



People, Media and Democracy: A Quali-Quantitative Assessment

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DELIVERABLE 5.6, V1.1

MeDeMAP - Mapping Media for Future Democracies

Grant Agreement number: 101094984



**Funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Document information

Project information	
Grant Agreement no.	101094984
Funding scheme	Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Actions
Project title	Mapping Media for Future Democracies
Project acronym	MeDeMAP
Project starting date	01/03/2023
Document information	
Work package no.	5
Work package title	The Demand Side
Work package lead beneficiary	IULM University
Task(s)	5.4
Deliverable no.	5.6
Deliverable title	People, Media and Democracy: A Quality-Quantitative Assessment
Deliverable type	Report
Contractual date of deliverable	28/02/2026
Actual date of deliverable	12/03/2026
Editor(s)	-
Author(s)	Andrea Miconi (IULM University), Giulia Ferri (IULM University), Elisabetta Risi (IULM University), Panos Kompatsiaris (Nello Barile (IULM University))
Reviewer(s)	Nico Carpentier (CU), Manuel José Damasio (Lusofona Uni), Beata Klimkiewicz (JU), Helmut Peissl (COMMIT), Josef Seethaler (OEAW)
Version	1.1
Status	Final
Total number of pages (including cover)	84
Dissemination level	PU

Document history

Version	Date	Submitted by	Changes
1.0	28/02/2026	IULM	Initial version
1.1	12/03/2026	IULM	Deliverable number corrected on page 1

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Executive Summary

This report provides an integrated assessment of how European citizens perceive the relationship between media and democracy, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research conducted across ten EU countries within the MeDeMAP project. Rather than measuring democratic health through a single indicator, the study combines data on media use, audience practices, trust, and institutional dynamics to develop a comprehensive understanding of how democratic participation and communication interact in contemporary Europe.

A central finding is that democratic participation has not declined in a straightforward sense. Citizens remain engaged in political discussion and continue to express strong normative support for democracy as an ideal system of governance. However, this engagement increasingly takes place within highly mediatized and platformized environments that shape how participation is experienced. While opportunities for expression have expanded—particularly through social media and online communication—many citizens perceive a widening gap between their ability to speak and their ability to influence political outcomes. The issue is therefore less one of disengagement than of perceived ineffectiveness: individuals remain willing to participate yet often doubt that their participation can meaningfully affect decision-making processes.

The transformation of media environments plays a key role in this dynamic. As audiences shift away from print media toward digital platforms while continuing to rely on television and hybrid information sources, political participation becomes embedded in everyday communication practices rather than confined to institutional moments such as elections or formal civic activities. Platforms are widely perceived as accessible spaces for expression, coordination, and local mobilization, enabling citizens to organize initiatives and share viewpoints with unprecedented ease. At the same time, the saturation and algorithmic filtering characteristic of these environments make it difficult for dispersed voices to be aggregated into coherent collective claims capable of shaping institutional outcomes. In this context, participation becomes ubiquitous at the level of expression but uncertain at the level of consequence.

This tension is closely connected to broader issues of trust and legitimacy. The report shows that distrust in political institutions and media does not necessarily translate into rejection of democracy itself. Instead, a distinction emerges between democracy as an ideal and democracy as it is experienced in practice. Citizens frequently express disappointment, fatigue, or disillusionment with the functioning of institutions, yet continue to view democratic governance as preferable to available alternatives. In this sense, legitimacy often persists even as institutional trust weakens. The findings suggest that declining confidence is directed less at democratic principles than at perceived failures in responsiveness and accountability.

Importantly, trust is shown to operate on multiple levels. While vertical trust in institutions has eroded in many contexts, horizontal trust among citizens—rooted in everyday social relations—remains comparatively

resilient and can even increase under certain conditions. This layered structure of trust helps explain why dissatisfaction with political actors coexists with continued commitment to democratic norms. Emotional dynamics such as disenchantment and disappointment further shape this landscape. These sentiments reflect not a rejection of democracy but a weakening of affective investment in its capacity to deliver meaningful outcomes, producing a climate in which citizens remain attached to democratic ideals while questioning their practical effectiveness.

The role of media is similarly ambivalent. Both citizens and media professionals express concern about misinformation, and political interference in news production. Yet there is a divergence in how the credibility of traditional journalism is perceived, with many citizens expressing skepticism toward legacy media while simultaneously relying on them for information. The resulting environment is characterized by information overload and selective trust, in which individuals navigate complex media ecosystems by relying on familiar or personally credible sources rather than universally trusted institutions.

Across the findings, education emerges as a crucial enabling condition for meaningful participation. Citizens frequently describe engagement as requiring interpretative skills—such as understanding institutional processes or evaluating information quality—rather than simply access to communication channels. In increasingly complex media and governance environments, participation depends on political and media literacy as much as on formal rights. Unequal access to these resources can therefore translate into unequal capacity to act as effective democratic subjects.

Finally, the report situates these dynamics within broader processes of polarization and geopolitical uncertainty. Despite ongoing debates about its legitimacy, the European Union is often perceived as a stabilizing democratic framework, particularly when compared to national institutions or to non-democratic regimes elsewhere. This residual trust highlights the continued importance of supranational structures in sustaining democratic confidence during periods of social and political turbulence.

Overall, the report concludes that the primary challenge facing contemporary European democracies is not a lack of participation but the difficulty of translating widespread communicative engagement into visible political impact. Democratic resilience will therefore depend less on expanding opportunities for expression—which are already abundant—than on strengthening the mechanisms that connect citizens' voices to decision-making processes in ways that are credible and consequential.

Introduction and disclaimer

The goal of this report is to provide a synoptic observation of the major findings of Work-package 5, as emerged from the wide-scale qualitative investigation on people's perception of media and democracy in ten EU countries [deliverables 5.4 and 5.5], of the quantitative assessment of the evolution of media audiences in Europe [deliverable 5.1], and of the theoretical reflection on the critical issue of trust in news media and in the institutions [deliverable 5.2]; and also to put them in relation with the empirical analysis of the supply-side, or the organization of media markets and news systems, as carried out in Work-package 4.

Given the very heterogeneous nature of the results to be taken together, and in light of the various underlying methodologies that have been used, such findings can neither be reduced to a single plan of analysis, nor translated into a synthetic index. Rather than a clustering in the merely technical sense of the word, we consider here the quali-quantitative assessment as a mixed-method *triangulation* likely to integrate the different research strands and serve "as a means to produce a more complete picture of the investigated phenomena" (Kelle 2005, 99), rather than conflating the results into a single score or producing a final measurement of those phenomena. More specifically, among the various possible forms of triangulation, we refer to the "between-method triangulation", where different methods are called to action, rather than different frameworks, as in the theoretical triangulation; or researchers, in the so-called investigator triangulation; or datasets, in the most classical version (Hussein 2009, 3-4; see also Jick 1979, 602-603; Olenik 2011, 861).

The ambition of this deliverable, by mandate, is therefore the individuation of some "main constants", as foreseen in the Description of the Action, and also agreed upon in the Steering Committee session, which took place during the consortium meeting held in St. Polten in September 24-25, 2025. As stated in the description of the related task,

The final outcome would be an advanced understanding of the way people perceive media and democracy across Europe, what are they are needs – to be eventually compared with the results related to the supply side.

For this purpose, we extracted some major indications from the relevant deliverables - 4.3- Media Production in Ten EU Countries; 4.4- Comparative Assessment of Media Supply and Production in Ten EU Countries; 5.1-Data set for the map of European audiences; 5.3- Report on trust in media and democratic institutions in Europe – and put them in resonance with the related empirical clusters, as synthetized in the semantic three that we have built and used for the reports 5.4- Audiences' Media Practices in Ten European Countries, and 5.5- Comparative Report on Audience Needs in Ten European Countries.

Some steps have been taken, the clarification goes, also in order to differentiate our report from other deliverables which, in their turn, provided a final assessment of the MEDEMAM findings or a between-work-package analysis. In this case, for instance, we only marginally relied on the theoretical embedding provided

by deliverable 2.1- Theoretical framework in democracy, participation and representation (see Carpentier & Wimmer 2025), which nonetheless was the backdrop against which we draw other Work-package 5 reports. The choice is legitimated by the fact that all deliverables we re-analysed were already grounded in this theoretical framework.

In a similar vein, we devoted relatively little space, in comparison to other topics, to the synoptic confrontation between the demand-side and the supply side data [section III of this document], as it is already accounted for in deliverable 4.7- Report on media and democracy in the European Union, which is also the basis for a MEDEMAP book manuscript. Finally, despite the inspiring and rich contents produced by the Citizen Parliaments sessions and reports, also for what concerns people's understanding of democracy in Europe, we did not touch on these contents, on which another final assessment is grounded, as included in deliverable 6.4- Future roadmap for European media and democracy.

This approach eventually resulted in a four-section structure. The first section takes into account audience practices in the EU - as described in deliverable 5.1 and discussed during the qualitative interviews and focus groups - in order to reflect on their ability to generate a form of agency and favor political participation of any kind. The most striking indication, based on the connection between the structural data on the audience evolution and the evidence from the interviews and focus groups, is that we are not necessarily facing a lack of engagement: rather, people express a serious concern about the *impact* of mobilization activities, therefore perceiving a dramatic gulf between their agency and the actual, realistic possibilities for political interventions.

The second part addresses the capital topic of people's trust, while also making a step forward, in comparison to previous reports, and raising questions about when, and after which point, distrust in the media and in the institutions will eventually affect the *legitimacy* of the democratic order. Additionally, in this case, we also tried to address some hanging topics – namely, *disenchantment* and *disillusion* – that have been evoked in a series of internal MEDEMAP discussions (probably starting with Barbara Thomass' intervention during the Prague meeting, in March 2025). Despite not being singled out as operational variables in the design of the project – and not even mentioned in the original description of the action – these dimensions repeatedly emerged during our interviews and focus groups, possibly offering better insights into, and different explanations of, people's trust versus distrust dilemma, rooted in the paradigm of emotional politics (Mouffe 2018), rather than in the more classical categories of political studies, whether analytical or normative. The role of the media in the process, both legacy and social, is considered as well.

The third section hinges on a comparison between the standpoint of the citizens, as analysed in WP5, and that of media professionals and journalists collected in WP4, about a series of critical topics, including (along with the inevitable trust issue) the impact of digital platforms, misinformation, the role of the algorithms, the political influence on media outlets, and the role of journalism itself. Whilst citizens and journalists share a

very similar concern about the effects of social media and the risks of on-line disinformation, the main finding goes, their opinions rather diverge with regard to the reliability and credibility of official news media.

The final section connects the findings from Work-package 5 to the broader issue of societal polarization and geo-political de-globalization. By both analysing recent literature on the related topics and the ideas expressed by our interviewees in the Work-package 5 research, we put forward a reflection on how recent crises have undermined the global order and the trust in super-national organizations – among which the European Union – as it had been established during the rising stage of globalization and Europeanization.

In line with this ambition, the four sections adopt partially different analytical lenses, ranging from more empirically grounded observations to more theoretically oriented reflections. While this diversity may initially appear as a lack of uniformity, it reflects the deliberate attempt to address the complexity of citizens' media practices and their implications for democratic life. Some sections rely more extensively on the data and information collected through empirical tasks, while others develop broader interpretative reflections. As a result, certain thematic overlaps were inevitable, particularly with regard to key issues such as democratic agency, disinformation, the impact of platformization, and trust. Rather than imposing a single interpretative framework, the report brings together complementary perspectives that jointly contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how participation, trust and legitimacy unfold across contemporary European media environments.

Section I- Agency and Audiences

One of the key interpretative nodes emerging from the integrated analysis of Work-package 5 concerns the relationship between citizens and their perceived ability to intervene in the democratic process. In line with the overall goal of this deliverable — namely, to understand how people perceive media and democracy and what needs they express — participation cannot be approached simply in terms of presence or absence of engagement. Rather, it needs to be reconstructed as a situated experience, formed at the intersection of institutional expectations, everyday media practices, and perceived opportunities for influence.

The triangulation of structural data on European audiences and qualitative material points to a complex configuration. Participation appears widespread across everyday practices of information, expression and political discussion, yet it is simultaneously accompanied by uncertainty regarding its effectiveness. What emerges is not so much a withdrawal from the democratic sphere as a persistent tension between the willingness to take part in public debate and the perception that such involvement rarely produces tangible effects on decision-making processes.

This tension becomes clearer when the qualitative narratives are read against the background documented in Deliverable 5.1. Audience data indicate a long-term decline of print news consumption and a parallel increase in online news use and social media participation, while television and radio remain comparatively resilient. In other words, European citizens are increasingly surrounded by communication opportunities and information streams, and yet many describe the political system as increasingly distant and difficult to “reach.” This suggests that agency is not simply enabled by more communication, but depends on whether communication can be translated into recognisable political consequence.

In this sense, participation offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe the gap — already highlighted in the general introduction of this report — between perceived agency and the realistic possibilities for political intervention. While the first section of the deliverable identifies this gap as one of the most significant indicators of contemporary transformations in the relationship between citizens and democracy, the present chapter explores how this tension takes shape within mediatised and platformized environments, where participation is increasingly enacted as a communicative practice rather than a strictly institutional one.

Across Europe, citizens continue to express strong support for democracy as a political ideal. Yet this normative commitment increasingly coexists with doubts about whether participation can meaningfully influence political outcomes. Rather than signalling a withdrawal from democratic principles, this tension points toward a growing gap between democracy as an ideal and democracy as an experience — a gap repeatedly highlighted by WP5 qualitative research across countries. Democracy remains symbolically

affirmed as a regime of freedom and pluralism, yet participation is frequently described not in terms of formal rights, but in terms of the perceived ability to influence outcomes. As one French participant noted:

“Democracy is of course power by the people, of course. But we are far from Agora. We are millions of kilometers from Agora. It's... I think it's being flouted a little bit. We saw what happened recently. For me, when people express themselves and their will is flouted, it's a crime against democracy for me. So as much as it is a political system that is close to my heart, I am actually heartbroken to see what is happening in France. And that we can have such denials of democracy. This is the first time, in more than one hundred years, that we do not choose the Prime Minister or the leader according to the will of the people. So, I am very worried about the French political state. And in the world too, because well, it's not just here” (France, Int.9)

What is articulated here is not simply dissatisfaction with a specific institutional outcome. The metaphor of the “Agora” condenses a discursive construction of democracy as proximity, immediacy, and co-presence. Its hyperbolic inversion — “millions of kilometres” away — signals not the abandonment of the democratic ideal, but the perception of a structural dislocation between its symbolic grammar and its procedural enactment. Democracy is simultaneously affirmed and experienced as inaccessible. The citizen speaks from within the normative framework of democracy, yet positions herself at a distance from its operative core. Participation, in this sense, is not understood solely as the right to vote or express preferences, but as the capacity to intervene meaningfully in collective decision-making. The issue that emerges is not whether democracy is valued, but whether individuals perceive themselves as able to matter within it.

Building on both the structural mapping of European audience practices and qualitative insights into citizens’ participatory experiences, this chapter argues that the key democratic tension in contemporary Europe concerns not the absence of participation but the difficulty of translating participation into consequence. Citizens continue to express opinions, mobilise around issues and engage in political discussions within increasingly mediatized environments. Yet the pathways through which such engagement might shape decision-making processes are often experienced as opaque, fragmented or inaccessible.

From this perspective, democratic agency is not an individual attribute but an outcome emerging at the intersection of communicative infrastructures, institutional responsiveness and citizens’ capacity to navigate complex political and media environments. The contemporary transformation of participation can therefore be understood as a combination of interrelated dynamics: the persistent difficulty of converting voice into institutional impact, the challenges of aligning dispersed expressions into collective claims within platformed environments, and the unequal distribution of competencies that allow individuals to participate in ways they perceive as meaningful. In this configuration, opportunities to speak are widespread, yet the capacity to act as

consequential political subjects depends on structural and cognitive conditions that extend beyond access alone.

1.1 Structure and Perception: The Erosion of Agency

The persistence of democratic support alongside doubts about its effectiveness points not to a straightforward erosion of democratic citizenship, but to its reconfiguration. This pattern resonates with broader debates on the decoupling between normative regime support and institutional satisfaction (Norris, 2011; Dalton, 2014). Yet the integrated evidence from WP5 suggests that the central issue lies less in declining commitment than in the weakening of perceived responsiveness: citizens do not necessarily stop caring about democracy, but increasingly doubt that democratic systems respond in ways that make participation feel consequential.

From the perspective of political efficacy — and particularly external efficacy — this dynamic reflects a growing uncertainty about whether institutional actors are attentive to citizen input. When institutions are perceived as distant, unresponsive or opaque, participation risks becoming expressive rather than consequential. What may appear as disengagement is often better understood as a recalibration of expectations within increasingly complex political and communicative systems. WP5 qualitative findings repeatedly associate this recalibration with fatigue, frustration, and the sense that political processes remain formally open but practically unreachable.

Recent discussions on learned political helplessness capture this experiential shift: action remains formally possible, yet repeated encounters with limited impact foster the anticipation of ineffectiveness. As one Estonian participant noted:

*“You try to have your say, but why bother if you're a voice in the wilderness? No one really listens”
(Estonia, FG3)*

Similarly, a French respondent expressed a sense of passive spectatorship:

“I'm not satisfied because, from the voter's point of view, I find that we are atonic. I think we watch the trains go by” (France, Int.5)

Such accounts do not signal a rejection of democratic ideals, but rather a crisis of perceived responsiveness. As Rosanvallon (2008) suggests, citizens do not necessarily withdraw from democracy itself, but question whether their voices travel through institutional channels with transformative effect — whether they can be registered, aggregated, and converted into decisions.

Institutional complexity plays a decisive role in shaping this perception. European multilevel governance enhances rights protection and regulatory capacity, yet simultaneously produces opacity and distance (Schmidt, 2006).

Decision-making is fragmented across supranational, national and subnational levels, making lines of responsibility difficult to trace:

“ It's extremely complicated, especially for European elections. It's not clear what you're voting for, who you're voting for, how the Parliament works. I still don't understand it ”(Italy, Int.36)

Here, democratic procedures remain formally intact but cognitively and symbolically inaccessible. This matters because agency is not only a legal condition (having rights) but also a perceptual one (seeing how rights can be exercised effectively). When institutional architectures are experienced as unreadable, participation may persist as an ethical or symbolic commitment but weaken as a meaningful expectation of influence.

However, the qualitative findings acquire additional significance when read alongside the structural transformations of media audiences mapped in Deliverable 5.1. The quantitative analysis documents a long-term decline of written press consumption, accompanied by increasing reliance on online news and steady growth in participation in social networks. Eurobarometer data within D5.1 show a sharp increase in the share of respondents receiving news online (from 26% in 2022 to 37% in 2023), while the written press remains at low levels (21% in both years). At the same time, television remains highly resilient as a daily source of information, with many countries (including Italy) showing very high daily TV usage. The interviews suggest that this transformation is not experienced simply as a shift in channels, but as a change in how politics becomes intelligible, particularly for those who seek accessible formats and interpreters.

“Participant 7: I think that sometimes there are interesting videos on YouTube. For example, one person has their own election news, then there are the Cynical News or even Špaček (Czech Youtuber), who travels around interviewing politicians. These are quite subjective, but you can still get good information from them.

Moderator: So, specific YouTubers, for instance?

