der Leyen frames her approach, emphasising her distinct interpretation of the threats to democracy. Democracy-related issues are now coordinated by the Executive Vice-President, who is also in charge of tech sovereignty and security and a commissioner in charge of justice and the rule of law. Drawing such close links between democracy, security and justice points towards a securitisation of democracy very much in line with the proposal for a [‘European Democracy Shield’](#) against foreign interference at the EU which she proposed in her political guidelines.

Von der Leyen focuses on threats like disinformation and electoral manipulation posed both by external actors (mainly Russia) to the political system and the EU. This shifts the attention regarding the state and future of democracy away from European countries and the current functioning of politics and institutions. Consequently, the overall framing around democracy follows a defensive stance and puts the blame to external threats.

This approach comes with a renewed focus on security and prosperity, the other key priorities in her mission letters. Achieving competitiveness and ensuring the protection of Europe are, according to her [2024 political guidelines](#), the primary ways to address the “anxiety and uncertainty” felt by many Europeans. In this view, safeguarding democracy involves enhancing security, improving workers' economic conditions by increasing competitiveness, and combating external disinformation.

What von der Leyen’s understanding of democracy misses

By narrowing the focus, her strategy could result in more targeted and effective action on specific challenges. Concentrating on foreign disinformation or strengthening the link between the rule of law and access to EU funds – by appointing a former finance minister, Michael McGrath, to lead the justice portfolio – could address these challenges. However, this approach comes at a cost. It overlooks the EU’s own democratic deficits and the [need for reform](#), both within the Union and its member states. Crucially, questions about the quality and deficiencies of EU democracy, the responsiveness of EU leaders to citizens' demands, and the second-order nature of European elections are all sidelined.

Thus, one should not expect much from the new Commission when it comes to driving forward reforms aiming to improve the quality of EU democracy: despite much focus on preparing the Union for enlargement, von der Leyen’s mission letters focus mainly on policy reviews, stopping short of more fundamental governance reforms – particularly equipping the Union for future enlargement. While the priorities speak about embedding citizens’ participation into EU policymaking, they do not go in any way beyond the already established European Citizens’ Panels, thus failing to provide a [broader vision of democratic reform](#).

Other aspects of institutional reform which have been part of her 2019 guidelines, but remain unfulfilled, such as the reform of the [Spitzenkandidaten principle](#), a new electoral law, or [the enlargement reforms](#) were completely left aside. Overall, the prospect of progress regarding fundamental democratic reform seems dire, as it will be overseen by an executive vice president,

Henna Virkkunen, who as a Member of the European Parliament (EP) positioned herself against institutional reforms such as transnational listsⁱⁱ and [did not support](#) the EP's major report on amending the EU treaties.

An excessive focus on external disinformation might divert attention from the critical need to look inward. [Meta's Adversarial Threat Report](#) highlighted that "while public discourse ahead of the EU parliamentary elections focused primarily on foreign threats, the majority of EU-focused inauthentic behaviour they disrupted was domestic in nature" (p. 5). While foreign interference is indeed dangerous, it should not overshadow the growing prevalence of fake news and disinformation campaigns orchestrated by European political figures to maintain or gain power. For example, Viktor Orbán utilised sponsored disinformation campaigns during the last EU elections, and Spain's leading fake news disseminator, [Alvise Pérez](#), was elected as an MEP. Many parties, particularly those on the far-right, have integrated disinformation as a core electoral strategy and are successfully increasing their political influence in Europe, which they then use to propagate more fake news.

Lastly, the securitisation approach overlooks the civic dimension of democracy. Ultimately, the greatest threat to democracy is the loss of public support, with [surveys](#) increasingly showing a rise in authoritarian attitudes. A strong and mobilised civil society is essential to counter this trend, yet the political guidelines and mission letters give little attention to strengthening civil society, aside from proposing a civil society platform with vague functions. Democracy is fundamentally supported by a network of social institutions, particularly trade unions, which foster trust among citizens and channel their demands. The current trends of individualisation and [declining membership in unions](#) and civil society organisations risk undermining the structural foundations that sustain democracy, an aspect neglected by the new Commission. A focus on securitising democracy might fail to secure it properly.

What is needed now?

From a pro-democratic perspective, merely fending off threats is not sufficient. Von der Leyen's focus on the securitisation of democracy risks overlooking the more critical structural factors that sustain democracy, while avoiding the necessary reforms to improve the quality of the Union's democratic system. EU democracy should be on the offensive, not defensive, and the new Commission needs a clear plan on how this will be achieved.

This will require von der Leyen to fill the blind spot of her democratic agenda with an ambitious, forward-looking democratic agenda. This should include a bold governance reform agenda as well as an approach towards citizens' participation that goes beyond the recently established European Citizens' Panels and [involves citizens more regularly in major EU decisions and agenda setting](#). It also requires a clear responsibility and accountability structure within her Commission college.

If no Executive Vice-President receives this mission, it needs to be the President herself who drives, oversees, and is accountable for this agenda. Given the importance of these reforms in the context of the permacrisis and upcoming enlargements, a presidentialisation of these aspects is reasonable. The Commission's EU governance reform agenda should be presented in

the first 100 days of her new mandate, in a major speech and complementary to the [pre-enlargement policy reviews](#) scheduled for early 2025.

The EP, on the other hand, should use the upcoming hearings to seek clear positioning and clarification from both Commissioner candidates. Apart from the defensive elements of democracy as postulated in the mission letters, the Parliament should drill down on the missing dimension: the internal, structural elements of EU democracy. Beyond that, the EP should diligently hold von der Leyen accountable for the horizontal elements of her democratic promise – particularly when it comes to citizens’ participation and EU governance reform. Over the years, they should push for a more ambitious agenda.

In conclusion, the upcoming hearings present the EP with an opportunity to urge the Commission to reintegrate essential internal EU reforms into its agenda and establish clear lines of accountability. This opportunity must not be overlooked, as deepening democracy – rather than merely securitising it – is the best way to protect it.

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ⁱ Research of the data consultancy [Eulytix](#) shows that during her time as MEP, Henna Virkkunen for example worked primarily on research and digital topics, only sporadically talking about democracy and the rule of law during plenary debates.

ⁱⁱ See Henna Virkkunen’s [written explanation](#) of voting against the European Parliament’s report on the Composition of the European Parliament from 15 June 2023.