

COMMENTARY

Anticipatory democracy: Harnessing the power of people and strategic foresight



DEMOCRACY ([HTTPS://WWW.EPC.EU/EN/SEARCH?TAG=130](https://www.epc.eu/en/search?tag=130)) / COMMENTARY

Ricardo Borges de Castro

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Open, pluralistic and liberal democracies must adapt to the current uncertainty and speed of change while maintaining its defining characteristics. Anticipatory democracy, which joins strategic foresight and democracy, can improve democratic policymaking through partnerships, better governance models and societal resilience.

2020 was the worst year for democracy since 2005. According to Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>), last year saw the greatest expansion of authoritarian rule and erosion of freedoms and democracy worldwide, powered by the pandemic. The independent watchdog is not alone: The Economist Intelligence Unit (<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy->

[index-2020/?utm_source=economist-daily-chart&utm_medium=anchor&utm_campaign=democracy-index-2020&utm_content=anchor-1](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Anticipatory-democracy-Harnessing-.../index-2020/?utm_source=economist-daily-chart&utm_medium=anchor&utm_campaign=democracy-index-2020&utm_content=anchor-1)) and Bertelsmann Stiftung (<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/global-report-d.html>) point to the same downward trend – even if, according to the latter, the growth of authoritarianism was met with popular resistance.

In the age of [permacrisis](https://epc.eu/en/Publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c) (<https://epc.eu/en/Publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c>), the world we live in will continue to be characterised by high levels of uncertainty, fragility and unpredictability. The pressure on democracy and freedoms is likely to worsen if EU institutions, governments and societies fail to reform and adapt to this new reality.

Europe's ever more complex political regime

From the streets of Minsk to Yangon, people show that democracy is more than elections. It is hard to gain, establish and sustain. Indeed, it is quite fragile and needs to be constantly nurtured. Despite being the [most democratic region in the world](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege) (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>), Europe is not free from trouble. The attacks on the rule of law, [harassment and assassination of journalists](https://www.dw.com/en/journalist-murdered-in-greece-police-suspect-contract-killing/a-57169040) (<https://www.dw.com/en/journalist-murdered-in-greece-police-suspect-contract-killing/a-57169040>), and recent spikes in [far-right criminality](https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-records-highest-level-of-right-wing-extremist-crimes-in-20-years/) (<https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-records-highest-level-of-right-wing-extremist-crimes-in-20-years/>) indicate that Europe's democracies and basic rights are also [being endangered](https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2021/antidemocratic-turn) (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2021/antidemocratic-turn>).

What is more, the trend across the continent is tilted towards [political fragmentation](https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c2a3e6d5-10ce-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-206690874) (<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c2a3e6d5-10ce-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-206690874>) and [polarisation](https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/EU60--Countering-a-regressiv~259edc) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/EU60--Countering-a-regressiv~259edc>). Political parties are increasing in number, and governments have become more fragile, subject to weak coalitions, shifting support and constant electioneering. While this may bring more voices and diversity into the political system, it is likely to make governing more difficult (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/09/dutch-politicians-ready-form-government-election-coalition>). In addition, despite not profiting politically from the pandemic so far, [populists still enjoy wide appeal](https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/populism-and-covid-19-in-europe-what-we-learned-from-the-first-wave-of-the-pandemic-euopp-lse-blog/) (<https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/populism-and-covid-19-in-europe-what-we-learned-from-the-first-wave-of-the-pandemic-euopp-lse-blog/>) in many EU countries. [Disinformation](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-warns-of-disinformation-campaign-linked-to-russias-sputnik-vaccine/) (<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-warns-of-disinformation-campaign-linked-to-russias-sputnik-vaccine/>) or 'fake news' campaigns undermine evidence-based policymaking and governance. As well as [countering deepfakes](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deepfakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them) (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deepfakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them>), the effects of [disinformation](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Fear-and-lying-in-the-EU-Fighting-) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Fear-and-lying-in-the-EU-Fighting->

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[disinformation-on-migration-with-al~39a1e8](#)) can become even more negative in democratic societies as it will be harder to distinguish facts from falsehoods.

In Europe; in the world

The global decline of democracy may also be a result of the recent return of strongman politics, which is testing the international rules-based multilateral order. Because there are no power vacuums in international politics, the 'take back control' and 'my country first' movements best exemplified by Brexit or Trump also helped foster the ongoing competition among different governance models that vie for global supremacy.

Together with the EU, the new US administration may help reverse the dismal state of global affairs by adopting a [more constructive agenda](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Transatlantic-economic-relations-under-the-Biden-administration-Beca~3d5338) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Transatlantic-economic-relations-under-the-Biden-administration-Beca~3d5338>) than in the last four years. This would also boost [global democracy](https://www.politico.eu/article/joe-biden-summit-of-democracies-can-rally-allies-against-autocracies/) (<https://www.politico.eu/article/joe-biden-summit-of-democracies-can-rally-allies-against-autocracies/>). But the world has changed and is no longer dominated by Pax Americana. Hence, the course to a more stable and resilient rules-based system will not happen overnight or without challengers.