Participant 8: Even if it's in the form of satire, it's still a source. The younger generation, and even us, watch it. When there are tough debates where people argue, it can be challenging to stay focused because people often get upset, and it's understandable that they might react irritably. I think YouTube is a good option in the sense that it presents things more simply but still on an intelligent level, even in a way that can be understood by children, depending on the content ” (Czech Republic, FGI)

These patterns matter because they highlight a structural shift: politics is encountered less through bounded institutional moments and more through continuous exposure within cross-media environments. Participation thus becomes less episodic and more diffuse — embedded in day-to-day communicative routines — yet also less clearly consequential. In other words, digital connectivity expands the availability of expression but does not automatically improve the legibility of political influence.

Beyond institutional opacity, symbolic exclusion further undermines agency. In Estonia and Slovenia, respondents describe environments where dissenting opinions risk marginalisation:

“When your opinion differs even slightly and you express it openly, then you are simply erased... it's as if there is only my opinion and the wrong opinion” (Estonia, FG1)

*“Moderator: How do you see people going to protest? Is it a sign that you can have trust in democracy because people are expressing their will. And especially if they achieve some change. Is that also ...
Participant F: What did they achieve? When they had protests, they were targeted by open water cannons [by the police]. It's not very democratic. People were expressing their wish, speaking up that they didn't like something. Then [by the authorities] "No, let's press them down."
Participant D: They [the authorities] showed what they are like. That's also something.
Participant F: Yes. I wouldn't exactly say that we were democratic [state]” (Slovenia, FG2)*

As Fraser (1990) argued, formal inclusion does not guarantee discursive equality. Even when participatory opportunities expand — as suggested by the growth of communicative access across media environments — everyday experiences of delegitimation weaken external political efficacy. The problem is not only whether citizens can speak, but whether they feel their speech can be recognized as legitimate, and whether recognition can be institutionally processed.

“Participant B: Well, it doesn't, really—well, I think that it doesn't function. Perhaps I'm a bit passive myself, not getting involved, because for the most part, I'm quite fed up with it. But I do go out to vote, by the way, just because, he-he... But, well, when it comes to everything else, you actually get this sense of powerlessness that you don't really... You try to have your say, but why say it, if you're a voice in the wilderness? No one really listens. So, you must find a place where you are perhaps heard, but it turns out that it's easier for them to show you the door than hear you out” (Estonia, FG3)

Taking together, the qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that what is at stake is not a decline in democratic norms, but a crisis in the perceived effectiveness of participation. Citizens continue to value democracy and remain communicatively active within increasingly mediatized environments. What weakens

is their belief that engagement produces consequences. The central problem is therefore not participation per se, but translation: the ability of democratic systems to convert expression into recognition, and recognition into decision-making impact. This problem becomes even more complex in contexts where engagement is no longer confined to discrete institutional arenas but diffused across everyday communicative practices. To grasp the contemporary condition of democratic agency, it is therefore necessary to understand how participation has shifted from an episodic institutional act to an embedded feature of daily mediated life.

1.2 Platformed Public Spheres as Amplifiers of Participatory Transformation

If the erosion of political efficacy concerns the weakening of the perceived link between voice and consequence, this link today is inseparable from media infrastructures. Democratic participation is no longer simply mediated; it is increasingly structured through platformised communication environments. Deliverable 5.1 shows that European audiences operate within a cross-media ecology in which digital services expand quickly while legacy media remain present, generating hybrid repertoires rather than linear substitution. Within such environments, participation becomes inseparable from communication itself: the possibility of intervening politically is increasingly imagined through the ability to speak, post, share and mobilise within digital spaces.

“Participant G: It’s consistent in the sense that it’s expressing your opinion. Through that I can show what I support and what I certainly avoid. So it’s a way to show your attitude. It is consistent with democracy in that what’s going on in Palestine is a very huge and bitter topic precisely on social media. And this is a way to show that you care about it, and use the democratic opportunity to hold an opinion about things.

Participant F: This raises a big question: if most people use social media and it’s their main platform for information, then if you begin to manipulate it like with shadow banning—i.e., secretly hiding comments or not showing them to people—then this whole process has an impact on democracy. This... this much can’t be denied. How large of an influence it has is another question. But it would be interesting to find out” (Estonia, FG2)

These remarks capture an ambivalence that recurs across countries: platforms are perceived as expanding opportunities for expression and issue visibility, yet they are also framed as vulnerable infrastructures whose governance can shape what becomes visible, and therefore what counts as participation.

“A: Because who buys newspapers? Only professionals. How many people actually have a subscription to read a newspaper? Very few. If we report or denounce these issues through newspapers, who will read it? People who already have a job and can make a living. Instead, the goal here is to reach those who are struggling to get by.

Moderator: And where can you do that?

A: On social media”

(Italy, INT.31)

From a normative perspective rooted in Habermasian theory, democratic legitimacy depends on communicative conditions that enable the circulation of arguments and their translation into decision-making processes (Habermas, 1989). Yet contemporary public spheres are not structured primarily around deliberative rationality. They are shaped by commercial platform architectures, algorithmic regimes of visibility and attention-driven logics that privilege engagement over deliberation (van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). This transformation does not simply alter the channels of communication; it reshapes how citizens experience agency itself by relocating participation into environments where attention, reach and resonance are uncertain.

“On social networks, there is still a stronger participation, there, I think, once again, in recent legislative elections, for example. I had the impression that there was a wave on social networks of people urging people to go and vote. We even saw influencers encouraging people to vote. In any case, I don't know if that's what made so many people go to vote, but I tend to believe that there was still a good turnout” (France, INT.2)

On the one hand, the expansion of communicative opportunities allows individuals to express opinions and mobilise with unprecedented ease. Citizens across the WP5 qualitative sample consistently identify social media as the most immediate way of making themselves heard. This perception is compatible with the quantitative evidence of expanding online engagement and increased reliance on online sources for news. Platforms are experienced as lowering thresholds of participation by reducing coordination costs and embedding political communication within everyday routines.

“I think social media has a lot of influence, especially because I believe one of the reasons why voter turnout has gone down is because today votes are not only based on a two-party system, but are also a bit of combat votes. So, if I see news about a party I don't like, I will vote for the completely opposite party. For example, if I see news about Chega that I don't like, I'll vote for Bloco de Esquerda. If I see news about Bloco de Esquerda that I don't like, I'll vote for Chega. I think the fact that people are increasingly susceptible to seeing information on social media can give small cues about party X and party Y, and the debates will drive people to want to vote, even if it's just to participate” (Portugal, FG.4)

On the other hand, this perceived accessibility coexists with an awareness of its limits. As another respondent put it:

Moderator: In your opinion, can TV, newspapers and radio be spaces where citizens speak out and talk about public issues, or are they closed spaces?

A: I think they feel distant. It seems like they look for citizens more for interactions and comments, just to generate more of them. I don't really use many other communication systems apart from YouTube and social media, mostly by scrolling. But it feels like it's mainly news with comments underneath. The news on TV pushes a certain kind of communication, but there's no space for comments there. (Italy, INT.17)

This tension reflects a deeper distinction between the capacity to speak and the capacity to be heard. As Couldry (2012) argues, voice is not merely the act of expression but the social recognition that what is said matters. Citizens implicitly articulate this distinction when they acknowledge that social media allow them to “reach out” while simultaneously doubting whether this outreach carries sufficient force to shape political outcomes. One participant described this ambivalence clearly:

“Because I envisage that it would essentially be, via social networks, because it would be the easiest to access, but there would be a kind of mass effect which could drown out the quality of a wish or an information transmitted by citizens, to see the reality of what people write, how they write it, and what it is supposed to represent which, for me, makes no sense, but it is perhaps biased by our own convictions. In addition, I don't know what our elected representatives are doing with it. And no, I don't think there is a real, or at least sufficient, place in other forms of media, in the press, in advertising media, in radio, for citizens to be able to express themselves, perhaps precisely through one person, and that it is representative of what a majority of citizens would like, because we are going to give the floor perhaps to the associative, but as I said, who will still be quite biased on certain opinions, who will represent their associative body, possibly people who only participate financially in this association, without necessarily being involved in it, and then, once again, the mass of the population, in the pejorative sense, but the number, will not necessarily express themselves or be visible in the media, in my opinion..” (France, INT.6)

The distinction between access and participation developed by Carpentier (2011) becomes particularly illuminating in this context. Platforms undoubtedly expand access by enabling users to enter communicative circuits; however, participation in the stronger democratic sense implies influence over decision-making processes. The qualitative evidence suggests that this second dimension is far less certain — and the quantitative mapping helps clarify why: as online participation grows, communicative environments become more saturated, competitive, and fragmented, making visibility less predictable and influence harder to trace. The communicative affordances of platforms make it possible to publish opinions instantly and circulate them within networks, yet algorithmic filtering and attention competition limit their reach and durability. As one interviewee noted: “I think it's a way. But it's a drop in the ocean”.

The capacity to intervene becomes decoupled from the capacity to produce change. Participation becomes ubiquitous at the level of expression while remaining uncertain at the level of outcome. In this sense, the platformed public sphere generates a paradoxical form of agency. It empowers citizens symbolically by enabling continuous expression, while simultaneously weakening confidence that such expression can translate into political effect. The expansion of communicative infrastructures documented in the quantitative mapping of audiences thus coexists with qualitative perceptions of limited political consequence. Digital environments multiply opportunities for expression without necessarily clarifying how such expression travels into institutional circuits.

The challenge facing contemporary democracies therefore lies less in expanding opportunities for participation — which platformed environments have already multiplied — than in restoring intelligible mechanisms through which mediated expression can be translated into political impact. Without such mechanisms, participation risks remaining expressive but politically weightless.

1.3 Individualized Participation and the Problem of Aggregation

While platformed environments expand opportunities for individual expression, they also reshape the conditions through which participation unfolds and acquires collective relevance. Across the qualitative material, citizens do not describe participation as weakened or diminished. Rather, they experience it as increasingly grounded in accessible tools that allow individuals to intervene directly in the production and circulation of information.

Political engagement is frequently framed through the possibility of acting autonomously, without the mediation of traditional organisations. As participants observe:

Moderator: How do you think that today, citizens can participate in information, its production and its dissemination? Do you have any examples?

PF (M, 20): Like I said, the different types of new live media that allow anyone to broadcast whatever they want anytime, during a demonstration, a party, a thing.

PD (W, 34): I am thinking in particular of the podcast. Just buy a microphone, create an account and anyone can become a podcaster or YouTuber.

PB (M, 34): TikTok. TikTok!

PG (M, 30): Yes, it opens the door to everyone.

*PD (W, 34): This perhaps complicates the information we have, because not everything is reliable.
(France, FGI)*

Here, participation is explicitly associated with lowered entry barriers and expanded accessibility. Citizens recognise that communicative tools allow anyone to enter the public arena. At the same time, this openness

introduces complexity, as the multiplication of voices does not necessarily translate into shared standards of reliability or coordination.

This perception resonates with broader transformations in media use mapped in Deliverable 5.1, where engagement increasingly unfolds within hybrid and personalised media environments. Participation is no longer confined to institutional spaces but circulates through platforms that allow immediate visibility. As one respondent notes:

PA: For me, the media that best corresponds to popular expression will be social networks media. Why? Because everyone can give their opinion. There is no filter. If you want to say something, you film yourself with your phone and you post it on the networks. And if you want to be heard, people will hear you. Afterwards, it will depend on the algorithms. (France, INT.1)

Crucially, the qualitative material shows that this individualisation does not necessarily isolate participation. Instead, it often facilitates the emergence of collective initiatives that would otherwise remain invisible. For instance:

“Yes, well, first of all it helps, as you say, to organize some groups with similar, I don't know, views, with similar needs. I will give an example maybe from our neighborhood. If I didn't use Facebook-type media I wouldn't know that there is a group that is cleaning up the Drwinka river, yes? It takes care of the area so that a park will be built there one day. They are very active on this subject. If it wasn't for this very medium, I wouldn't have known that something like this was even available and that I could get involved” (Poland, FG.4)

Similarly, Italian participants highlight how digital tools support local mobilisation:

P6 (F, 65): In my opinion, social media play a big role, because I see it even in WhatsApp groups — small initiatives often achieve a lot. A practical example: tram 73 had been removed, and in our neighborhood we mobilized; people could collect signatures in local shops, and in the end it was partially reinstated. So, in the end, something can be achieved — maybe not on the scale of the French Revolution, but change can start from small actions. The same happens in neighborhood meetings: it begins with WhatsApp groups, maybe someone collects signatures...

P7 (F, 38): That's true. It works. In my municipality... although maybe it really happens more in smaller communities rather than in big cities.

Participation is therefore not confined to expression. It extends into concrete practices of coordination and problem-solving, often rooted in local contexts. Other forms of mobilisation also emerge through digital infrastructures:

“Many activities are “promoted”... through social media... which makes it possible to reach many more people... For example, I am a blood donor and the association... has its own Facebook page... people... send messages via Facebook... and are more encouraged to take part”(Italy, INT.8)

These accounts suggest that participation becomes embedded in everyday practices, including volunteering, fundraising and civic initiatives. At the same time, citizens consistently describe platforms as enabling more active engagement than traditional media:

“P7: television or radio or newspapers are actually all things where you only perceive and receive... with social media you can actively get involved”(Germany, FG.2)

However, participants also acknowledge that participation often remains socially bounded:

“You feel like you’re part of a discussion, but it’s always the same people”(Italy, INT.29)

This does not signal disengagement. Rather, it highlights the distributed nature of contemporary participation. As a Portuguese participant reflects: *through social media, each of us can play an active role in democracy... it’s a platform available to everyone (Portugal, INT.1).*

Participation is widely accessible and frequently enacted, yet it does not always translate into broader collective alignment. Platformed environments facilitate local mobilisation and everyday civic action, yet scaling these initiatives into broader political influence remains more complex. The uncertainty of translation is explicitly voiced in the material itself:

“ I don't know what our elected representatives are doing with it” (France, INT.6)

Contemporary participation thus appears less weakened than redistributed. It often produces tangible results at micro-levels, while its capacity to travel beyond immediate networks depends on whether distributed actions can align across fragmented communicative spaces.

1.4 Participation as Capacity: Education as a Democratic Resource

The preceding discussion has shown that the limits of participation within contemporary communicative environments cannot be understood solely in terms of access or technological availability. The qualitative material consistently suggests that citizens themselves interpret participation not simply as an opportunity that exists, but as something that requires learning, orientation and competence. Participation is experienced less as an automatic outcome of rights or platforms and more as something that depends on familiarity with democratic processes and everyday civic practices.

As one Portuguese participant explains:

“I think that even in schools, for example, it's not just the subject of citizenship, it's promoting discussion groups, cleaning schools, for example. I think that Japan has rules for children to clean classrooms when they leave, to pick up and clean up for the school. And all of this, I think it's important to later be able to recognise the value of getting along better with those who are doing these tasks” (Portugal, FG.3)

Similarly, Czech respondents stress the importance of understanding democratic mechanisms in accessible ways:

“Participant 8: Especially consulting with people of all age groups. I like it when schools explain how elections work. I'd like to see more explanations of the impact of our politicians in the Chamber of Deputies and the European Parliament, like what influence they have. But in a simplified way, not through complex laws, just explaining it clearly—how it all works. I think that education is essential. Also, we should talk openly with people and listen to their opinions. We shouldn't be too rigid, and we should understand why the older generation votes the way they do. Maybe we get frustrated with our grandmothers for voting a certain way, but we should calmly talk about it and try to understand. As Participant 5 said, even extreme opinions are opinions, and we need to be empathetic because we don't live in the other person's shoes, and we don't know what experiences shaped their views” (Czech Republic, FG.1)

Italian participants also highlight how limited understanding can weaken engagement:

“In my opinion, it's also important to make people better understand what the European elections are for. Yes, because they are useful — in the sense that it's necessary to go and vote, on a practical level, for the kind of change that could happen in Europe in this case, and which would consequently also bring that change to your own country. The change would take place in Europe, since we are talking about decisions made at the European level, but also in Italy, which is part of Europe and therefore benefits from it” (Italy, INT.13)

When these perspectives are read alongside the audience transformations mapped in Deliverable 5.1, the issue becomes clearer. Citizens increasingly encounter politics through complex information environments that require interpretative skills. Qualitative material directly links democratic inclusion to uneven access to educational resources and time, and to the lived constraints that shape whether participation is feasible.

“Maybe I'd like to think about democracy, which is also closely linked to education, because it's very important for a person to have an idea of what democracy is and since, for example, most of us here probably have a university degree or have studied, we have an idea of democracy. What does voting involve? We've always had the privilege of knowing about local government: what are you going to do? But a lot of people are disconnected from that, they're disconnected from voting, they're disconnected from politics, from democracy, because they don't even realise it. Or frankly, they don't want to think about voting when they have to work. There's a disconnection, you see. A lot of people don't know what politics is, what democracy is, and because democracy doesn't work the same for everyone, not everyone has access to democracy for various, various reasons, such as region, age, schooling, work, you name it. So, for me, it's a bit difficult to detach, I don't know, society from democracy, education from democracy. And maybe that also causes a bit of a lack of trust, because people don't see the results of access to things” (Portugal, FG.2)

A French respondent points to the absence of early political socialisation:

“I know that, for example, politics is a subject that was taboo in my family, that I never heard of it. And yet, we, young people, are asked to get involved, to vote, to take part in politics in France. And I kind of agree, actually. I have the impression... Well, personally, I'm interested in politics when we enter the election period, in fact. So maybe it's something that can actually be cultivated. But we have no actual teaching of politics per se. And we are asked to inform ourselves and make choices in record time. I see for the legislative elections, it has been done in 2 weeks” (France, INT.6)

Another Portuguese participant adds:

“I think, and picking up on what was said earlier, that education can help promote participation. Education can help promote political participation and I don't think that nowadays this is promoted, because I remember when I was at school, we talked very little about politics, we talked very little about what was happening in our society and I never, never went looking to find out a bit more and that's why I think that promotion has to come from education, and it has to come from our education system so that we leave school knowing what and how our state works, what we have to do and how we can participate” (Portugal, FG.2)

Across contexts, participation is thus framed as requiring orientation rather than mere access. Citizens do not deny that participatory channels exist. Rather, they stress that without the ability to interpret institutions, evaluate information and understand the consequences of choices, participation remains difficult to enact meaningfully. In increasingly mediated environments — as documented in Deliverable 5.1 — navigating politics involves engaging with abundant and uneven information flows, and the perceived difficulty of participation is often described as the practical outcome of this complexity.

Education therefore emerges not as an external supplement to participation but as one of its enabling conditions. Political literacy supports understanding of where decisions are made and how influence might be exercised, while media literacy helps navigate environments structured by visibility and credibility dynamics. Participation, in this sense, appears less like an automatic outcome of access and more as a capacity that depends on socialisation, knowledge and interpretative resources. Citizens do not describe themselves as unwilling to participate, but often as insufficiently equipped to do so in ways that feel consequential.

Conclusions for section I

The analysis developed in this chapter suggests that the contemporary condition of democratic participation in Europe cannot be understood through the lens of decline alone. Citizens continue to engage, express opinions and interact within political debates across multiple communicative arenas. Participation has not disappeared; rather, it has expanded and diversified. Yet this expansion has not resolved the persistent gap between voice and consequence.

