

THE EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE: A NEW BATTLEGROUND OF DEMOCRACY IN THE EU?

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The recently established European Centre for Democratic Resilience is a key feature of the European Democracy Shield (EDS). In this Brief, we differentiate constructive criticisms on the Shield's implementation and destructive illiberal narratives around the EDS. We also warn against the risk of its illiberal co-optation. To have an added value for European democracy, both the EDS and the Centre must become resilient themselves.

The European Democracy Shield: Another tool in the shed

As democracy erodes globally, according to data collected by [V-Dem Institute](#), democratic quality in European Union (EU) Member States suffers, too. Existing research shows that the erosion of the quality of deliberation – the way we discuss politics – and the rule of law, which prohibits arbitrariness and ensures accountability of those in power, are [the essence of democratic backsliding](#). In some Member States, electoral laws are [redesigned](#) or constituencies redrawn to favour incumbents. In others, heated debates about the legitimacy of [militant democracy](#) emerge, testing the possibility of excluding [extremist politicians](#) or [entire parties](#) from democratic elections. During [election campaigns](#), misinformation and polarising narratives are spread on social media by bot networks and troll farms, with potentially dire effects on the legitimacy and integrity of elections.

Against the background of gradual democratic erosion, the European Commission unveiled the [European Democracy Shield](#) (EDS) in December 2025. The EDS has three priority areas: media and elections, information space integrity, and societal resilience and citizens' engagement. In practice, the EDS primarily focuses on countering foreign interference, disinformation, and hybrid threats inside the EU. To do so, its centrepiece is the [European Centre for Democratic Resilience](#) (henceforth: Centre), which can be best understood as a hub for pooling expertise, sharing knowledge and building capacities on foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and disinformation. While participation for Member States is voluntary, all 27 EU countries joined the Centre. Additionally, a stakeholder platform will enable civil society organisations (CSOs) or researchers to engage in the Centre's work.

Since the Commission presented the EDS, it has drawn a wide range of criticism across the political spectrum. We distinguish between constructive criticisms that assess the practical impact and focus of the Shield, while acknowledging the general need for action. In contrast, we understand as destructive criticisms such arguments that reject any EU competence to tackle FIMI, which cosplay democratic accountability, but in reality seek to legitimise illiberal rule in the Member States.

Constructive criticism: Limited competence, constricted focus

To us, there are good reasons to criticise the Commission's approach to democratic resilience, namely its practical implementation and overt focus on misinformation.

First, the EDS lacks legislative bite. It mainly consists of [soft-law tools and voluntary coordination mechanisms](#), such as the Centre, or announces stronger enforcement of existing legislation, such as the European Media Freedom Act, the Digital Services Act, or the regulation on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising. Certainly, improving coordination and enforcement can have added value to foster democratic resilience. Yet, for now, it remains unclear how the EDS and Centre can make a real-life difference at the national and European level. Consequently, some commentators warn that the EDS could become a [paper armour](#) rather than a real shield for democracy.

Second, the EDS is [overtly focused on disinformation](#). Without a doubt, FIMI poses a great challenge to the information space during election campaigns. Take the recent campaign for the Hungarian parliamentary elections on 12 April 2026, for instance. The campaign was marked by reciprocal allegations of foreign interference. During his visit to Budapest just days before the election, United States Vice President JD Vance called the campaign “[one of the worst examples of foreign election interference](#)”, repeating a central campaign motif of the ruling Fidesz party and its [media ecosystem](#). Vance’s claims even sparked a reaction by a spokesperson of the [German government, who accused him of hypocrisy](#). In turn, allegations of foreign interference are a central campaign motif of the oppositional Tisza party, too. Tisza [alleges Fidesz of cooperating with Russian officials](#), drawing on reports of [investigative journalists](#) and [of CSOs](#). In the aftermath of the elections, the [official assessment](#) by the OSCE’s election monitoring mission found that the ruling party used “divisive and fear-mongering rhetoric [...], including unsubstantiated claims of foreign interference.” Furthermore, according to the observers, “[m]ost reported claims from both the authorities and opposition remained unsubstantiated at the

time of the observation.” Ultimately, the reciprocal allegations did not affect the acceptance of the election results by both Fidesz and Tisza. Nevertheless, the Hungarian election campaign should serve as a warning example for Europe of how governments of EU Member States can strategically use FIMI allegations as a political weapon to undermine trust in the integrity of elections. Furthermore, the importance of trust in electoral integrity became also observable in Romania in 2024, when the first round of presidential elections was annulled by the [Constitutional Court](#) after [declassified intelligence](#) on Russian FIMI campaigns, particularly on [TikTok](#), emerged.

While both the Hungarian and Romanian cases clearly underline the need to protect the informational integrity of elections, the Commission’s approach to [securitise](#) democratic resilience also has shortcomings. The Commission [externalises](#) threats to democracy by primarily attributing them to foreign actors (first and foremost, to Russia). This attempt to close the ranks against political and private interests from outside the EU falls short of recognising an inconvenient truth: there are actors within the EU that have an interest in foreign interference or willingly collude with external powers to tilt elections in their own favour. The EDS fails to address the demand side for disinformation campaigns.