In a state of competitive interdependence, change is increasingly fast-paced, boosted by new technologies, innovation and, more recently, a virus. Against this backdrop, agility and strategic anticipation become even more important in dealing with new challenges and crises and identifying opportunities to thrive.

More than traditional '[anticipatory governance](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/1216573/anticipatory-governance-practical-upgrades-equipping-the-executive-branch-to-co/) (<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/1216573/anticipatory-governance-practical-upgrades-equipping-the-executive-branch-to-co/>)', Europe needs 'anticipatory democracy': the fusing of strategic foresight capabilities and mindset to democracy and electoral cycles. Coined in the 1970s by Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock* and subsequently [expanded](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329067514_The_History_and_Future_of_Anticipatory_Democracy_and_Foresight) (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329067514_The_History_and_Future_of_Anticipatory_Democracy_and_Foresight), anticipatory democracy gains new relevance in 21st century Europe.

Anticipatory democracy: What would it take?

European anticipatory democracy can be built upon three key areas: principled partnerships, smarter governance and resilient societies.



1. Principled partnerships

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each other. The EU should continue to use its democratic principles as not only an asset in its foreign policy arsenal but also as a differentiating element vis-à-vis competing governance models. And in this respect, there should be no ambiguity on where Europe stands regarding democracy and its freedoms.

The EU's weak response (<https://epc.eu/en/Publications/EU-crash-course-in-geopolitics-Lessons-from-the-foreign-policy-battle-3d1e7c>) to recent Chinese countersanctions targeting its parliamentarians, think tanks and analysts for freely expressing their opinions further undermines the Union's credibility in defending democracy worldwide.

Building alliances with like-minded democratic partners is still the surest way to uphold the rules-based international system developed after the Second World War. Nevertheless, the EU must also have a consistent response and set red lines for attacks on democracy – especially when relevant economic interests are at stake. In the long term, democracy and freedoms are vital interests to preserve.

2. Smart governance

Governance systems at both the EU and member state levels must reform and adapt to more complex and challenging internal and external environments. There is no doubt that open, liberal and pluralistic democracies need to find solutions to keep up with the fast pace of change. But they should do so while upholding the features of our democratic systems, even in the face of global competition that is not subject to the same rulebook. This requires parallel but concurrent efforts from decision-makers and foresight experts and practitioners alike.

EU institutions and member states should develop more flexible policy instruments and funding mechanisms, stepping up current efforts (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/default/files/commissioner_mission_letters/mission-letter-maros-sefcovic-2019_en.pdf) to adopt strategic foresight practices and approaches to policymaking. By either creating 'foresight units' with clear mandates and access to decision-makers or by fostering an anticipatory mindset across governments and institutions, public administrations would modernise, innovate and strengthen their ability to sustain long-term planning in step with more immediate political aims.

But foresight must also adapt to democracy. There is an inherent tension between democratic politics and forward-looking policymaking. Nevertheless, it is not insurmountable. Anticipatory democracy should reconcile long-term strategic thinking with electoral cycles and the needs of democratically elected leaders beyond just warning about the future. Instead of criticising democratic politicians for being short-sighted and looking only further than the next vote, foresight experts should integrate this need and structural features of democracy that must be preserved: elections, divergent political preferences, and alternation of power.

If democracy cannot move faster to keep up with the pace of change, then it should be smarter about the future. In other words, it must be more proactive and less reactive.

3. Resilient societies

EU institutions and governments ought to invest more in the marketplace of ideas and foster a healthy and diverse ecosystem of free media, think tanks, academic institutions, and informed citizens. Together with principled partnerships and smarter governance, this is the only way to promote debate and contribute to evidence-based solutions to so many of Europe's challenges, from post-pandemic recovery to climate change. The European Commission's [Democracy Action Plan \(https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2020:790:FIN\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2020:790:FIN) is a welcome step to addressing many of the pressing issues that imperil the 'infrastructure' of modern democracies, such as disinformation or threats to the integrity of electoral processes.

But efforts to make democracies better at anticipating change should also focus much more on [education systems \(https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Safeguarding-European-values-The-case-for-a-European-Agency-for-Citiz~3a2c94\)](https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Safeguarding-European-values-The-case-for-a-European-Agency-for-Citiz~3a2c94) and schools, bringing new subjects like 'futures thinking' to the member states' classrooms. A good place to start learning about these new skills is UNESCO's [Futures Literacy initiative \(https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about\)](https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about), which aims to help people better prepare for the future and build resilience as well as break new horizons and seek new opportunities.

Democracy is not a static political system; it must constantly reform and [adapt \(https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-enemy-within-are-modern-E~25a2c4\)](https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-enemy-within-are-modern-E~25a2c4) to new challenges. Democracies that are better prepared to scan the horizon for emerging problems and to anticipate patterns of change will also be better prepared to act and avert crises that can ultimately undermine democracy itself. Anticipatory democracy may be the key for Europe to remain strong and open in a more competitive and fast-paced world.

Ricardo Borges de Castro is an Associate Director and Head of the Europe in the World programme.

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