Across the empirical material examined, participation appears increasingly embedded within mediated environments that multiply opportunities for expression while complicating the pathways through which such expression might influence decision-making processes. Digital platforms enable continuous communicative presence and often support concrete practices of civic action, local mobilisation, fundraising and issue-based engagement. At the same time, they do not necessarily provide mechanisms through which dispersed voices can be aggregated or translated into institutional impact, and citizens frequently describe uncertainty about what institutions do with the expressions that circulate online.

The resulting tension is not between participation and apathy, but between participation and effectiveness. Citizens remain normatively committed to democratic ideals, yet they struggle to perceive themselves as consequential actors within complex political and communicative systems. This difficulty reflects both structural and experiential dimensions. Platformed environments expand access and enable local coordination, yet they also fragment attention and disperse expression, complicating the emergence of claims that can travel beyond immediate networks. At the same time, the qualitative material highlights how meaningful participation is experienced as requiring understanding and competence, and how citizens often interpret

disengagement as rooted in disorientation, lack of civic education, and unequal access to the resources needed to navigate politics.

The emphasis placed by citizens on political and media education underscores the importance of interpretative resources in shaping democratic agency, especially in a context where information abundance and uneven capacity to interpret institutions can further complicate participation.

The challenge facing contemporary democracies therefore lies less in expanding opportunities for participation — which are already abundant — than in enabling the translation of dispersed voices into forms capable of engaging decision-making processes. This translation depends both on infrastructural conditions and on the competencies through which citizens interpret and act within complex systems.

Democratic agency persists, but its effectiveness increasingly hinges on the intelligibility of the connections between expression, recognition and consequence. The resilience of democratic systems may therefore depend not only on sustaining participation, but on ensuring that participation can be understood, aggregated and rendered consequential within an increasingly platformised communicative landscape.

Section II: Trust and legitimacy

The goal of this section is to single out a few selected insights from deliverables 5.2- *Report on Trust in Media and Democratic Institutions in Europe* and 5.5- *Comparative Report on Audience Needs in Ten European Countries*, and combine them with the theoretical embedding provided in deliverable 2.1- *Democracy and Media: A Discursive-Material Approach*, in order to reflect on the state of people's trust in the media and in the political institutions in the EU. In particular, we will pull into focus the relationship between the well-known *trust versus distrust* problem, and the *legitimacy* of the institutions as it is perceived by the citizens – with legitimacy being, based on Carl Schmitt, even more necessary to the very foundation of democracy (1923, 30). In the second section we discuss affects around democracy and focus more precisely on notions of disenchantment and disappointed while in the third section we discuss the institutions where distrust is mainly directed at (e.g. professional politicians, voting and justice). Later, we look at notions of systemic trust and in the last section, we offer some conceptual notes around trust, media and democracy.

2.1 Trust and legitimacy in the eyes of the Europeans: Insights from deliverables 2.1, 5.2, and 5.5

To start with, whether trust and legitimacy are different in kind or in degree is a widely debated issue. According to the theoretical framework we have been following, albeit trust is undeniably a fundamental “condition of possibility for democracy” – in Europe and elsewhere - in the end “trust and legitimacy are not the same” (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025, 24). In this respect, *disenchantment* is one of the reasons for the citizens to move away from political participation and political news (ibidem, 85-87), showing that disillusion would trigger people's distrust, without necessarily impacting the level of legitimacy. In a similar vein, it can be stated that trust is a broader dimension, also largely implying social solidarity and inter-personal reliability, whilst political legitimacy is fueled by the perceived trustworthiness of a few specific institutions (Pakulski 1992, 25; on trust as a broader societal issue, see also Fukuyama 1995, and the first part of deliverable 5.2)¹. In deliverable 5.2, for instance, we already emphasized the difference between *vertical* trust, which shows the fading reputation of the institutions in the eyes of the citizens, and *horizontal* trust, related to general social mutuality, which even happened to increase, especially in the Southern countries which were more deeply affected by the economic crisis (see also Rakopoulos 2015). The most staggering example of the tick relation between general political values and the granular circulation of social capital is provided by an Estonian interviewee:

“Q: In general, do you trust the democratic system in Estonia?”

¹ The misalignment between trust and legitimacy brings with it another aspect that cannot be fully discussed here: that both trust and legitimacy, in the end, may go in favor on non-democratic rulers, as in the case of Weber's charismatic power, or in Buchanan's distinction between legitimacy, authority, and authoritativeness (2002, 692-694).

Person G: Well, I'm a bad example in the sense that I trust people. I just had a car accident and I trusted the person who caused it will write to me today, but they haven't written the car number. I just won't learn from my daughter's profession.

Q: Are you okay?

Person G: Yeah, yeah. But I won't learn. I trust people. I'm not like a good role model.

Q: Well, people are different. But this trust in people somehow extends in your case to trust in the system, so to speak.

Person G: Yes, I trust. So, well. When I go to the doctor then I trust that they have their, they're professionals. And obviously I can see that there are also very inadequate decision makers among politicians and they're in there for something, I don't know, how. Well, we do know. It's probably because of the very high ambition that totally unprofessional people get in who shouldn't be in the state system. But basically, I trust that they want to make better. Well, I'm also from the generation whose generation of people created, well, the legal system and the whole idealistic Estonian state again. Well. I know the people who have said how they want to do it and it's all made on that basis. All kinds of other space dust comes in between that. That's probably also a natural part of democracy. But I have a ninety-year-old aunt who lives and is very smart and she's been talking about democracy all her life, so she says that democracy is only for the smart. In the hands of stupid people democracy doesn't work"

(Estonia, INT.G)

For this reason, in the working document *Demand Side D5.5- Data Analysis Update*, we included an ad-hoc dimension related to horizontal trust, named *Shared Ideals and Proximity*, aside with the more classical factors relying on *Guarantee Institutions and Instruments*, and to *Residual Trust and Hope*. In all likelihood, the importance of this sort of pre-political solidarity has been sidelined so far, and it will require closer attention in the future, as it can pave way to a better understanding of people's daily engagement in society at large, beyond the domains of political activities in the strict sense (i.e., voting, participation to demonstrations, petitions, or subscription to official parties).

As to the vertical dimension, the decoupling between trust and legitimacy is made evident by people's insistence, during our interview sessions in all the countries considered, on the frustration and disappointment produced by how the democratic institutions work, regardless of the general principles they are inspired by. A French interviewee perfectly expressed this gulf between the *disillusion* brought about by current political affairs, and the *legitimacy* of democracy as such:

"M: And what would you say about your level of trust in political institutions?

PA: My confidence was put to the test. I've voted since... I've been voting for 20 years now, 22 years. And I started with a barrage vote for Chirac against Le Pen. And for a start, it was a bit unusual, since

I'm not necessarily on the right, nor on the far right. So, I voted from my first vote against my desires, against my will. So, I had expectations. And at the same time, I didn't have too many expectations regarding this president. And then afterwards, I tried to defend my ideas. I protested. I voted as I saw fit. And I realized that politics was not necessarily always what we hoped for. There's a lot of talking and not much action. We were very disappointed. And we always feel like we're being taken for a ride. Now, the 5th Republic is made like this. Should we change, perhaps? Should we evolve? I think, because it's still something that was done in the 60s or 50s and 60s. So perhaps there is an adaptation to be made to current society. We no longer have the same desires. We no longer have the same ambitions. The population has changed. There were all the baby boomers retiring. So, there is a demographic evolution which is completely different. There are different needs in the regions. In the 1950s, the population was more rural than now. Perhaps we should readjust the institutions a little to better suit the desires of citizens, yes.

M: Would you say that between 20 years ago, when you voted for the first time and today, your level of confidence – or even let alone level – but your confidence, has it changed? Have there been any changes?

PA: I don't know if my confidence has changed. I like to trust people in general. And afterwards, some betray or... I don't know if we can say betray, but in any case, they have opinions that are different from mine. Afterwards, the fact of voting for one person or another, obviously, will not reflect my desires. So afterwards, we must understand that the person who governs, governs for everyone through his/her own view. So, it won't necessarily suit my desires. Now, I want to trust again, because if you no longer trust, afterwards, it's quite terrible. So, no, I think my confidence hasn't been shaken. I still want to believe in the institutions of this country. And I will fight in any case so that it is respected”
(France, INT.1)

Or, as the participant to a focus group in Slovenia observed:

“I won't repeat myself on every question. I have confidence in all these institutions I have the mindset that there are cases where they don't work. But in principle I trust. And that's part of democracy too, when things don't work, I go to the polls. I express myself so that then they will do something. But I know that this is a minority opinion. Now you can all go on. I just wanted to say my opinion” (Slovenia, FG.4)

“Institutions don't work”, this crystal-clear synthesis goes, “but in principle I trust”. In Italy, the MeDeMAP research team reached a comparable conclusion, by using a quite different rhetorical formula:

“Q: So, let's go back to that child to whom we explained what democracy is. If he did ask “can we trust democracy”, what would you reply?

A. Well, yes, I do trust. Most of the relevant choices are taken in the interest of the citizens. In Italy the opposition exercises a strong, maybe even exaggerated control of veto and amendments. The majority even complain about not having enough freedom. Which, from my side, is rather positive [...]. There are a few initiatives and dispositions that go against the citizens. The opposition always must speak its voice, but 90% of the passed laws are in the citizens' interest. So, I would say yes" (Italy, INT.6)

The same concept, to limit ourselves to a few examples, has been also put forward by a Portuguese and a German citizen:

"I trust, generally speaking. In fact, I trust all our democratic institutions because, even though some may show weaknesses at certain moments or during specific periods, these weaknesses stem from those who hold the positions. Sometimes, for example, I'll give the example of the Attorney General's Office, which should be a position or an institution above all suspicion. What we have seen is that with the current attorney general, who is at the end of her term, she has not been able to preserve the integrity of the Office. There have been a series of incidents that do not dignify the institution at all. However, my trust lies not only in the institution itself but also in all democratic institutions. Sometimes, it is the individuals leading these institutions who do not have the best profile to represent them. Finally, regarding the democratic model we currently have, it is sometimes the representatives who fall short"(Portugal, INT.1)

"Then I'm happy to continue, aren't I? Okay. In principle, I also have confidence in the function that it [the democratic system] currently fulfils. If I can roughly agree with both. Apart from our bureaucracy, which is always very cumbersome"(Germany, FG.1)

In this case, we may say that as much as democracy is perceived as flawed, or even *broken*, there is hope in the possibility of fixing it. Not surprisingly, a more direct confrontation between citizens and representatives is presented as a possible solution, and it has been directly experienced by a citizen interviewed in Estonia:

"Person M: Your local governance, omavalitsused, like, you know these like small district governments that in turn eventually answer to like city government, and then to your like government. But then it's I feel that trust goes only so far as when you have positive experiences going back and forth. Having, comparing my trust in government here, for instance, didn't trust it up until I started having issues. And then I ended up getting in touch with my elected member of Congress who immediately set things forth and who personally fixed an issue for me. And it's something that I experienced with Estonian government as well a while ago, but that was then, and nearly a decade ago" (Estonia, INT.M)

Besides the notable Estonian exception, though, the relationship between the citizens and the rulers is way more problematic, also and especially in terms of trust, as expressed by an Italian interviewee:

“You cannot blindly trust, you always have to stay alert. Give freedom and be ready to take it back. Trust like we do with people, starting with the assumption that “ok, this one wants the good for anyone”, but also being ready to understand when this does not happen. And then, I withdraw my trust from you” (Italy, INT.34)

Interestingly, Zizi Papacharissi collected a similar instance, through her qualitative interviews to citizens on the state of democracy around the world: the widespread idea, in short, that if people “trust politicians with their vote”, then we should also consider mechanisms for revoking that trust when the bond has been broken” (2021, 112).

Such weakness, as opposed to the confidence “in principle”, would still produce a cascade of pernicious effects, variously thematized in our coding for deliverable 5.2 as *disinterest, abstentionism, or lack of citizen's power*. These findings, along with others stored in the deliverable 5.5 dataset, would also come as a confirmation of the indications collected by means of secondary analysis for deliverable 5.2., as in both cases it is not primarily democracy per se to be questioned, but the way it concretely unfolds caused to power imbalances, economic injustice, or bureaucratic limitations and constraints. If anything, the permanence of a positive understanding of democracy as a common value is due to the comparison with non-democratic countries or stages of European history, as proved by a focus group realized in Portugal.

MODERATOR: Do you think it is better?

SPEAKER 5: I do. I trust it, given what we see in other countries, where there are still dictatorships, where information is completely blocked, so I don't know.

SPEAKER 6: Compare this democracy we live in to the democracy we experienced in the 20s and 30s.

MODERATOR In the 20s and 30s, which was a rather complicated democracy.

SPEAKER 6: But certainly, this is what we have been living for the last 20 years.

SPEAKER 9: It's a kind of democracy, but not quite. Okay, let's put it this way.

SPEAKER 6: Running over each other to get elected. If we study the entire history, from the establishment of the Republic to the Estado Novo, the beginning of the Estado Novo. They trampled over each other to get power. That's what we're seeing now.

MODERATOR : Do you think it's the same or?

SPEAKER 6: Actually, it was worse. Back then it was worse. Back then it was more militarized and now it's not.

(Portugal, FG.3)

A similar argument has been made in Estonia by an interviewee, coming from non-Western origins:

Q: Do you trust political institutions here?

Person N: Yes, I do trust political institutions here.

Q: Why?

Person N: Because I have seen the worst political institutions in my country, so they are better than them. Of course, they're less corrupt. They don't control the channels. In our country army is very dominant. Army is, I mean, interfering with the political decisions. I won't say that my country is democratic. It has a long history of dictatorship, so there are some channels that are being controlled and owned by army generals. Army generals are in banks. They are in every strong financial institution of Pakistan, so that they can control the people. So here it's not like this. Army has a specific role to defend a country in certain conditions, and they're doing that. They're not interfering in the political scenario or the political system of any country. Yeah. And the power of vote in EU is very strong. Yeah, I totally agree with that.

(Estonia, INT.N)

As Winston Churchill allegedly said, so, democracy appears to be the worst form of government - except for all the other forms ever tried during human civilization. As obvious as it may seem, this evidence should not be overlooked, as one reason of the declining trust in democracy among the youth, in the whole Western world, is supposed to be the plain fact that the young generations – for the first time in modern history - are simply too young to have experienced life under non-democratic or authoritarian regimes (Mounk 2018, 123).

What is even more significant is that Europe, and the European Union as well, are granted with a sort of residual trust in an age of troubles and turmoil. The second-hand analysis presented in deliverable 5.2 had already shown traces of this tendency, with the EU institutions generally being perceived as more solid and reliable than the national ones. We can quote two examples coming from the interviews realized in Czech Republic and – with a more emphatical tone - in Italy:

“Participant 19: I see the guarantee of democracy primarily in the European Union because for me, some of the political parties are more like a theater, the system itself, but the fact that we're anchored in the European Union and that we adopt the vast majority of our legislation from the EU is, for me, the basis of democracy. That's the foundation for me” (Czech Republic, FG.2)

“Q. You were referring to the Head of State. In case of an actual extremist drift, fascist, who else should intervene?”

A: At a high level, also the EU. Because we are members of the EU and cases of totalitarianism or deprivation of rights should be taken under control, surveilled by the EU. But we are also part of NATO, and therefore I expect that all entities regulating rights at the inter-state and international level may intervene and prevent things from degenerating. Hence UE, NATO, United Nations, all the societies supposed to regulate rights” (Italy, INT.25)

This would also give strength to previous evidence collected by some researchers involved in the MEDEMAP project, in particular by means of the even more radically qualitative methodology of the Delphi+ workshops. In that case, it is interesting that in common narratives EU was somehow given both the role of the “villain” and that of the “positive hero”, and in particular, it was assigned a “prominent role” in facing the problems produced by destructive technological innovations (Carpentier, Miconi 2024, 74-75). We know, of course, that the European Union itself is undergoing a serious crisis of legitimacy, which is widely attested for in scientific literature; and for this very reason, it is relevant to observe how often it is also perceived as a possible solution to current problems and criticalities. Additionally, a number of critics to the credibility of the European Union appear to be based on the same double level between the overarching legitimacy of the institution, on the one hand, and the material implementation of its regulation and workplan, on the other. As another Italian interviewee said:

“I understand that anyone has its own value in the EU, but a State like Cyprus cannot afford to put a veto on a given topic in the same way Germany does, I find this unfair. It is a matter of weight, responsibility, it is not only rights. I had serious discussions, during my meetings, stating that tax havens should not be allowed in the EU, as this means that we are fighting each other. The representative who was there answered that a small State has a few people to feed. I always supported the European common army, not for offense but to let the others know that, in case of trouble, you are able to defend yourself” (Italy,INT.12)

In conclusion, democracy still stands out as positive value in the minds of the Europeans, therefore - but at the same time, it turns out that democratic institutions are hardly capable of solving people’s problems in real life. As a participant to an Estonian focus group said, “I think that, say, five years ago, my trust in democracy and the progress of the society in general was significantly greater”. Still, after which point does distrust² become something else, and even put into question the legitimacy of democratic order as such, though, it is not easy to tell. At least in theoretical terms, and for many reasons, but maybe especially for one: that our understanding of the legitimacy of institutional authorities is largely grounded on Max Weber’ work - and Weber never considers, not even once, the dimension of people’s trust, political agency and participation. Rather, in his

² We will not take any position, here, in the debate around the increase of distrust in the whole Western world, which is generally accepted but has been actually questioned by a number of scholars (for an overview, [see Thomassen, Andeweg, van Ham 2017; Valgarðsson et al 2025](#)).

view *legitimacy* is somehow an ontological property inherent to any given form of power: including, and the more significantly, in the case of the bureaucratic authority of the liberal national states (Weber 1919, 37), which is under observation in our case. As to the theoretical framework we are following, to some extent a similar understanding is implied in the idea of legitimacy as the ability of the rulers to get “consent” from the “governed” (Carpentier, Wimmer 2025, 23; mainly based on Chabot 1993). In the next sections, therefore, we will provide an empirical assessment, before trying to sketch a temporary conclusion on the balance between trust and legitimacy in the European democracy, albeit limited to the scope of our investigation.

2.2 Disenchantment, disappointment and effect of democratic trust

To dig deeper into the ways that democracy and trust are negotiated in our data, we focus in this section on the sentiments, moods and affects that we detect in the interviews. Chantal Mouffe argued for “the crucial role played by common affects in the constitution of political forms of identification” (2018), putting specific emphasis on the importance of passions and emotions in democratic politics. The shared moods of a political constituency shape how the specific model of democracy is felt and lived how participants from the focus groups perceive democracy as a larger background “atmosphere” in their everyday lives – atmospheres refer to the “affective powers of feeling” and the “spatial bearers of moods” (2017, 16), to refer to how Gernot Böhme theorized the concept.

As we saw before, across interviews and focus groups, distrust in democratic institutions rarely appears as explicit anti-democratic sentiment but as condition of disenchantment, understood here, drawing loosely on Weber, as a gradual erosion of meaning and emotional investment in a particular cause. Similarly to Josephson-Storm (2017), we do not see disenchantment as a totalizing narrative of modernity but as a grounded and affective condition through which democratic life is experienced. We thus do not claim that the politically demotivating affects we detect across interviewees are part of some *longue durée* of democratic disenchantment (Braudel, 1982) but rather that they are situated in the historical present (and can thus be potentially reversible). Across the data, then disappointment, fatigue and confusion are interrelated affects composing a shared atmosphere of democratic disenchantment. Despite this atmosphere of disenchantment, trust in democracy most often means trust in the ideal, the desirable horizon.