Destructive criticism: Illiberal instrumentalisation

In contrast, we understand some criticisms of the Shield as destructive if they are used to propel illiberal narratives and instrumentalised for general EU ill will. [Illiberal networks](#) coined the EDS a “[democratic deepfake](#)” and – in synergy with the Digital Services Act or European Media Freedom Act – a “censorship operating system” by unaccountable, EU-funded fact-checking entities and watchdog organisations. In

this line of argument, illiberal forces frame EU action on democracy as competence creep and “Orwellian” censorship attempts.

At first glance, such criticisms appear concerned with the accountability and democratic legitimacy of the EU itself. However, in our view, they remain bad-faith arguments and must be seen in the broader picture of the strategy of [legitimisers of illiberalism](#). Because the EDS strengthens mechanisms of [diagonal accountability](#) – media, civil society, or academia – it is rejected in principle as undemocratic interference with national sovereignty and democracy. Such accounts are not concerned with accountability as a general principle of political legitimacy. Rather, they twist the argument to shield illiberal rule from domestic and European scrutiny.

This is because the EU legal system serves as an [external constraint to hybrid regimes](#) – regimes that combine both democratic and authoritarian characteristics. EU values and jurisprudence, economic integration and peer pressure limit policy space for autocratisation. Thus, EU integration contributes to the protection of individual citizens’ rights and freedoms – regardless of their political affiliation! – from overreach and arbitrariness by their own governments. The EU, as a [“democratic union of democratic states”](#), serves as a clear constraint to installing outright authoritarianism or dictatorship. This is why illiberal actors reject European competence concerning democratic processes – a goal they share with [the current United States administration](#).

Both provide them opportunities to promote illiberal narratives and accuse political opponents or European actors of meddling with domestic democracy. Thus, the Centre’s own resilience against illiberal co-optation will be key.

How to make the European Centre for Democratic Resilience resilient

Despite their rejection, we can still expect that illiberal actors will engage with the EDS and the Centre. It offers illiberal actors attractive opportunities to promote illiberal narratives and accuse political opponents or European actors of meddling with domestic democracy. Thus, we expect that the Centre will become an arena for disputes about democracy at its core. That is not necessarily a bug, but a feature. We recommend defenders of liberal democracy to take this challenge head-on and put democratic resilience into practice.

First, the Centre’s Stakeholder Platform must allow for the participation of CSOs from Member States and EU accession candidates alike. The Centre can benefit from the proven [expertise and grassroots innovation in countering disinformation and securing digital space](#) by CSOs from accession countries. This requires a targeted selection process [beyond informal Brussels networks](#) and protection from potential hostile actors in the Centre framework. Therefore, it should be civil society actors only who decide upon the representation of civil society at the platform. Moreover, it requires that CSOs have adequate resources to participate in the Centre. Given the [increasing financial support to illiberal organisations](#), it is indispensable that pro-democratic civil society in Europe has access to [predictable and sustainable funding](#). Thus, the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 should include a sufficient funding envelope for CSOs in candidate countries and EU Member States.

Second, democracy defenders should use the Centre to build strong partnerships and coalitions with like-minded partners. Building synergies between academics, CSOs and

institutional stakeholders will be key for putting democratic resilience into practice. Given the global decline of democracy and the network of the [“illiberal international”](#), partnerships beyond Europe are vital to defend democracy. For instance, the “Strengthening Democracy Taskforce” in Australia holistically analysed the [strengths and vulnerabilities of Australian democracy](#). Its main finding – that democracy is a public asset worth protecting – is also highly relevant for Europe.

Third, democracy defenders should use the framework of the Centre to address democratic challenges beyond FIMI. Democratic resilience does not stop at the information space. Rather, defenders can use it constructively to identify strengths and weaknesses of democracy at the national level, including discussions on electoral system design and preventing practices such as gerrymandering. By doing so, the Centre can contribute to making democracy a subject of European debates more broadly. In the last decade, the EU saw a gradual process of [supranationalisation](#) of the rule of law, which gained salience at the EU level. In analogy, the Centre and the EDS could signal a similar process for democracy.

Lastly, democratic resilience does not end at maintaining the status quo; it not only means resistance, but also transformation. Democracy defenders should not leave questions on the EU’s democratic legitimacy and accountability to illiberals. Against their pressure, the Centre can be used to create a new, forward-looking and inclusive vision of European democracy in the 21st century – both at the national and the EU level.

Conclusion: Taking on the challenge of democratic resilience

Democracy is under threat in many EU Member States. There is a clear need to protect information integrity, especially during election campaigns, so that citizens can vote without being manipulated by obscure artificial intelligence content, bot networks or fabricated reporting. The EDS and its Centre can contribute to democratic resilience by building coalitions, strengthening democracy defenders, addressing information manipulation, and exchanging democratic innovations.

The proper functioning of the Centre, however, will not only be determined by its institutional mandate or thematic focus. It also hinges on the ability to resist illiberal co-optation attempts disguised as democratic accountability. The resilience of democracies requires resilient defence mechanisms. The Centre offers democracy defenders the opportunity to get on the front foot again against proliferating illiberalism. After all, democratic resilience is not a fancy academic concept, but a fundamental practical skill. The Centre offers those committed to democracy the opportunity to acquire and train it.

Without the ability to effectively defend liberal democracy – fundamental rights, the rule of law, pluralism – against coordinated illiberal attacks, Europe won’t be able to preserve its security, competitiveness and capacity to act in an increasingly antagonistic geopolitical environment.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA), of its Members, or the author's institution.

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