Drawing on affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; 2012), we understand affects as circulating, accumulating and “sticking” to objects, institutions and practices over time. The object is here is democracy and as affects and emotions of disappointment become attached to it, they produce conditions of disenchantment. One interviewee from Portugal articulates this disjuncture explicitly: “So it’s not really this aspect of people, it’s what matters most to me and we should all be able to live in harmony, always thinking about the common good. But in the end, unfortunately, that’s not what democracy has brought us. I confess I’m getting a little disappointed”. This statement is not anti-democratic per se but expresses a normative attachment to democracy,

insofar as democracy remains legitimate as an ideal yet without affective fulfilment. What has waned is trust in its capacity to deliver ethical and social goods.

Politics, within this climate of disappointment, can be experienced as increasingly professionalized and distanced from everyday concerns (see also next section). As another respondent notes, “Politics is more for professionals... who are distanced from the people... preoccupied with their own personal projects”. The speaker concludes with a mood of fatigue: “That’s a little disenchanting... I confess I’m getting a little disappointed”. Similarly, another respondent from Portugal observes, “I do feel some dissatisfaction. They don't defend the most disadvantaged people. I mean, they talk, they say they give a lot, but it’s noticeable that they seem to be defending the powerful, the big companies, the powerful ones”(Portugal, INT.5). Here, disappointment relates precisely to expectations on outcomes that fail to materialize.

In this sense, we can perceive disenchantment as a modality of trust, insofar as citizens continue to orient themselves toward democracy as a normative horizon while suspending belief in its practical responsiveness. Electoral politics, or what we discussed before as “minimalist participation”, constitutes a key site where this affective dynamic takes shape. Several participants describe democratic procedures as producing illusion rather than agency; as one participant from Slovenia remarked, “There is a lot of illusion... some kind of throwing sand in the eye” (Slovenia, FG.3). When promises remain symbolic and unimplemented, disappointment accumulates: “When that illusion has to be put into practice, then it gets stuck in a concrete way. And that is why people are disappointed.” The atmospheres of disenchantment here relate to broken promises and abandoned expectations.

This helps explain why voting’s effectiveness is problematized as the minimum form of participation (yet not abandoned as an ideal). One participant reflects on the accelerated rhythm of disappointment: “We look for someone, vote for someone, then are disappointed and would like to vote again immediately.” Democracy appears simultaneously too slow to respond and too fast in producing disenchantment. The participant describes a lingering sense of powerlessness:

“Participant I: ... Like, ‘okay, that’s crap, let’s take someone new’—perhaps that. But then again, perhaps we should give them time so they could come up with something good. Perhaps—I’m not sure. But in this sense, I’m... Sometimes, you do get this sense of powerlessness, right? You just think, ‘See, it doesn’t work’. It’s really unfortunate if you vote for someone and they turn out to be a very different kind of person from what their brand was, right? So that’s a bad point” (Estonia, FG.3)

Disappointment here is inseparable from representation, from the gap between political personas and the experience of being governed. In any case, in these responses there is a decoupling between trust and legitimacy. Trust, as we shall also see later, in institutions, actors and procedures weaken, while legitimacy of

the ideal of democracy can endure as a background assumption. This endurance is often maintained through minimal, procedural engagement, with effects such as anger directed against the voting system. The act of spoiling the ballot paper, for instance, is described as a way of remaining within democracy while refusing available voting choices:

“Participant I: Well, that’s the thing; they say that vote for a... if you can’t vote for a worldview, then vote for a person. This is actually a somewhat poor recommendation, but at least you go out to vote then, right? Which is, after all, the foundation of democracy. I, for one, can say that I’ve repeatedly ‘voted’ by simply spoiling the ballot paper—because then I can later on complain that I did go out to vote, but no candidate was suitable for me. Because if you don’t go at all, then it’s like, ‘What are you complaining about? You didn’t even go’. So, that’s like...”(Estonia, FG.3)

In the Irish focus group, a sentiment of disappointment is echoed, describing the behavior of a disenchanted youth:

*“Male 3 01:20:15: I know, I suppose another point as well, just to go back to the passive element of it. There’s a lot of; there’s a lot of young people I suppose today that wouldn’t bother voting. [mmm...] And they don’t bother voting because (a) they think whatever they’re voting for isn’t quite relevant to them. [Yeah]. And like there were, what were the, some referendums that we had that load of people turned up to vote in and then the Register of Electors went up exponentially and then, no, for the next, I don’t know what election it was that followed, only half the people showed up. And there’s a lot of young people today I suppose that don’t see the value of [Yeah].
Male 2 01:20:52: [Yeah], absolutely!”
(Ireland, FG.3)*

We can think of the above responses in relation to Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism” (2013) as a heuristic for understanding why democratic investment persists despite repeated disappointment. Democracy remains an object of attachment even as it repeatedly fails to provide the conditions it promises. Citizens continue to invest affectively in democracy because letting go would imply a loss of orientation, the loss of a shared horizon of meaning and possibility (and the feared regression to even less democracy or even dictatorship, as we shall see). This also manifests contradictory emotions about democracy, such as a sense of confusion and messiness, which can be paralyzing. As one participant observes:

*“Q: What was your idea about the confusion?
Person B: Well, there’s all kinds of upheavals and upsets, disappointments, that people choose someone and expect something and then those expectations don’t materialize and then. Or, well, let’s say, all sorts of different ways of participating in democracy. So, whether you are active in politics or are somewhere like in NGOs or just an activist on the street, there is a lot of confusion within that.*

There are people who move from one sphere to another, which is very okay.... But well, in a sense it is that democracy is kind of messy. That in the sense that if it's kind of everything is straightforward, understandable, unambiguous, then it's no longer democracy, then it's already some kind of autocracy or some other thing”(Estonia, INT.B)

Eventually messiness and confusion make everything slower – “*you have to argue everything over again all the time*”, the participant says later, which is a practical concern about how decisions are taken, and things are run. Yet, in most of our data, the alternative is not more authoritarian governance insofar as authoritarianism and dictatorship function as the constitutive other of democracy; they are to be avoided. This alleviates feelings of disappointment and helps maintain the democratic ideal– e.g., “[there are countries] where they come with a gun, [saying] ‘now you're going to make decision like that’. Here, we still have some options and possibilities. Even in the parliament, there is some countering”. Or, as another participant puts it, with no participation

“...we could just end up in a situation where it's a far less democratic society, you know overtly less democratic society, as opposed to all the very subtle changes in democracy that we were discussing here. It would just be a much less democratic outcome. I suppose that would be the threat that I would see really, on a larger scale social view” (Ireland, FG.3)

However, the paradox appears when despite the references to dictatorship or “less democracy” as a largely undesirable condition, the latter are often perceived as threats that edge closer to Europe. For instance, a participant notes that “I think that today we already have a small-scale dictatorship, because the power of the majority over the minority has, I think, grown too large”(Estonia, FG.1). And another one: “Well, it [democracy] represents a way of operating that is not too bad, that is really perfectible, but that is not so different, in my opinion, from certain ways of operating in other countries that are not at all democratic, but that are not so terrible. Well, not so terrible, I'm not talking about the extremes, where there is less democracy, but it also works not too badly. I have the impression that democracy is not the panacea either”(France, INT.7).

Overall, these atmospheres of disenchantment towards democracy are parts of a mode of distrust which is affective; it is felt, orientating participants towards certain opinions and actions. From the interviews, we can see that atmospheres of disenchantment do not explicitly legitimize other forms of governance, like “dictatorship, the “extremes” or “less democracy” even if these are sometimes perceived closer to home. Emotions of confusion, frustration, disappointment, anger, among others, represent rather a temporal disenchantment with the practiced form of democracy rather than with democracy as an ideal (Runciman, 2013), which even deeply skeptical voices most often insist that democracy remains “the best system”. Here, we should not forget what we referred to in 5.2., which is that democracy, as Carpentier and Wimmer note (2025), is a floating signifier as antagonistic actors engage in a struggle to define the concept. In this sense, from these interviews we are unable to draw an accurate assumption about the specific characteristics that fill

the signifier democracy, that is, what these participants mean by democracy, apart from the rather abstract idea of “power to the people”. It is this tension – between democratic ideals and their perceived non-realization in practice – that we conceptualize in the next section through the notion of broken promises.

2.3 Broken Promises and Institutional Mistrust

To make the above discussion more grounded, in this section we look at how distrust orients around certain institutions and processes of democratic governance (what we are referring to in the next section as “institutional trust”) rather than the democratic ideal (that we refer to as “systemic trust”). While the previous section focused on the affective dimensions through which democracy is experienced – particularly disappointment and disenchantment – the qualitative data also points to a differentiated and reflexive configuration of trust in relation to perceived broken promises of democracy. Most often, rather than expressing a generalised stance of trust or distrust toward democracy as a political system, participants articulate orientations toward specific institutions, actors, procedures and scales of governance, perceived to be violating these promises or expectations. In this sense, trust becomes a situated relation that is configured by the perceived responsiveness of these specific entities claiming to practice democracy.

This relates with the conclusions of 5.2, which emphasises that trust in democratic institutions and trust in media cannot be treated as singular or homogeneous phenomena. As shown in 5.2, trust varies significantly depending on the object of trust and on social position, class, education and economic security. Mistrust then may reflect critical judgement or dissatisfaction with how democratic systems operate *institutionally*, in practice (Prats, Smid and Ferrín, 2024). Here, again, participants often distinguish between democracy as an “abstract ideal” and the concrete institutions and actors through which it is enacted.

A common set of actors toward which suspicion is oriented are political elites and professional politicians, who are typically perceived as prone to abuses of responsibility and accountability; official politics is generally not trusted to keep the promises of the democratic ideal. As one participant notes when discussing parliamentary representation:

“Or when you watch the recordings from the Chamber of Deputies, and half the people aren't there, or they're sleeping....And just recently, it came out that one of them—I don't know who, but he had a lot of hours of attendance and received millions for it, but he wasn't even there. He missed 500 sessions, and if I missed work 500 times... That's not okay. I don't like that at all” (Czech Republic, FG.3)

And another one:

“Politicians, as they appear to us, we can discuss them with many people, they work for themselves. They are there to make a career. If they make decisions that are poorly received by the population, it

doesn't last very long. They change. They change their decisions and it doesn't work. Because they want to be elected. The next election is soon. Two years before the elections, nothing is happening anymore. They have no conviction. These are people who have no face” (France, INT.7)

Often the politicians seem to be staging democratic processes rather than being really invested in them:

“And you put them on a TV set; they will tear each other apart. And there, you say to yourself, well, there is something I did not understand. Well, after, for them, it is the canteen, it is normal. It is their job. When they go to work, they don't all agree completely or not at all. They'll send each other, they'll insult each other officially. And then, somehow, there, we end up at the restaurant, we eat together” (France, INT.7)

One Italian interviewee describes democracy as a “messa in scena”, a staged performance in which political parties manage representation and limit genuine popular participation. Yet even in these strongly critical accounts, democracy remains the reference point through which political dissatisfaction is expressed, some ideal of a “true democracy” (e.g., “Politics is a show. Because the people can't propose, everyone proposes someone... this is true democracy”).

Furthermore, distrust frequently appears as a response to perceived violations of democratic pillars, such as fairness and responsibility, which manifests how political institutions are evaluated against the normative expectations of accountability – disappointment arises when these expectations are not met. This differentiation of trust becomes particularly visible in discussions of electoral politics. Voting, as discussed earlier, is frequently described as a minimal or procedural form of democratic engagement (Carpentier, 2011), and appears to be discussed as problematic (although several participants emphasize that they continue to vote despite the disillusionment referred to before):

Then you go to the elections. I go to every election. I don't miss elections. And then you hope for something. And then the turnout is 40... How many did we have last time?

Insofar as in democracy it is the people who decide, there is an implicit promise of election as a means to legitimize the government; when this promise is broken, participants perceive it as a failure of democracy (the participant expresses astonishment when the moderator informed them that electoral participation was actually 70% last time – “What? That many?”).

Another democratic pillar is the promise of equality, as in fact democracy is expected to institutionalize “the principle of equality” (Landwehr & Schäfer, 2025). Across interviews, distrust is then frequently justified in

moral and social terms with respondents expressing dissatisfaction with political actors perceived as defending elite interests at the expense of the most vulnerable:

“I do feel some dissatisfaction. They don't defend the most disadvantaged people. They talk, they say they give a lot, but it's noticeable that they seem to be defending the powerful, the big companies, the powerful ones” (Portugal, INT.5)

And another one:

“I think, you know, children should be able to eat for free. The children of poor families. So, you know, I signed multiple petitions on that because it's just. I don't have children, but I believe it's a human right, and I just don't understand why this is taken away from vulnerable people” (Estonia, INT.J)

This converses with the arguments advanced in Deliverable 5.2 that mistrust can be perceived as the violation of certain democratic promises; for instance, expectations of justice, care and representation are understood as central to processes of legitimacy. Citizens can thus selectively mistrust particular institutions, actors or procedures while still orienting themselves toward democracy as an ideal horizon. At the same time, the data raises the question of whether sustained institutional distrust may, under certain conditions, spill over into a more systemic questioning of democracy's legitimacy itself. It is precisely this possible shift – from institutional to systemic trust – that the next section addresses.

2.4. From Institutional Distrust to Systemic Legitimacy

Let us move from the weak to the *strong* understanding of the impact of trust and distrust on the overall European political equilibrium. As it is in the spirit of the report, we will not provide a systematic review of the findings, which are extensively documented in deliverables 5.2 and 5.5, while reflecting on the consequences of the decreasing level of trust in terms of *legitimacy* of the existing democratic order.

We stated that trust and democracy are not strictly the same thing; and still, they are undoubtedly intertwined, and in various ways. Generally speaking, we can say that trust is the basis of legitimacy (Sedláčková, Šafr 2019, 129; Keman 2025, 522), raising questions as to whether disillusion and distrust can eventually deteriorate not only the “institutional trust”, usually generated or dismantled by more contingent political affairs, as we saw in the section above, but also the “systemic trust”, which has to do with the legitimacy of democracy per se (Sedláčková, Šafr 2019, 106-107). Far from being a unilateral process driven by people's disengagement, this would probably result from a more complex polarization process: as Yascha Mounk observed, the diffused skepticism commonly leads to the “self-insulation” of the elites as a reaction from above, which can easily loop back into the very same process of disaggregation by which it was originally produced (2018, 11). On the

other side, the increasing distance from the ruling classes would probably induce in the people a sense of passivity and resignation, as expressed by a French citizen during our interviews:

“Well, actually, am I satisfied with it? No, I'm not satisfied because, from the voter's point of view, I find that we are atonic. I think we watch the trains go by. And from the point of view... So, I would enlarge, in fact, because, of course, when we return afterwards, we realize that democracy, in fact, from the point of view of the state level, we will say, ultimately, in fact, we can find... Finally, democracy is instilled, for example, in associations, etc. There are more and more associations with horizontal governance, blah blah blah, etc. So. Now, in fact, I find that, at the level of voters, we are not there. And at the level, in fact, of governance, we will say, at the level of the media, etc., it can also be complicated, with the concentration of the media, therefore freedom of the press and access to information, etc. And, indeed, a questioning, which can be increasingly greater, of the legitimacy of elected officials” (France, INT.5)

An interesting attempt of empirically assessing the tendency under observation has been produced by both Vlachová (2001) and Keman (2025). Vlachová analyzed the state of people's trust in Czech Republic after the post-Socialist transition, in comparison with other European countries, by focusing on the reputation of four major forms of agencies: State power; other institutions active in society, including the media; welfare institutions; and super-national and regional organizations, and namely NATO (2001, 17-18). Besides other implications that cannot be debated here, the statistical analysis revealed a clear correlation between the “legitimacy of democracy” and “trust in the majority of institutions included in the survey” (24; italics removed). Basically, the more the citizens put trust in the current performances of their actual institutions, and the more they will recognize the whole democratic order as being legitimate. In the case of post-Socialist Czechia, the correlation is particularly strong when it gets to trust in NATO, social security system, Chamber and Senate, and in the Church, while for some reason no correlation is in place with trust in trade unions, major economic companies, and – maybe more surprisingly so – in the education system (24-25).

Keman's work is even more ambitious, as it compares the state of trust and legitimacy in thirty-six countries, and precisely, twelve “full democracies” (including Ireland and Germany, as to the countries covered by the MEDEMAP research tasks), thirteen “flawed democracies” (including Italy, Czechia, Portugal, Estonia, and France), and eleven “defective democracies” (including Greece and Poland), as described and foreseen by the Economist Intelligence Unit (see EIU 2021). In this case too, “trust in politics and confidence in the state is the glue to enhance governability and output legitimacy of democracy”, with a statistical correlation akin to that previously observed: even though some other factors play a significant part on the overall stability of the system, and namely wealth and economic well-being (2025, 522-525). To put it in different words, the post-Socialist transformation offers a clear example of a paramount problem, which is the difference between trust in some institutions and the “systemic trust”, which is rather an indicator of the legitimacy of the overall societal order (Sedláčková, Šafr 2019, 106).

Even though the above-described results cannot be generalized, they can be productively for framing the problem we are investigating, which is the connection between trust in politics and in the media, and the legitimacy of the democratic order. An emblematic example can be found in one of the focus groups run in Slovenia, with some participants taking a different – if not opposite - stand, in comparison to those that we have previously cited:

Participant D: I think that we all have lowered expectations of all these institutions, that you cannot even be disappointed. Because then when something like this happens, you're just like "ah, Slovenia, our systems..." It's hard... I mean, I don't even remember ever trusting a whole institute, or a whole state, a democracy. Because you know it was always something. Something was being done under the table, something was being stolen. I mean, in that sense I don't trust politics, power, democracy.

Participant E: I personally don't trust very much either. But I think we are all kind of resigned to it. We don't have anything to do. It's not really a crisis, but it's like [Participant D] said, "ah, what can we do, it is Slovenia" (Slovenia, FG.2)

A similar kind of deep disillusion comes from the Italian interviews:

“Q: Have you seen any change in these years, after being in Italy for so long?

A: Distrust came with experience, as I did not want these things while being a student. Now I observe and realize that you always have to complain, if I have anything to say, I have to, until as you can.

Q: Given that you are very active in this sense, did you ever happen to participate to demonstrations, for instance?

A: Nope. Because I do not think they are useful [...]” (Italy, INT.35)

In this sense, *drying up* is the telling expression chosen by a French interviewee:

“Well... Honestly, I've reached the point where I'm drying up, actually. I dry up because... Because... Because after a while, I don't know how to do it, actually. I mean, today, having, in fact, a little access to some pretty good information, etc., it's doable. And I mean, if I prefer to subscribe to the site of the lumberjack who saws his wood shirtless, more than to subscribe to the page of I don't know which magazine, it's a deliberate choice on my part, in fact. So... Really, I don't know. I don't know how... It's discussions... The last time, I was discussing it with Lorena, but it's discussions about how to do, actually, to... to succeed in mobilizing, in fact, on... to mobilize on the... on the common good, that is. On the common good, and on... on all these little things, in fact, which make life in common... There you have it, individual freedoms, social achievements, achievements... Well, social achievements too of society, what. You see, the right to abortion, etc. And really, I... I... Sometimes, I'm a bit like “no

future". I tell myself, we're going to sink, and then... We're going to sink under the weight of our cars, our waste, and that's it. But at least we will have had a party. At least we will have had a party this weekend. I don't know, I'm... So, I'm a little... And that saddens me, in fact, because I would like, precisely, to succeed in... Well, at times, I arrive, in fact, to tell me that we have to go through very small things and that everyone does very little things so that there is, as we said at the time of the legislative election, to bring just one person to vote, that is. Make a power of attorney, manage to make one power of attorney per person. Like that, little by little, we move forward. So, sometimes I try to hold on to that. But other times, I say to myself... Sometimes I also say to myself, above all, that, there you go, if we continue like this, in fact, we will end up, indeed, with an authoritarian government, with... And the temptation is really great. And the temptation is great, in fact, on all sides. That is to say that it can be, in fact, the good, big, very fascist, very right-wing fascist government, but it can also be... No, no, but I want to create an enlightened dictatorship for the good of all, etc. And, in fact, no, it's still a dictatorship, in fact" (France, INT.5)

Disillusion and disenchantment, again, emerged during another focus group session in Slovenia:

"Participant F: As [Participant E] said - we are resigned. It's not perfect, maybe we would all like to see changes, we just don't know how. Because I don't know if it can't be done. Because some politicians have been around for XY years. But maybe there will be a new one, that's my feeling. That a new one will come with a really big desire to make a change. And then they eat him up, bribe him, throw him out somehow. [All participants nod and chuckle]. Then it's one and the same. It seems to me like it doesn't make any difference whether the left or the right or this or that is in power. In the end, it seems to me that it is the same. And we're kind of resigned to it, because nothing can be changed! (Slovenia, FG.2)

Nowhere this transition from the feeling of distrust to the delegitimization of democracy as such seems to be evident, though, as in two interviews conducted by the Lusófona University team in Portugal.

"Participant 8: I used to have a more positive idea. Well, in relation to democracy and politics. In relation to everything, a more positive idea, because I had never needed to turn to the institutions, to the organizations that act or that I recently turned to, and nothing worked. Well, now my opinion has completely changed, I used to have a more...

Interviewer 1: Therefore, since the organizations don't function well, in your opinion, your opinion about democracy nowadays is not as good as it was in the past.

Participant 8: Yes, because democracy is basically about the people having some power, some voice over things that are not functioning well, but it doesn't work because I have been to some demonstrations with thousands of people. So, there is a will among the people... People are outraged. But those who need it, those who are in difficulty, right? People are angry. And I feel that

people want to do things, but they can't, because they don't have the means, right? We don't have the power in our hands to..." (Portugal, Int.8)

Interviewer 1: But despite all this, do you have confidence in our country's democratic system or not?

Participant 6: I don't have much, no.

Interviewer 1: No confidence?

Participant 6: No, I think there are parties that have a flag they defend, but then it seems that when they get to the top, there are always agreements that speak louder, and those flags end up being a little forgotten (Portugal, INT.6)

In the end, what we are observing – to apply a classical terminology - is the dialectics between the “specific support” granted to a given institution – Chamber, political parties, law administration, or the media – or expressing the appreciation towards a political leader, and the “diffuse support”, which is rather a predictor of the legitimacy of the democratic order in itself (Easton 1965, 273-275). In the next section, we will put forward two hypotheses on the connection and disconnection between the two dimensions – trust and legitimacy – in light of our theoretical framework and empirical findings.

2.5. Media, Society and the Limits of Democratic Legitimacy

The focus of the whole MEDEMAMAP project being on the nexus between media and democracy, we will finally discuss two theoretical hypotheses on the critical tension between trust and legitimacy of the institutions – that we might define, respectively, a media-centric and a socio-centric option (Cannizzaro, Miconi, Papathanassopoulos 2026, in review). The first hypothesis will call to action the role of the media, and particularly that of social media and the overall digital platforms ecosystem, while the second one relies on more structural aspects of the relationship between society at large and its political institutions.

When it gets to the role played by the media – both legacy and social media - it cannot come as a surprise that the major concerns expressed by the citizens we interviewed are related to disinformation, fake news and reliability of the sources, which, by definition, would compromise people’s trust. For instance, we can quote two participants to our focus groups, the first from Poland, and the second from Ireland:

“[...] lack of trusted sources. In my opinion, this is a very big problem, because even if I am able to verify information from many different sources, if I do not trust them all, it defeats the purpose a bit” (Poland, FG.2)

“I generally don’t listen to the news at all at all to be honest. Mmm... the odd time I might, like Instagram if there’s like protests or something like that going on, but generally I don’t listen to the

news. I just don't. I just think it's; I don't think there's, you don't get the full truth in any news to be perfectly honest with you. That's just my opinion on it" (Ireland, FG5)

One of the focus groups realized in Czech Republic, additionally, made it emerge the connection between trust in the media and trust in national politics:

"Moderator: So, in your opinion, the media are one-sided, so they're not fulfilling that role as they should?"

Participant 19: Well, but who's to blame? I think it's the politicians.

Participant 13: I also think it's because of the politicians, especially Czech Television, which lives off our license fees, so it should be objective and should give space to everyone, not just the selected ones. So, for example, before the European elections, there's the Spolu coalition, but it's one entity. Everyone else is there with one person from each party, but Spolu is three, right? And they talk over each other and are really smart. The same thing happened before my elections, there were even 5 of them, that was the five-party coalition. So, therefore, those five voices sound louder than the individual ones who try to oppose them. The TV does it on purpose and just plays along with them, I'm convinced of that.

Participant 18: Exactly, and if I may add, exactly before those elections, and this was on Czech Television, there was some kind of pre-election program and it was like, this party didn't show up, and this party didn't come, and then there were no videos showing that they stood in front of the building and they were refused entry, but on TV they said they didn't show up, so that's the height of it, right? Or with Ukraine, the classic, oh my God, they bombed a house in Ukraine, and only when a poor woman spoke up that it was when there was a tornado, and that even before the house there was a car, did they graciously apologize for putting up the wrong photo, what is that?"

Participant 12: They've messed it up so badly, Czech Television, that you don't even believe what really happened" (Czech Republic, FG.2)

An Italian citizen interviewed by the IULM team stressed the same point:

[...] Italy is beautiful, but the political and journalistic ruling class is leading us to hit rock bottom. As I was saying, the university is the last resort, and I hope that there the young people may find good ideas and get trained" (Italy, INT.2)

An overview of the WP5 results would confirm the impression that the media are mostly perceived as detrimental to democracy; and even more, that no good would come from the synergy between the media and the political class. Emblematic, in this sense, the collective answer provided by the participants to a French focus group:

Moderator: Do you feel, as a citizen, that politics and the media lack honesty towards the population?

Severil: Of course, totally. (France, FG.2)

Let us indulge on this argument. By and large, a series of positive opinions on the role of the media can be actually found, so that in our semantic tree we count a number of related thematic clusters: namely *impartiality*, *use of institutional sources*, *independency*, or *public service*. Interestingly enough, though, the expressed opinions mainly – if not almost always - rely on the *appreciation for a selected media outlet*: for instance, Público in Portugal, Radio Slovenia and Val 202 in Slovenia, iDNES in Czechia, ERR TV in Estonia, RTÉ in Ireland, or Associated Press among the considered news agencies. In other words, we mostly observe *specific* support towards a given agency, going back to Easton's terminology, rather than a *diffuse* support to the media system or the journalism field. One of the rare exceptions has been provided by an interviewee in Estonia:

Q: Are there others, for example politicians, some experts, academics, some thinkers, media?

Person D: I would say that I would trust the media and science the most. That those philosophical approaches to things are more reliable. I honestly never trust politicians at all.

Q: Why?

Person D: It's just another kind of self-promotion. It's just a way of spreading propaganda. I don't feel that they think about the people very much. Politics is politics is politics. That's the way it is.

Q: So the media and science, what is it about them that makes you trust them more? What qualities perhaps?

Person D: It seems to me that they are telling the truth more. I also get a lot of news, new things I haven't heard or seen before. (Estonia, INT.D)

The other relevant exception is offered by a focus group run in Slovenia, with young participants, aged 18-35:

Moderator: What about the media, Participant G? Will the media survive democratic functioning?

Participant G: I think they will. I still think that we still have freedom of the media. That's why there is no fear of anything like that happening.

Moderator: Participant H, what about you?

Participant H: Like Participant B said, I quite agree.

Moderator: If they listen to the people ...

Participant H: it will be much better. Then the country will be much more successful.

Moderator: Participant F, what about you?

Participant F: Yes, too. I think almost everything has been said.

Participant C: I agree. I still have confidence because, despite that, there are still certain objective media that can be a role model.

Moderator: Participant E?

Participant E: They can still have a future, but it depends very much on the people who are on top of it all.

Moderator: Participant A?

Participant A: I would like to refer to Mr Participant G's comment. I don't think there are any concerns about the amount of freedom we still have. (Slovenia, FG.3)

Apart from these notable anomalies, still, it appears that – in relation to the overarching research question of the MEDEMAP project – in the eyes of the people the media is not paying a good service to the stability and reliability of democracy in Europe. We already alluded to disinformation, hate speech and polarization³ as the main perceived threats, and in fact, the relevance of such issues could hardly be overestimated. As these topics are widely debated in current literature and already addressed in deliverable 5.5 and in the *Data Analysis Update* paper, though, here we will put forward a different hypothesis about the clash between media and democracy – one that, going back to Marshall McLuhan's legendary statement, has more to do with the *medium* than with the *message*.

All in all, we are used to talk about the expected virtuous circle between information and democracy – at least from Habermas onwards – with negative effects mostly being framed in terms of disfunctions, starting with their very definition: for example, *fake news*; *mis-information*; or *post-truth*. As a parallel hypothesis to be considered for future research, in a more systemic fashion, we might argue whether there is any *structural* enmity between the two contemporary regimes of media and democracy. Jodi Dean's theory of communicative capitalism hinges on a similar idea, based on technological fetishism misplacing democratic politics and improperly reducing its inherent complexity. In particular, the process would unfold through three major moments: *condensation*, as the fetishization of media devices; *displacement*, with political issues being mixed with endless other activities; and *denial*, due to the “assertion of immediacy” put in scene by the omnipresence of media platforms (2009, 38-41)⁴.

The fetishist nature of digital culture is actually a very complicated issue to settle (Miconi 2024; Miconi, Carpentier 2025), and as a matter of fact, this aspect has been mentioned only once in our interviews, and

³ To some extent, incidentally, there is a serious shortcoming in the contemporary debate around these critical points, which are commonly taken together into the same category. Contrarily, whilst distrust and disinformation can jeopardize people's interest in public affairs, the other phenomena – labeled as *hate speech*, *polarization* and *radicalization* – are actually *a form of political engagement*, no matter how elegant or polite their manifestations will be. A question would rather arise, consequently, as to whether or not these forms of politics can be considered as democratic, which would lead us back to the major contribution made by Carl Schmitt: up to which point, in short, *politics and democracy can go together*. In conclusion, in respect to what we defined the socio-centric hypothesis, we will discuss this aspect in greater detail.

⁴ To be more precise, Dean is mostly talking about *left* politics, and based on that, she will later propose the recovery of the traditional *party* as the most appropriate form of political organization (Dean 2016). Here we will make a broader use of her concepts, in relation to the current state of democracy and democratic politics.

namely by a participant to a focus group in Czechia (“I have a bit of a... I don’t want to say it’s a fetish, but do you know “Události24”? It’s a website”). What we may observe, though, is the condition of *disorientation* lived by the people in front of the media-politics complex, resulting in a critical understanding of the state of democracy. A participant to a focus group in Ireland expressed a position which somehow recalls Jodi Dean’s critique to the displacement operated by the circuits of communicative capitalism:

“with the social media now you can write whatever you want, anything can go and you have people that will believe it. No matter how ridiculous it is. Either you will get people who believe it because the social media is such a broad spectrum that you can get a group in the States or in Ireland scattered all over the country that can come together and form a group of people that believe the earth is flat, It is, or whatever” (Ireland, FG.2)

Not too differently, this overwhelming impact of 24/7 connectivity has been discussed in a Slovenian focus group:

There are a lot of untruths, there is a lot of fake news. And unfortunately it's the case that everybody is aware, but nobody has the time to check. You see something. If it's too sensational, you know it's not true. But if something is so-so, well ...

Participant H: But do you know it's not true?

Participant B: Well... Everything is possible in this world anyway. But let's say. Unfortunately, artificial intelligence can make you such news... Fake Igor E. Bergant [note: well-known Slovenian news anchor] that he will talk to you, and you think it's true. And everything can be checked, you just need to have time.

Participant E: Yes, I agree with that. I have this disease to check everything. This takes me time all night searching through traditional books, media and everything to check how true this thing is. But I only check things that interest me. How many things are there that do not me.

Participant B: So unfortunately we are bombarded with a huge amount of news and we don't have time to check whether it's true or not. Let alone have time to compare them with each other. In the sense of, you know it's true, but in what tone did somebody say it. You don't have time to do that anyway. You take one journalist you like, and you trust him a little more. The main thing is that people can think with their heads. That is the best weapon against fake news. That's my opinion. (Slovenia, FG.1)

During a focus group in Austria, additionally, a few participants discussed something very close to what Dean referred to as the *denial*, due to the immediacy effect of ubiquitous communication [italics added], by comparing it with the “boring” dimension of classical media:

R1: [I] would like to go back to one of the initial questions and see which media are reliable, which media are conducive to democracy?

P1: I think the more boring it is, the more reliable it is. If you read an article that consists only of text, a long newspaper article that is printed, where someone must have done research. And you contrast that with some TikTok video with pictures where a person you see arouses an emotion in you, then that is, then [the information] is aimed at the emotion. Then it's no longer about the facts and the content. Then it's about: how do I personally feel about things?

P3: The more often, the less reliable. A TikTok, for example, a story is produced very quickly, but a weekly journal takes a week of work and not a daily newspaper (Austria, FG.1)

As the participant to a German focus group stated, “what social media is good for” would be “to get information quickly from somewhere – but it’s difficult to know where it comes from”. A reference to *immediacy* has been also made by an Italian citizen interviewed by the IULM team:

If you want simple, essential things, you can go on Google News, which seems to be objective usually. It provides real-time news. (Italy, INT.13)

From the media-centric, then, to the socio-centric explanation. Needless to say, the macro-social factors triggering the crisis of trust and legitimacy have been widely debated in literature: ranging from the increasing economic imbalances (see Piketty 2013) to the latent conflict between space of flow and space of flows, or between the cosmopolitan elite and the people, whose experience is rooted in tradition and localism (Ruggie 1993, 172; Castells 1996, 440-450). In the case of the EU, the crisis undergone by the whole area, and especially the South, after the 2008 economic downturn possibly signed a turning point in the de-legitimization of national and EU institutions (Castells et al 2012; Castells et al 2018). Tim Wu recently tried to provide a synthesis between the media and the societal factors, by listing out four stages of de-democratization: the rise of unprecedented monopolies in digital economy, due to platformization processes; the following splitting of the social world into the two classes of winners and losers, due to the extraction of vital resources on the part of platforms; the mass resentment triggered by this exploitation process; and finally, the democracy failure in addressing such challenges (2025, 122-124). Sticking to our findings, the tension between major cities and peripheral areas is a clear-cutting example of a societal factor – somehow recalling the same flows/places dichotomy already alluded to. This dimension, which has been proposed and adopted by the Charles University team, was not systematically used for the composition of the focus groups, and might require additional investigations in the years to come.

Given the purposes of this report, though, we will not review the various societal factors causing the crisis of trust and legitimacy, which are described in deliverable 2.1 and addressed in different tasks of the MEDEMAMAP project. Rather, we will put forward a more radical hypothesis for future studies: the idea, in short, that these

processes may not have *provoked* the crisis of democratic legitimacy, while *making it visible* an already existing problem. As a French interviewee observed,

“[democracy] has always been imperfect. It would be weird to say it's new, but maybe a little more imperfect than before, or maybe with more extreme, that's it. Afterwards, there is also democracy, as I said, it is also a question of citizens, and I do not know to what extent all citizens feel entrusted by democracy, I do not know” (France, INT.2)

Not differently, a participant to a focus group run in Ireland stated:

“I would be of the opinion that democracy is always under threat, always a work in progress, when you look back at the founding of America, they did not het they were doing, they were constantly working on it” (Ireland, FG.1)

As we synthesized in deliverable 5.5, therefore,

Findings reveal a Europe where citizens hold democracy as both a guiding ideal and a lived challenge. The gap between the promise of equality, freedom, and participation, and the everyday realities of mistrust, disinformation, and institutional inertia, is stark—but it is precisely within this tension that the vitality of democracy persists [...] In this sense, democracy emerges less as a fixed structure and more as an ongoing, shared endeavour—a fragile yet resilient experiment that must be actively nurtured to transform its ideals into tangible, lived experiences.

Here it is not the media driving people away from democracy, as in the first hypothesis: rather, *it is democracy itself to be constantly displaced*, and by its very nature. To some extent, it appears to be in *latent* dimension – always visible, and still, usually impossible to grasp. As Jacques Derrida would put it, democracy is always a “democracy to come” (2003, xii)⁵:

In the end, if we try to return to the origin, we do not yet know what democracy will have meant nor what it is. For it does not present itself; it has not yet presented itself, but that will come [...]. Neither the word nor the thing “democracy” is presentable (Ibidem, 9).

We need to clarify the difference in comparison to the previous interpretation we put forward. If we frame the current crisis in terms of *frustration* or *disillusion*, as we have done so far, this will lead us to expect a moment of final disenchantment, when democratic politics will no longer matter in people's mind – eventually paving

⁵ To be precise, Derrida first addressed the idea of democracy as always to come in *Du droit a la philosophie*, (1975-1990, 34); and lately applied the same conceptual framework to the Marxist ideology (1993).

the way, as the usual story goes, to the rise of the strong man. Contrarily, this alternative idea would rather bring with it twofold consequences. On the one hand, in fact, latency means that people *will always look for democracy* and will still be attracted by it, by filling this “empty vacant” (ibidem, 8-9) with occasional instances of any kind, and using it as a sort of empty signifier. As we highlighted in deliverable 5.5, therefore,

citizens' expectations regarding democracy do not point to rejection of the system, but rather to a strong desire for its renewal and reinforcement. Across countries, participants expressed the need for a democracy that is more inclusive, participatory, and grounded in shared responsibility. Rather than dismantling institutions, people envision a system capable of listening more attentively, educating its citizens, and translating ideals into concrete practices.

On the other way, this notwithstanding, such never-ending crisis may suggest the evidence of a more structural problem, of a *contradiction intrinsic to democracy per se*. According to Derrida, more precisely, it would be the contradiction between two motivations, which are both necessary to democracy: “excluding all the others, in particular bad citizens, rogue, noncitizens”, or simply the “unrecognizable others”; while at the same time “wanting to open itself up, to offer hospitality to all those excluded”(ibidem, 63). This statement echoes Carl Schmitt's words, which, way more radically, point to the plain incompatibility between democracy and politics, the latter being based, as we know, on the identification of the enemy - or, “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (1932, 26). Whether we adopt Derrida's metaphor of the autoimmune disease, which represents democracy as fatally fighting against itself, or we follow Schmitt to the abyss of Western history, either way it appears that *inclusion* and *exclusion* are both necessary to democracy⁶, making it a floating category in the mind of the people.

Chantal Mouffe repeatedly addressed this issue, by moving from Schmitt's classical dyad. The rise and spread of populism, for Mouffe, is therefore due to the overcoming – at least in public narratives – of the left/right juxtaposition, which, the identification of an enemy being necessary to political action, would give way to the new opposition between the elite and the people, as simple as that (1993, 5). The only viable alternative to populism will be, in her words, the consolidation of a new form of “radical democracy, liberty and equality”, capable of taking account of “the different social relations and subject positions in which they are relevant: gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on” (ibidem, 71). We would even radicalize Mouffe's point, as in our interviews a sort of pre-political dimension occasionally seemed to take shape: one in which democracy has less to do with parties and leaders than with care and engagement, daily participation, and all the nuances of what we refer to as social capital.

⁶ For our definition of *inclusionary* and *exclusionary* political discourse, and its implications for the state of democracy in the EU, see Kompatsiaris et al 2026, in press.

In the end, and as a reminder for future research, what if democracy, in the eyes of the Europeans, was in direct action rather than in the representative agencies - not in the media, nor in the classical forms of politics we are used to?

Section III - Supply and demand

Trust in media institutions represents a foundational component of democratic legitimacy. Classical democratic theory, particularly within the Habermasian tradition, conceptualizes journalism as a central epistemic authority capable of providing citizens with reliable information necessary for informed participation in public life (Habermas, 1989). However, contemporary transformations associated with digitalization, platformization, and the emergence of hybrid media systems have profoundly destabilized the epistemic foundations of journalism and its perceived credibility (Chadwick, 2017; Couldry & Hepp, 2018).

Across Europe, declining trust in media institutions has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary democratic cultures. This erosion of trust cannot be reduced solely to isolated instances of misinformation or political bias; rather, it reflects a deeper structural crisis affecting the perceived authority, independence, and credibility of journalistic institutions. As Easton (1965) distinguished, the legitimacy of democratic systems depends on both specific support — trust in particular actors or institutions — and diffuse support, which reflects broader confidence in the system itself. When trust in media institutions erodes, this process may undermine diffuse democratic legitimacy, contributing to declining political engagement documented across European democracies (Newman et al., 2024).

Democratic participation has historically depended on institutional mechanisms such as elections, political parties, and public deliberation mediated through journalistic institutions. However, the emergence of digital media and social platforms has profoundly transformed the conditions under which citizens engage with politics. Digitally mediated environments are shaped by social media algorithmic infrastructures and hybrid information systems. While these transformations have expanded opportunities for engagement, they have also introduced structural constraints related to misinformation, algorithmic filtering, and declining trust in institutions.

This deliverable section investigates citizens' perceptions of media/social media credibility, trustworthiness, and epistemic authority across multiple European countries, and correlates the findings with journalistic opinions. The goal is to connect the demand side with the supply side in media communication (Workpackages 4 and 5).

Drawing on qualitative data from focus groups and interviews conducted as part of MeDeMap research project, the analysis explores how citizens evaluate media institutions, how they navigate the contemporary information environment, and how trust or distrust in media relates to democratic participation and legitimacy; in addition, interviews conducted with journalists and editors in chief on the same topics are considered.

In this section of deliverable 5.6, the analysis addresses the following research questions:

- How do citizens perceive the credibility and authority of media institutions? How does media trust shape democratic engagement and political legitimacy?
- What is the role of newsmedia in enabling and shaping (democratic) participation? What role do journalists see social media playing? What is the impact of fake news and algorithms on democratic engagement?

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Participatory Democracy in a Hybrid Media System

Trust constitutes a fundamental mechanism through which complex societies maintain social and institutional stability (Giddens, 1990). In modern democracies, citizens rely on media institutions as expert systems capable of producing reliable knowledge about political reality. Journalism's legitimacy rests on its capacity to function as an independent epistemic authority, mediating between citizens and political institutions.

However, contemporary media systems have undergone structural transformation. The hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) integrates traditional journalistic institutions with digital platforms, social media networks, and algorithmic infrastructures. This transformation has fragmented information flows, weakened gatekeeping functions, and destabilized traditional hierarchies of epistemic authority. Longitudinal research confirms that the erosion of institutional trust in the press has accelerated alongside the proliferation of digital alternatives, with declining confidence in mainstream journalism documented across Western democracies (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Participatory democracy refers to the direct involvement of citizens in political processes beyond periodic voting, grounded in the classical expectation that citizens be informed, capable of deliberation, and actively engaged in shaping collective decisions.

Contemporary participation, however, increasingly unfolds within digitally mediated environments where platform architectures and algorithmic systems structure how individuals encounter information, interact with one another, and access opportunities for political voice. Within these spaces — functioning as *de facto* quasi-public infrastructures — the governance of participation becomes inseparable from questions of ownership, control, and data extraction (Stubbs, 2023). Ensuring meaningful democratic agency therefore requires institutional designs that embed transparency and safeguards into the algorithmic mediation of public deliberation, countering risks of exclusion and inequality built into digital platforms (Paulis, Kies, & Östling, 2025). As algorithmic decision-making grows more pervasive, the locus of democratic participation shifts from offering input within pre-defined channels to exercising oversight over the systems that allocate visibility, shape preferences, and structure policy implementation, highlighting the dangers posed by proprietary and opaque algorithmic governance (Dean, 2023).

The relationship between journalism and democratic governance has long occupied a central place in communication theory. As Alexander (2016) has argued, journalism does not merely reflect democratic culture

but actively participates in its creative reconstruction, performing the rituals of fact, narrative, and moral evaluation through which a shared social world is maintained and contested.

Yet the media systems within which journalism is practised are undergoing profound transformation. Chadwick's (2017) account of hybrid media systems draws attention to the dissolution of stable boundaries between legacy media and digital networks, generating an information environment characterised by simultaneity, remediation, and the interpenetration of professional and amateur modes of communication. Within this hybridised space, Zuboff's (2015) analysis of surveillance capitalism identifies a structural shift in the political economy of information: digital platforms extract and monetise attention in ways that fundamentally reshape the incentive structures governing news production and distribution.

Building on these foundations, the MeDeMAP project adopts a comparative framework that analyses media systems in terms of three distinct institutional sectors — Public Service Media (PSM), commercial media, and non-profit or community media — each characterised by a different mandate, operational logic, and democratic potential (Klimkiewicz & Szafrńska, 2024). This tripartite architecture is notably specific to the European context, reflecting the historically distinctive role of public service broadcasting and the growing significance of civil society media in sustaining pluralism. The analytical framework identifies five groups of factors — economic, professional, legal/regulatory, political, and cultural — that interact to shape the capacity of media systems to support democratic participation. Democratic participation, on this account, is not reducible to formal electoral behaviour but encompasses the daily practices of staying informed, engaging in public discourse, and taking action to influence political decisions (Klimkiewicz et al., 2025).

The comparative media systems literature, particularly Hallin and Mancini's (2004) canonical typology of Mediterranean, North/Central European, and North Atlantic models, identifies the degree of political parallelism — the alignment between media outlets and political parties or ideological blocs — as a key variable differentiating democratic media systems. In contexts of high political parallelism, media outlets tend to function as instruments of partisan communication rather than autonomous forums for democratic deliberation. More recent scholarship has extended this concern to the phenomenon of media capture, in which powerful political or economic actors subordinate news organisations to their particular interests through ownership, advertising leverage, or regulatory interference (Klimkiewicz et al., 2025; Humprecht et al., 2022).

The incorporation of social media into the news media ecosystem has introduced new contradictions into the relationship between journalism and democratic participation. On the one hand, platforms such as Twitter/X, Facebook, and, increasingly, TikTok have extended the reach of public discourse, enabled new forms of civic mobilisation, and provided channels through which previously marginalised voices can achieve visibility. Scholars working in the tradition of participatory communication have identified in these affordances a potential democratisation of the public sphere, expanding the range of actors capable of contributing to political

discourse (Carpentier & Wimmer 2025). On the other hand, the algorithmic architectures governing social media platforms systematically favour sensational, emotionally charged, and partisan content.

As Chadwick (2017) observes, the hybridisation of media systems does not straightforwardly produce more democratic outcomes; it simultaneously opens new spaces of participation and creates new vectors for manipulation, disinformation, and the erosion of epistemic commons.

Digital media have expanded opportunities for participation by reducing barriers to political expression. Citizens can now access information instantaneously, share opinions publicly, and engage with political actors directly. Social media platforms have thus created new opportunities for political expression, information access, and civic engagement, while simultaneously introducing new risks associated with misinformation, algorithmic filtering, and fragmented public discourse.

These transformations have generated a set of paradoxes. On the one hand, digital media have lowered barriers to participation, enabling citizens to access political information instantaneously and express their opinions publicly. On the other hand, the proliferation of information sources, the spread of fake news, and the opacity of algorithmic systems have undermined citizens' confidence in their ability to meaningfully participate in democratic processes. Dean (2009) identified this condition as communicative capitalism, in which the formal participation afforded by networked media becomes increasingly detached from effective political agency, with circulation and engagement displacing substantive deliberation as the governing logics of digitally mediated public discourse.

3.2 Analytical approach to the evidence

This study employs qualitative thematic analysis of two complementary data sources. The first consists of focus groups and interviews conducted with citizens across multiple European countries, including Italy, Czech Republic, Ireland, Slovenia, Poland, Austria, France, and Estonia.

The data consist of verbatim transcripts of citizens discussing their perceptions of democracy, media (mainstream and social media), political communication, and participation. The second source comprises semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with journalists and chief editors representing PSM, commercial, and non-profit media organisations in each of the ten countries. Interviews were carried out by national country teams during months sixteen to twenty of the project, with transcription and translation completed during months nineteen to twenty, and country reports compiled in months twenty to twenty-one.

Participants were selected to ensure representation across media sectors, editorial roles (both reporters and editorial leadership), and media types (national, regional, and local outlets; print, broadcast, and digital-native). Interview codes used throughout this paper — such as DE-C-4, FR-J-1, or SI-C-3 — denote the country of origin, the sector (C for commercial/chief editor, J for journalist, PSM for public service media), and a numerical identifier.

Qualitative analysis enables the examination of citizens' subjective experiences and interpretations: rather than measuring trust quantitatively, this approach explores how citizens conceptualise a range of themes including democracy, media credibility and legitimacy, political engagement, social media usage practices, and attitudes toward the media landscape.

At the level of journalistic evaluative frameworks, qualitative data analysis followed an iterative deep content analysis procedure in which the research team applied the five-factor framework (economic, professional, legal/regulatory, political, cultural) as an organising structure, identifying convergent themes, national variations, and cross-cutting structural phenomena.

The analysis followed an inductive coding procedure, identifying recurring topics related to:

- trust and distrust in media
- perceived political influence on journalism
- credibility and epistemic authority
- social media use and information reliability
- the role of journalism in democratic participation
- democratic participation and (dis)engagement
- political participation and engagement
- fake news, misinformation, and algorithmic influence

Particular attention was given to Italian participants, identified by the IULM interview and focus group references, enabling comparative analysis with other European contexts.

3.3 Distrust in Media

Across all countries examined, citizens expressed widespread distrust toward media institutions. This distrust reflects not only scepticism toward specific news organisations but also broader doubts about journalism's epistemic reliability.

Participants frequently emphasised their inability to identify trustworthy sources:

*"I generally don't listen to the news at all... I just don't think you get the full truth in any news."
(Ireland, IRL_FG3, +35 – low)*

This statement illustrates a shift from selective distrust toward generalised scepticism, in which journalism as an institution loses its epistemic authority. Similarly, Czech participants directly connected media distrust with democratic disillusionment:

"The TV does it on purpose and just plays along with them, I'm convinced of that." (Czech Republic, Czech_FG3, +35 – low)

This perception reflects the belief that journalism is not independent but subordinated to political interests. Despite widespread distrust, citizens did not reject journalism entirely. Instead, trust became selective and conditional. Some participants expressed trust in specific journalists or outlets rather than media institutions as a whole:

"You take one journalist you like, and you trust him a little more." (Slovenia, SI_FG2, +35 – low)

This reflects a shift from institutional trust toward personalised trust. Similarly, Austrian participants associated credibility with traditional journalistic formats:

"The more boring it is, the more reliable it is." (Austria, AT_FG1, +35 – high)

This suggests that citizens associate credibility with perceived professionalism and effort. Importantly, trust in media is closely linked to broader perceptions of political legitimacy. When citizens perceive media institutions as politically compromised, this undermines both journalistic authority and democratic legitimacy. As one Czech participant explained:

"They've messed it up so badly, Czech Television, that you don't even believe what really happened." (Czech Republic, Czech_FG3, +35 – low)

This statement illustrates how media distrust may extend beyond specific institutions, affecting citizens' capacity to trust political reality itself.

3.4 Perceived Political Influence and Loss of Journalistic Independence

A recurring theme across countries was the perception that media institutions are politically controlled or influenced. Citizens frequently described journalism as aligned with political elites rather than functioning as an independent watchdog. This perception was particularly strong in Italy:

"Italy is beautiful, but the political and journalistic ruling class is leading us to hit rock bottom." (Italy, IT_int7)

This statement reflects a profound crisis of institutional legitimacy extending beyond media institutions to encompass political elites more broadly. Similarly, French participants emphasised the perceived collusion between media and political power:

*"Do you feel, as a citizen, that politics and the media lack honesty towards the population? —
Of course, totally." (France, FR_FG4)*

Such perceptions undermine journalism's democratic function as an independent intermediary. One of the most consistent findings across all ten countries is the pervasive perception among journalists and editors of political pressure on journalistic independence — whether direct, through interference in editorial decisions, or structural, through ownership arrangements, funding dependency, and the weaponisation of legal instruments. This perception is not merely a discursive posture; it is grounded in concrete institutional conditions that the systemic analysis of the MeDeMAP dataset substantiates.

In the case of Public Service Media, the principal mechanism of political influence identified by interviewees is the manipulation of governance and appointment procedures. In Austria, an editor observed that political pressure on ORF (Österreichischer Rundfunk) could manifest through

"changes in the composition of the supervisory bodies, changes in the composition of the management, and influence on appointments in the organisation." (AT-C-1)

This structural form of influence operates with a degree of subtlety that renders it particularly difficult to resist: it does not require explicit editorial directives but works through the prior selection of personnel whose loyalties or dispositions are already aligned with those of the appointing political actors. A similar dynamic was documented in France, where a journalist articulated the dependency created by parliamentary budget appropriation:

"If the money is budgeted, you depend on the willingness of the power in place. Therefore, you will necessarily have to not displease too much if you want your budget to be renewed — it is a real problem of independence of information in relation to the executive power." (FR-J-1)

In Slovenia, interviewees from both sides of the political spectrum described recent changes in PSM governance in starkly contrasting terms: for a journalist from a right-leaning outlet, the appointment changes constituted "a relatively brutal political purge" (SI-J-4), while a PSM editor described the new dispensation as "a relief" and "returning to normality" (SI-C-1), with a depoliticised governing council serving as "a firewall between this kind of independent public media and politics trying to interfere" (SI-C-1). These divergent accounts testify to the deeply contested nature of PSM governance in politically polarised media environments, where the line between legitimate editorial renewal and partisan capture is not always self-evident.

In the commercial sector, interviewees identified a more diffuse but no less consequential set of political pressures, operating primarily through the control of state advertising and media ownership. In Poland, the concentration of state advertising in the hands of political actors loyal to successive governments was described as structurally distorting competitive conditions across the media market, with local media identified as particularly vulnerable (PL-C-5). The existence of "municipal media" — outlets funded by local authorities and systematically used to project a favourable image of incumbent politicians — was described by one interviewee as "not competition, this is killing the independent regional press with distorted pseudo-journalism" (PL-J-5).

3.5 Information Overload and Selective Trust

Citizens across countries described experiencing epistemic disorientation within contemporary media environments. The proliferation of information sources makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish credible from unreliable information. As one Slovenian participant explained:

"Unfortunately, we are bombarded with a huge amount of news and we don't have time to check whether it's true or not." (Slovenia, SI_FG2, +35 – low)

This condition reflects structural features of digital media environments, where speed and volume undermine verification processes. Irish participants similarly emphasised the destabilising effects of social media:

"Social media is such a broad spectrum that you can get a group of people... that believe anything." (Ireland, IRL_FG3, +35 – low)

This statement illustrates the erosion of shared epistemic authority in contemporary information environments. Within these spaces, citizens increasingly encounter conflicting information sources, generating epistemic uncertainty. As one participant explained:

"Even if I am able to verify information from many different sources, if I do not trust them all, it defeats the purpose." (Poland, PL_FG2, +35 – low)

This statement reflects a core paradox of the contemporary media landscape: increased access to information does not necessarily increase trust. Instead, informational abundance may produce epistemic overload and generalised scepticism.

The Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2024) confirms that this paradox is widespread across European democracies, with high exposure to news correlating with increased uncertainty rather than improved informational confidence.

The proliferation of social media platforms has further complicated citizens' ability to evaluate credibility. Unlike traditional journalism, digital platforms do not operate according to professional journalistic norms, enabling the rapid circulation of unverified or misleading content. As one participant observed:

"With social media now you can write whatever you want, anything can go and you have people that will believe it." (Ireland, IRL_FG3, +35 – low)

This perception reflects what Dean (2009) described as communicative capitalism, in which democratic communication becomes subsumed within networked infrastructures that prioritise circulation and engagement over epistemic reliability. Italian journalists consistently identified information overload as a defining feature of contemporary media environments, fundamentally transforming both journalistic practice and audience trust. As one editor explained:

"Unfortunately, we are bombarded with an excess of information, so often many of the information are wrong, and therefore, especially those who work like us on the Internet, must reflect and think that it is not always good to be the first." (Editor-in-chief, Public Service Media)

This statement reflects the tension between speed and accuracy that characterises contemporary journalism. The proliferation of misinformation, particularly on social media, has further destabilised the epistemic environment. Journalists described fake news as one of the central challenges of contemporary practice. As one journalist explained:

"The biggest problem of our times is fake news, false information" (Journalist, Community Media).

Another interviewee emphasised the scale of misinformation during major crises:

"During Covid, think about the pandemic and how many false news stories were published, especially on social media. There are accounts on social media that create conspiracies, and many people believe them" (Journalist, Public Service Media).

3.6 Ambivalent Perceptions of Democratic Participation

Across countries, citizens expressed ambivalent attitudes toward democratic participation. While they recognised the importance of democracy as a political system, many expressed scepticism regarding their ability to influence political outcomes. An Austrian participant explained:

"You vote, but after that, it seems like they do whatever they want anyway." (Austria, Austria_FG2, +35 – high)

This perception reflects what political scientists describe as declining political efficacy — the belief that one's participation has limited impact. Italian participants expressed particularly strong scepticism toward institutional participation:

"Sometimes you feel like participation is just symbolic, not something that really influences decisions." (Italy, IULM_INT13)

This reflects a perception that democratic participation has become procedural rather than substantive. Similarly, an Irish participant described disengagement from political processes:

"I don't feel like my voice makes any difference in the political system." (Ireland, IRL_FG3, +35 – low)

These perceptions suggest that democratic disengagement is not driven by apathy but by perceived inefficacy — a structural condition that existing scholarship has linked to declining institutional trust and weakened intermediary functions of mainstream journalism (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

3.7 Social Media as a Space of Participation and Expression

Social media platforms have become central spaces for political engagement. Citizens increasingly rely on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X to access political information and express opinions. An Italian participant explained:

"Social media allows you to stay informed more easily than traditional media." (Italy, IULM_INT24)

This reflects the perceived accessibility and immediacy of digital platforms. Similarly, a French participant noted:

"Today, if something important happens, you see it first on social media." (France, FR_FG2, 18–35 – low)

Social media platforms have thus come to function as primary gateways to political information. However, citizens also recognised the limitations of digital participation. An Italian participant explained:

"You can comment and share things, but it remains something virtual, detached from real political power." (Italy, IULM_INT36)

This reflects the perceived disconnect between digital expression and institutional influence. Despite increased opportunities for expression, citizens frequently described digital participation as ineffective. As one Italian participant explained: "Even if people protest online, nothing really changes politically" (IULM_INT31). A French participant similarly observed: "Online participation creates discussion, but not necessarily political change" (FR_int9). Another Italian participant captured this tension succinctly: "At the end, everyone can express their opinion online, but it seems like nothing really changes" (IULM_INT30). As one Portuguese participant observed: "Nowadays you have access to everything immediately, you can know everything that happens politically" (Portugal_FG2, 18–35 – high).

However, increased access to information does not necessarily translate into meaningful democratic participation; instead, citizens often experience information overload and uncertainty. A Slovenian participant explained: "We are flooded with information and it becomes difficult to know what is really true" (Slovenia_FG2, 18–35 – low).

Social media platforms have become central infrastructures for journalistic work and audience engagement, fundamentally transforming the relationship between journalists and citizens. Italian journalists described social media as both enabling democratic participation and introducing new risks and challenges. Social media provide opportunities for direct interaction between journalists and audiences. As one editor explained: "Our cultural relationship with the public is mostly connected to social media. For example, we recently opened the WhatsApp channel and we see that the public is not only growing very quickly but also interacting" (Editor-in-chief, Public Service Media). One journalist described their role as actively facilitating democratic engagement:

"Through social media, I try to give more visibility and provide collaboration for the content of the article through posts I make in collaboration with the newspaper" (Journalist, Press).

A recurring concern across multiple national contexts is the growing capacity of political actors to bypass journalistic mediation entirely, communicating directly with their supporters through social media channels in ways that render traditional journalism increasingly marginal to political communication. As an Austrian journalist observed:

"Politically, the biggest threat is that they no longer need us. And I think the antidote can only be to say how you're not going to make too many concessions to keep them with you." (AT-J-2)

This disintermediation dynamic creates a structural dilemma for news organisations: engagement with social media platforms is commercially and editorially necessary to maintain audience reach, yet this engagement demands adaptation to platform logics that corrode the professional norms of accuracy, balance, and independence. In Germany, editors flagged that "unrealistic expectations towards journalism among social media users" compound this problem, as audiences accustomed to the immediacy and partisanship of social media content become increasingly impatient with the deliberative tempo and epistemic caution of professional journalism.

Nevertheless, several interviewees identified in social media an opportunity as well as a threat. Estonian interviewees described the development of special formats for election coverage, including public debates in local communities and broadcaster travels across the country to facilitate regional political discussions — formats that leverage the connective capacities of digital media to strengthen, rather than displace, the participatory functions of professional journalism. In Slovenia, a Press editor expressed a vision of social media as a vehicle for emancipatory participation:

"We involve people in asking the authorities about certain problems that concern them. And in this way we try to maintain this social tension, inclusion, emancipation — to keep the emancipatory potential in the community." (SI-C-3)

3.8 Fake News and Algorithmic Filtering

Social media were also described as problematic environments for democratic deliberation. One journalist emphasised that "social media have become a place where it is difficult to have a calm discussion" (Journalist, Community media). Similarly, another interviewee observed that "the way in which news and information spread risks favouring very extreme and very polarized positions" (Journalist, Press). One of the most significant barriers to democratic participation identified by citizens was the proliferation of fake news. An Irish participant explained:

"With social media now you can write whatever you want, anything can go and people will believe it." (Ireland, IRL_FG3, +35 – low)

This reflects the erosion of epistemic gatekeeping functions traditionally performed by journalism. Italian participants expressed similar concerns: "It is difficult to distinguish between real information and fake news online" (IULM_INT17). A Czech participant explained: "Sometimes you don't know what to believe anymore, because everything contradicts everything" (Czech_FG3, +35 – low).

This reflects the fragmentation of epistemic authority in contemporary media environments.

Citizens increasingly recognised the role of algorithms in shaping their access to political information. An Italian participant explained: "What you see online depends on what the platform decides to show you" (IULM_INT30). A Portuguese participant similarly observed: "Social media show you what they think you want to see, not necessarily everything" (Portugal_FG3, +35 – low). A Slovenian participant reflected: "You end up seeing only one type of opinion, and this influences how you think" (Slovenia_FG4, +35 – low). This reflects the creation of algorithmically structured echo chambers. Algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content further contributes to polarisation. As one journalist explained: "There is a lot of space for emotionality and divisive positions" (Journalist, Press).

The German journalist community, confronting both an algorithmically accelerated information environment and the rise of AI-generated content, identified misinformation as the dominant threat to journalistic diversity, with one editor observing:

"If in the end only texts are created that are either formulated out of clear interests that no longer have the goal of being journalistically independent but pursue clear goals, and you work with AI-generated texts that ultimately only regurgitate what information was already there, then these are two points that worry me." (DE-C-4)

Despite these challenges, journalists recognised the centrality of social media for contemporary democratic communication. As one interviewee noted: "Social media are primary tools for stimulating debate today. Any article that does not reach social media does not generate debate" (Journalist, Community media). These findings illustrate the ambivalent role of social media as both facilitators and destabilisers of democratic participation.

3.9 The Italian Case in Comparative Perspective

Italian participants exhibited particularly high levels of institutional distrust, reflecting historical, political, and structural factors shaping Italy's media system. Italian citizens frequently emphasised the structural relationship between media and political power: "If you want simple, essential things, you can go on Google News... It provides real-time news" (IT_int3). This reliance on aggregators rather than traditional journalistic institutions indicates weakened institutional authority. Italian participants also expressed scepticism regarding political participation: "Distrust came with experience... I do not think demonstrations are useful" (IT_int5), suggesting that media distrust contributes to democratic disengagement. More broadly, Italian citizens displayed strong scepticism toward political institutions: "People feel distant from politics, and social media do not solve this problem" (IULM_INT7), as well as awareness of algorithmic manipulation: "Platforms influence what people think by controlling what they see" (IULM_INT30).

Compared to other European countries, Italian participants expressed more pessimistic views regarding democratic efficacy and institutional responsiveness. Italian journalists across media sectors described structural constraints that limit editorial independence and shape the boundaries of journalistic practice, operating not only through direct political pressure but also through indirect mechanisms linked to ownership structures, economic sustainability, and institutional relationships.

The Italian media system presents a particularly instructive comparative case, concentrating several of the vulnerabilities identified across the broader European sample in acute form. The intersection of high ownership concentration, deep political parallelism, structural economic precarity, and a culture of clientelistic media-politics relations creates conditions that are distinctively challenging for democratic journalism. Italian interviewees articulated the implications of these structural conditions with considerable clarity. The dominance of wealthier political parties and organisations over media access, to the detriment of smaller and marginalised actors, was identified as a structural distortion of the forum function of journalism: "Wealthier political parties and organizations often dominate media access, sidelining smaller or marginalized groups" (ITJ-3).

In terms of journalistic standards, Italian interviewees described a professional culture in which commitment to fact-checking and source verification coexists with significant pressures from political actors, advertisers, and the threat of legal action. Censorship in journalism, as one interviewee observed, "comes from multiple levels of influence, including legal action, usually in economic lawsuits" (Klimkiewicz et al., 2025). The landscape of digital misinformation is perceived as particularly acute: the "strong social polarization and high level of misinformation" identified by interviewees, compounded by the role of AI in generating and amplifying false content, creates an environment in which the epistemic authority of professional journalism is continuously contested.

The non-profit sector in Italy, while numerically limited, exhibits a distinctive character of civic engagement. Italian non-profit media organisations were described by interviewees as frequently characterised by a strong commitment to inclusivity, with active participation in civil rights movements and the amplification of marginalised voices as a central element of their editorial identity: "active participation in civil rights movements and advocating for underrepresented groups, using their platforms to amplify marginalized voices" (Klimkiewicz et al., 2025). This civic orientation represents a potential counterweight to the concentration and politicisation characterising other segments of the Italian media landscape, though its structural fragility — financial precarity, limited legal recognition, and dependence on volunteer labour — limits its capacity to function as a systemic corrective.

Several interviewed journalists explicitly emphasised the structural entanglement between media ownership and broader economic and political interests. As one editor explained: "In Italy, many media outlets are

associated with larger economic groups, which impacts their editorial decisions. For instance, major media companies often have interests beyond journalism, affecting their ability to provide independent reporting" (Editor-in-chief, Public Service Media). Political pressure was also described as a direct and persistent condition: "a great climate of political pressure... promotions and relationships also at the local political level, and pressures are applied differently" (Journalist, Press). Investigative journalists working in digital-native outlets reported that "there are certainly political pressures" and that "influential members of the ruling government [are] trying to hinder the work of the investigative journalist" (Journalist, Digital native news media).

Economic precarity further exacerbates vulnerability to external influence: "There is a general and constant decrease in funds available... Editorial teams experience significant political pressure" (Journalist, Press). Conflict of interest represents another key structural challenge: "The fundamental risk is called conflict of interest... media owners are not pure publishers but are publishers who have other interests in companies with primary relationships with governments" (Journalist, Community media).

These findings confirm that political influence in Italy operates primarily through structural and systemic mechanisms rather than overt censorship. Journalistic independence is shaped by economic, political, and organisational constraints that limit the capacity of journalists to act as fully autonomous watchdogs.

3.10 Conclusion to section III

The findings reveal a structural crisis of epistemic authority affecting media institutions across Europe. This crisis cannot be understood solely in terms of misinformation but reflects deeper transformations in media systems and democratic institutions. The hybrid media system has fragmented epistemic authority, undermining journalism's traditional role as a trusted intermediary. Citizens no longer rely exclusively on institutional journalism but instead navigate complex information environments characterised by competing sources and eroded gatekeeping functions.

Importantly, distrust in media institutions is closely linked to distrust in political institutions. Citizens frequently perceive media and political elites as interconnected, undermining both journalistic credibility and democratic legitimacy. Italy represents a particularly significant case, characterised by historically rooted scepticism toward institutional authority and strong perceptions of media-political collusion. The Italian case illustrates how structural distrust may contribute to democratic disengagement, reinforcing the importance of restoring journalistic independence and credibility.

The findings reveal a paradox at the heart of contemporary participatory democracy. Digital media have expanded opportunities for political engagement, but they have also introduced new structural constraints. Social media platforms enable participation but do not necessarily empower citizens politically. Instead, participation often takes symbolic forms detached from institutional decision-making. Rather than simply rejecting media, citizens are renegotiating trust, shifting from institutional trust toward selective and

conditional trust. However, this transformation has significant implications for democratic legitimacy, as journalism's capacity to function as a shared epistemic authority is weakened.

Fake news and misinformation undermine epistemic certainty, reducing citizens' confidence in their ability to make informed political decisions. Algorithmic systems further constrain participation by shaping citizens' access to information in opaque ways, reinforcing echo chambers and amplifying polarisation. This study demonstrates that contemporary democratic participation is shaped by complex interactions between citizens, media systems, and algorithmic infrastructures. While digital media have expanded opportunities for engagement, they have also introduced new constraints that undermine democratic efficacy. The imperative, therefore, is not merely to restore confidence in specific media organisations, but to rebuild the institutional and regulatory conditions under which journalism can credibly fulfil its democratic function — conditions that encompass financial independence, transparent ownership, regulatory safeguards against political capture, and the genuine participation of citizens in media governance.

Section IV - Polarization and Deglobalization

This section situates the findings of Work Package 5 within the broader socio-political transformations currently affecting European democracies. While previous sections have focused on citizens' agency, trust, and participation in media environments, the analysis now expands to consider how these dynamics are shaped by wider processes of polarization and deglobalization. In recent years, successive crises—including geopolitical instability and disorder—have challenged the assumptions that underpinned the earlier phases of globalization and European integration. These developments not only affect institutional arrangements but also reshape how citizens perceive belonging and democratic governance. By connecting empirical insights from audience research with emerging debates on polarization and systemic fragmentation, this section explores how changing global and regional contexts may influence democratic legitimacy and the role of media in sustaining—or undermining—shared political horizons.

4.1 The notion of deglobalization

Deglobalization can be seen as the culmination of a sequence of epochal crises that have shaken the very structure of global society. Although critiques of globalization were already present in the cultural debates of the 1990s, only in recent years has politics fully acknowledged that the process was losing momentum and appeal. At least five major crises anticipated and accelerated this shift: 9/11, the 2007–2008 financial crisis, migration tensions culminating in Brexit, the pandemic, and most recently the invasion of Ukraine. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz described the current phase as a **Zeitenwende**—a historic turning point marking the end of a multipolar balance grounded in the universalization of law. The present crisis stems from the accumulation of fractures that have unfolded over roughly two decades.

Anthony Giddens has often been regarded as a celebrant of the neoliberal order and, consequently, of globalization. For the British sociologist, globalization is not only a natural phenomenon but also an irreversible and, in some respects, desirable process (Giddens 2000, 24). From his perspective, Marshall McLuhan's notion of the "global village" can be seen as a precursor to today's concept of globalization—an idea capable of transcending disciplinary boundaries: "Aside from the work of Marshall McLuhan and a few other individual authors, discussions of globalization tend to appear in two largely separate bodies of literature. One is the literature on international relations, the other is the 'world-system theory,' particularly that associated with Immanuel Wallerstein (1990), which is fairly close to a Marxist position" (Giddens 2000, 61).

Although Giddens's tribute to the Canadian scholar may be somewhat overstated, it is nonetheless useful to reflect on how the identity of the nation-state—an entity shaped by the long legacy of the Gutenberg Galaxy—has been challenged and partially superseded, thanks in part to new communication technologies (Held, McGrew 2000). The myth of the global village, to which McLuhan actually attributed a meaning different from the one commonly invoked today, has been shaken by a series of epoch-defining crises:

beginning with September 11, extending through the Credit Crunch and the migration crisis linked to Brexit, intensifying dramatically with Covid-19, and reaching a peak with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These crises have eroded the bonds that once held together an open, cosmopolitan, and multiethnic society, deepening internal polarization and heightening conflicts among its constituent groups.

McLuhan's global village is, at its core, a celebration of the electric age. Yet the ideal of a planetary village—where cultures blend in a kind of technological melting pot—took shape as early as the 1950s: "The United States is the first global society in history, and it is the principal propagator of the technetronic revolution" (Mattelart 1997). The transformative power of electronic technologies simultaneously restores the intimacy of village life and brings people closer together, merging their "inner worlds" (ibid.). The cultural environment from which this concept emerged was one in which a technological revolution "rendered obsolete the old obsession with political revolutions" (ibid.), replacing an "ideology of progress" with an ideology of communication. In other words, the sequence described by Mattelart (1991) unfolds in reverse compared to today's trend toward deglobalization, in which political power is reasserted at the expense of communication and consumption.

The rise of globalization in the 1980s and 1990s marked a step forward in recognizing social groups and their territorially rooted cultures. The world moved from the McDonaldization model (Ritzer 1997)—which imposed a uniform standard on all cultures—to a hybrid model that acknowledged cultural diversity. Moreover, the top-down dynamic of globalization imposed from above gave way to a bottom-up, grassroots model, driven by cultural differences, local contexts, and movements emerging from below. The long-standing optimism surrounding globalization was reinforced by a linguistic bias that permeated not only everyday discourse but even scientific theories. For instance, the adoption of two terms borrowed from physics—centrifugal and centripetal—carries no inherent ethical or evaluative meaning. For proponents of globalization (Hodkinson 2016), cultural integration made possible by the maturation of the global village is inherently centripetal, while the fragmentation of nation-states into multiple identities is "centrifugal" (ibid.). From the perspective of identity-based political parties, however, the movement that keeps the nation-state balanced around its center is centripetal, whereas the forces that push it beyond its center of gravity—challenging its borders—are centrifugal.

Deglobalization is determined by the accumulation of five main crisis:

- 1) The attacks of September 11, 2001, particularly on the World Trade Center, claimed by Al-Qaeda, represented the first systemic shock, inaugurating the era of global terrorism that would later evolve with the rise of ISIS. The initial trauma seemed to confirm that "nothing would ever be the same again," while subsequent developments transformed terror into an increasingly sophisticated and spectacular communicative strategy. For Jean Baudrillard, 9/11 marked the irruption of reality into the realm of spectacle, reawakening history from the numbness induced by images. At the same time, as Franco

Berardi argued, globalization entered an age of “panic,” in which the excessive speed and density of information overwhelm rational response. Terrorism thus operates like a virus that exploits the very networks and codes of globalization, while the system reacts by intensifying surveillance and control—creating a complementary dynamic between destruction and immunization.

One of the Focus Group participants, in Czech Republic, emphasizes the similarities between 9/11 and Invasion of Ukraine in terms of media coverage and amplitude (Hodkinson 2017; Galtung, Ruge, 1973).

Participant 21: For me, it depends on what it is or how serious it is. For instance, when the war in Ukraine started, you just had to turn on the TV, and it was on all the news channels. There were special reports everywhere, just like with the 9/11 attacks in New York. Someone wrote to me, "Turn on the TV," and it was on all channels. It depends on the importance or the scale of the event" (Czech Republic, FG.3)

- 2) The 2007–2008 financial crisis struck at the heart of so-called “turbo-capitalism.” The collapse of subprime mortgages exposed the fragility of an economy built on widespread indebtedness and extreme financialization. Financial products labeled “toxic” triggered a global domino effect, revealing the instability of a system that celebrated immateriality, with finance as its infrastructure and communication as its surface. Years earlier, Edward N. Luttwak (1993) had warned about the risks of unchecked debt expansion. In Europe especially, the credit crisis ushered in a new era of austerity, while signs of neo-industrialization emerged in Asia and other rising economies. The proliferation of alternative payment systems such as electronic money and "private" currencies cannot be considered the cause, but it is certainly a crucial factor in the drift followed by the speculative economy as it transforms into the so-called "debt economy." Suddenly, it becomes clear how the rhetoric of the immaterial, which used finance as a substrate and communication as a surface layer, is faltering, and vistas of neo-industrialization are re-emerging, glimpsed from Asia and various emerging countries. In the period that more than any other has celebrated the social value of immateriality, signs of recession, the uncontrolled fluctuation of oil prices, the flight to safe havens, and the rising prices of raw materials, wheat, and grains are emerging like ghosts of a bygone era. With the credit crisis in Europe, a new austerity atmosphere is pervading. The impact of the financial crisis on Europe and Euro, increased the local crisis of some countries, like Greece, and amplified the dissent and the disconnection between EU and national contexts.
- 3) Migration dynamics further reshaped contemporary geopolitics. The Syrian war, supported militarily by Russia, generated a massive humanitarian crisis. Angela Merkel’s decision to admit around one million Syrian refugees—heightened by the emotional impact of the image of Alan Kurdi—marked a turning point. Yet as the symbolic power of that image faded, right-wing protest movements gained strength, benefiting parties such as Alternative für Deutschland. Similarly, the 2016 victory of

Donald Trump and Brexit reflected sovereignist reactions to globalization. Populism thus emerged as a response to perceived inequalities and the crisis of financialized ideology, reasserting identity, security, and borders against the neoliberal narrative. The impact of BREXIT on the European Citizens perception and trust is clearly described by the following quote coming from the focus group in Ireland.

“Male 1 00:40:25 Because you look at Brexit in England. [Yeah]. It was the papers like, your man Nigel Farage [Former Member of European Parliament and leader of UKIP, current leader of political party Reform UK and Member of Parliament in the UK] and all their papers and all their red tops [and they sold a thing to the English people like. [Oh yeah]. And there’s a danger that media can do that to us as well you know. [mmm...]. And I don’t know how you stop it. Do you, because I’m a different generation to you, you’re all a lot younger than me like. So, I came from newspapers [All laugh]” (Ireland, FG.5)

- 4) The COVID-19 pandemic transcended its biological dimension, functioning as a powerful communicative medium that reshaped perceptions of space, time, and social interaction. Drawing on Marshall McLuhan’s theories, the virus can be understood as a “medium without a message”: its mere presence restructured institutions and daily life. The temporal lag between cause and effect, the centrality of statistical reasoning, and the saturation of media coverage produced a relativistic sense of time and intensified social conflict. Isolation, once considered pathological, became a sign of civic responsibility. Whereas previous crises had shaken globalization, COVID-19 temporarily reversed its foundational assumptions by halting mobility and disrupting supply chains. Covid has prepared and implemented a new form of isolation and a new way of consuming contents and news. As an example, we can quote a Portuguese participant:

PARTICIPANT 9

32:43 “It’s changed a lot, because before, for example, I had, and I’ll say it again, since Covid. I think that was the big chip for me, the paradigm shift, the way I look at news and the media. It started with the Covid, because I used to be able to have the news on at 8 pm, whether I was paying attention or not. I was always connected to the news. Since Covid, my way of thinking has changed radically, and I choose not to watch the news at mealtimes because I want to eat in peace. It’s not that the news wasn’t bad before. It’s just that I think there’s been a big change in recent years and increasingly there’s a lot of information that I don’t want to be in my mealtime, my mealtime, I want to be talking to my son or after dinner, we can watch a series that entertains us, that cheers us up, we can talk about that series. Now I don’t want to hear every day about how many people have died, how many have been murdered, and how many haven’t, because otherwise, it’s not good” (Portugal, INT.9)

- 5) Finally, the invasion of Ukraine has restored centrality to politics, geopolitics, and war—understood, in the words of Carl von Clausewitz, as the continuation of politics by other means. The image of Patriarch Kirill alongside Vladimir Putin symbolized a renewed fusion of religious and temporal

power. The conflict appears not only territorial but also “metaphysical,” fought over values and worldviews. The withdrawal of Western platforms from the Russian market signaled a deeper cultural confrontation with what might be called the “Netflix society,” emblematic of progressive and inclusive imaginaries perceived as threatening by conservative ideologies. As Zygmunt Bauman suggests in **Retrotopia**, contemporary society no longer looks confidently toward the future but turns nostalgically to an idealized past. Utopia no longer illuminates progress; instead, it fuels regression. In this sense, today’s conflicts transcend material interests, taking on symbolic and cultural dimensions that reflect a clash between fundamentally incompatible visions of the world. Also, the invasion of Ukraine has reinforced polarization between opposed factions, making tighter the connections inside the identitarian paradigm, as indicated by the comments of two participants to our focus groups, respectively in Estonia and Germany:

“Participant F: Well, the policies implemented in the last decade or even before show that we are heading towards European ideals, and these European ideals are not in line with democracy. The environment, the food, all these things; taxation... they’re... they don’t go with... It’s getting worse. The European Union has publicly stated these goals and is acting more like a political organization than an economic one. At first, it was more about the economy, but it has been political for decades, and now it’s... You could see it especially with Ukraine. We cut the energy supplies to Europe and now we’re buying the same energy, Russian energy from third countries, paying more for it. Thus, the people suffer, while politicians don’t bear many consequences (Estonia, FG.2)

“P4: So, I think it's so great that the Washington Post is staying out of the elections. Yeah, we should have that too. It's none of our business what's going on over there. And I think it's so bad how people are railing against Trump here. Yes, you don't have to like him and so on. But this direction... You can't say anything positive. It's the same now with the Ukraine war: yes, it's the same. I think it's very one-sided and the media need to stay out of it. Hart aber fair , for example, only invites people who have an ideology. Yes, and I think that's a shame ” (Germany, FG.3)

4.2 The Two Paradigms: Reversing Polarization

In the past, the political orientation of nations or large geopolitical blocs tended to remain relatively stable despite electoral shifts within democratic countries. The victory of right- or left-wing parties rarely altered the international political configuration, particularly with respect to the balance of the global order. This homeostatic feature of democratic systems has largely eroded in the current age of polarization. The increasingly antagonistic confrontation between opposing camps, coupled with the systematic delegitimization of rival positions, has produced two overarching paradigms that condense ethical values, worldviews, and post-ideological political orientations.

Polarization now permeates multiple dimensions—economic, political, cultural, and psychological—ultimately destabilizing the very foundations of social and political identities. It is, first and foremost, an economic problem, concerning the capacity to re-center the interests of the middle classes and moderates. It is also a cognitive problem, involving the need to reduce individuals' psychological fragmentation and restore the value of logical coherence. It is cultural, insofar as it requires reconstructing a shared repertoire of knowledge, values, and consumption patterns aligned with class interests. It is a media problem, shaped by algorithmic communication. Finally, it is a political problem, linked to the need to reaffirm that some parties genuinely defend the interests of subordinate classes, while others primarily represent elite interests.

Cognitively, polarization produces a drastic simplification of the interpretive spectrum, reducing it to two binary and mutually exclusive positions: A or B. As a result, even the most sophisticated thinkers find themselves compelled to align with one of the two poles. It becomes nearly impossible to remain outside these frameworks, since rejecting one paradigm is automatically interpreted as endorsing the opposite. Polarization also has an affective dimension: individuals resonate emotionally with arguments embedded in specific paradigms, far beyond rational political reasoning. The novelty of this emotional hypertrophy lies in its direct impact on geopolitics.

The postmodern deconstruction initiated in the 1980s reached significant heights in the 1990s, when the rhetoric of rights-based emancipation still aimed at reasonable forms of recognition for marginalized groups. Since then, something has gone awry: certain issues of collective life have expanded disproportionately, overshadowing all others. The central hypothesis of this book is that polarization has shattered political dialectics, making not only synthesis but even basic comprehension of opposing positions increasingly impossible. In academic contexts—especially in EU-funded research projects or in speeches by President Von der Leyen—polarization is typically attributed to the opposing side, usually the right. Rarely is it acknowledged that polarization is reciprocal: as one side moves further from the center, the other tends to do the same.

Identity has become the central axis of contemporary politics. After decades of postmodern and glocal visions, public debate has devolved into a “clash of incivilities,” where each side retreats into its own bubble and refuses to listen to the other. F. Fukuyama (2019) attempts to reframe this debate within the tradition of classical political philosophy—an inevitably ideological move that emphasizes continuity rather than rupture between Western modernity and the present, from Trump's election to Brexit and the rise of illiberal “super-leaders.”

A key concept is the Socratic notion of *thymos*, expressed in two forms: *isothymia*, the desire to be respected as an equal, and *megalothymia*, the desire to be recognized as superior. Modern democracies emerged through the “removal of megalothymia by isothymia”, supported by the Leviathan, which ensures peaceful coexistence among individuals conceived as “machines propelled by their desires” (2019, 67). In classical Greece, honor belonged to those who renounced rational utility maximization (2019, 35); in modern bourgeois society, the aristocrat is reinterpreted as a “parasite.”

The mission of modern democracies has been to sustain isothymia through the upward emancipation of minorities, culminating in Hegel's notion of universal recognition. Yet this trajectory is now threatened. Huntington's "third wave" of democratization—from thirty-five to more than one hundred ten democracies—has proven reversible, prompting concerns about a global democratic "recession". The equilibrium among class, ethnic, religious, and gender identities—once maintained by the expansive, globalizing dynamic of postindustrial societies—appears to be collapsing under the pressure of competing claims for recognition.

The current democratic crisis stems from the pursuit of recognition, but "the desire for equal recognition can easily slide into a demand for recognition of the group's superiority" (2019, 37). The mimetic polarization between sovereigntists and radical Islam illustrates this oscillation between isothymic and megalothymic impulses. Fukuyama argues that economists have long ignored the problem of the "invisible man," although Adam Smith already recognized that economic behavior is driven not only by the satisfaction of needs but by the desire to be seen and valued by others (2019, 98–99). Thus, both neoliberal extremism and its proposed remedies—such as universal basic income—are critically reassessed.

Identity politics now permeates democratic life, undermining the mission of political parties and the dialectic between left and right. Fukuyama's analysis echoes Christopher Lasch's left-wing conservatism (2019, 114): the left has shifted from economic equality to the defense of minorities, immigrants, women, LGBTQ+ communities, and refugees, while the right increasingly presents itself as the defender of traditional national identity. The pivotal turning point, according to Fukuyama, was 1968, which displaced Sartrean intellectuals focused on the industrial working class in favor of new movements centered on emerging rights—minority, gender, and environmental rights. Identity, once conceived in liberal-individualist terms, became recognized as fundamentally collective. This shift also redirected the left from combating inequality to critiquing Western cultural hegemony. A new left—described, perhaps hyperbolically, as Nietzschean, relativist, and anti-colonial—"infiltrated" American universities (2019, 129) under the banners of postmodernism and deconstruction, intensifying cultural conflict. The text's central theme is thus the transition from an individualist, modern conception of identity to a more anthropological one rooted in social, ethnic, and political groups.

Fukuyama's discussion of multiculturalism is crucial: it represents the evolution of the liberal state from protecting individual liberties to recognizing the rights of ethnically based groups. Multiculturalism is defined as both an ideology and a "political program aimed at establishing equal valuation for each culture" (2019, 127). Unlike Charles Taylor's optimistic "fusion of horizons" (1993), Fukuyama adopts a more critical stance. Drawing on cyberpunk literature, he depicts the contemporary world as suspended between two dystopias: a hyper-centralized Chinese-style society and a fragmented American-style landscape of "self-sufficient communities" (2019, 196) shaped by social media.

The paradox of our time is that the customer-centric regime (Barile 2022), amplified by social-media echo chambers, simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes Western individualism (Rodhes 2021). It also provides an entry point for autocracies to influence democratic politics through algorithmic exploitation of data. This asymmetry mirrors other crises—from migration to public health. The problem of “data colonialism” (Couldry, Mejias 2019) is alarming not only because it exploits deep layers of human subjectivity, but also because it can be weaponized by emerging autocratic powers, potentially more dangerous than earlier forms of Western colonialism.

A particularly valuable contribution to understanding the dynamics of polarization is offered by Sunstein, who defines it as the tendency of group members to shift toward more extreme positions.

To illustrate this principle, Sunstein employs a positivist metaphor borrowed from chemistry, comparing social polarization to the behavior of “polarized molecules” that “align increasingly in the direction to which they were already inclined”. Polarization is triggered and amplified by three fundamental mechanisms (2019):

- the role of information and the specific “argument pools” circulating within each group;
- social-influence processes shaped by reputational cascades;
- the sense of security individuals derive from the group’s endorsement of their ideas, which encourages them to adopt more radical positions.

The science of *nudges* is directed toward social-science researchers, policymakers, and public-sector administrators—essentially, those who design collective behavior as if they were architects of social processes. The concept of the nudge occupies a central place in behavioral economics. It demonstrates the crisis of the purely rational action model posited by classical economic theory and opens the field to an intersection of economics, psychology, and neuroscience.

Whether described as cues, aids, facilitators, prompts, incentives. Nudges function as complexity-reducing devices that help orient individuals faced with more or less conscious choices. They encompass a wide and heterogeneous range of human behaviors: from the fly etched into men’s urinals, to financial incentives aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy (*Dollar a Day*), to recommendation algorithms and, today, artificial intelligence systems.

Sunstein reflects carefully on the ethical dimension of nudges, emphasizing transparency as a fundamental value of technocratic planning. The strategic use of nudges may help reverse processes of polarization. Indeed, Sunstein (2019) has explored how polarization intensifies within homogeneous groups and has proposed potential solutions aimed at depolarization, cultivated through deliberative dialogue and exposure to plural viewpoints.

4.3 Impact of the “Turning Point” on European Identity

If depolarization remains an experiment confined to controlled environments, polarization—and its interaction with the dynamics of de-globalization—is already reshaping the architecture of international politics. This transformation is driven by the cumulative intensification of previous shocks, pushing the system toward a breaking point and ultimately inverting its foundational principles: democracies drifting toward autarky, law reduced to an instrument of power, multiculturalism devolving into *multi-conflictualism*. While the populist-sovereigntist wave once seemed to blow from the East, the most unexpected cultural rupture dividing the West now originates from the West itself.

From a European perspective, it is difficult to grasp the hostility repeatedly expressed by J. D. Vance (2016) toward the culture and politics of the Old Continent. Part of the frustration of the so-called *Rednecks* in *Hillbilly Elegy* stems from the paradox that, despite their European ancestry, they feel “inferior or disadvantaged” compared with other ethnic groups. Their aversion to European culture may derive from Europe’s universalistic self-conception—its claim to embody a historical, cultural, and political mission. Historically, this mission is rooted in Enlightenment values; culturally, it asserts the idea of a more advanced and modernized West; politically, it implies a form of normative “trickle-down” influence.

Democracy has long maintained a delicate balance between individual and collective dimensions. Yet the proliferation of particularistic demands for recognition risks destabilizing the system itself. This process recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of polyphony and multi-accentuality (1929), celebrated within Cultural Studies for their critique of bourgeois hegemony and their resonance with multicultural and postcolonial perspectives (Moore 1990). In Bakhtin’s view, language functions as a battlefield where the strategic aspirations of dominant groups (class, ethnicity, etc.) confront the tactical agency of subordinate interlocutors. Cultural Studies built upon this foundation to develop an alternative perspective on history and class-cultural relations. The encoding/decoding model operationalizes Bakhtinian multi-accentuality and opens the door to postcolonial interpretations (Moore 1998). The colonized subject’s speech diverges from the colonizer’s grammatical expectations, generating polysemy and polyphony that renew linguistic meaning and enable new forms of self-expression—and freedom. It is no coincidence that geopolitical conflicts often invoke language as a marker of identity, as seen in disputes involving German-speaking or Russian-speaking communities.

The key issue is the transition from linguistic and power relations to the sphere of production and consumption—from the domain of freedoms to that of needs and desires, embodied in the figure of the *prosumer*. Polarization is therefore primarily a cognitive and linguistic phenomenon, echoing Wittgenstein’s insight that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Yet globalization, once envisioned as a fusion of horizons in the Taylor-Gadamer tradition, now reveals a more troubling profile: the shift from multiculturalism to what the political right now labels *multi-conflictualism*.

Trump's 2016 victory was initially explained as a quirk of the electoral system. Subsequent victories of sovereigntist parties in Europe and beyond were dismissed through symbolic gestures rather than examined through a rational critique of the changing class structure in advanced societies. The absence of such analysis has left European identity exposed to the full force of the turning point. With the second Trumps election, worked such a sort of pandora effect in the sense that all the consequences contained in the first presidency, exploded dramatically in the second one. At the core of the new political strategy, there is a strong verbal and economical attack against the EU. The pressure put on some firendly nation such as Italy or Hungry, is a strategy to turn them into a leverage to accelerate the implosion of the European Union.

4.4 Hybrid Warfare Against Europe: De-Europeanization and/or De-Democratization

Contemporary hybrid warfare deploys not only conventional weapons but also robots, drones, and low-cost devices (De Feo 2025; see also Carpentier, Miconi 2024). It additionally exploits migration flows as a tool for exerting pressure on the borders of democratic states, generating discontent among economically vulnerable groups and producing unexpected political transformations that ultimately serve the emergence of a new international order. A striking example occurred in 2021, when large numbers of migrants were lured from Asian countries to Belarus and directed toward the Polish border in an attempt to destabilize domestic politics (Gavin 2024). As the document notes, immigration in itself represents neither a negative nor positive phenomenon, "yet the rhetorical frames constructed by both right and left transform it into an electoral lever. The right often mobilizes the image of the muscular Black man with a smartphone, while the left invokes the sacralized figure of the mother with her child. Both are emotional attractors designed to generate political consensus. Beyond such hybrid-warfare experiments, the migration crisis can be amplified by the media (Mudde 2022) and manipulated as a mechanism for hacking liberal democracies, producing extreme polarization that undermines the functioning of democratic institutions.

While the right invokes the specter of irregular migration, the left struggles to acknowledge its social and psychological impact on specific segments of the population. This difficulty stems from the left's post-1970s shift away from Marxian analysis toward a form of globalism that inadvertently legitimized globalization—even when driven by capitalism and finance. A simple thought experiment illustrates the paradox: if Trotsky's utopia of global communism had been realized, the current migration crisis—dismissed by some scholars as a media construction (Mudde 2020)—would not exist. The adage that "the left loses when it imitates the right" is matched by another: the left also loses when it insists on positions rejected by subordinate classes. A left that denies its origins is mirrored by a right that retreats into myths of purity and origins.

To describe this dynamic, the concept of polarization is insufficient, as it is often used as a stigma against opponents. The notion of *schismogenesis* more accurately captures the reciprocal escalation between groups. Bateson (1972) distinguishes two forms. The first, *symmetrical schismogenesis*, evokes the Cold War: two equivalent superpowers locked in mutual antagonism, where destabilization risks total destruction—including

self-destruction in the case of thermonuclear war. The second, *complementary schismogenesis*, resembles asymmetric conflict: differentiation between groups becomes progressive, and “ai segnali assertivi del gruppo A seguano quelli di sottomissione del gruppo B,” such that subordination provokes greater assertiveness, which in turn deepens subordination. If unchecked, this dynamic leads to a progressive unilateral distortion...which results in mutual hostility, and inevitably leads to the collapse of the system.

The negotiations surrounding peace in Ukraine reveal an integration of symmetrical and asymmetrical schismogenesis. From the Russian perspective, the conflict is not a symmetrical confrontation between two states but an internal matter—a “special military operation.” After Trump’s second victory, Ukraine found itself caught between two fronts: the longstanding schismogenesis with Russia and a new, unexpected schismogenesis with its principal ally, now repositioned against it.

D.J. Trump's second election in 2024 marked a reversal of the reversal. The rift with the EU, the proclamations regarding the annexation of Greenland, Canada, and Panama, and the flattery toward Russia, had as their only tangible consequence the green light for Benjamin Netanyahu. The devastation of Gaza, already begun under the assent/dissent of J. Biden, has catastrophically intensified under the new presidency. Meanwhile, the severing of the once-unbreakable bond with Europe is throwing the world into an era of reorganized chaos. If the initial hypothesis underlying this book envisioned a split in globalization into two sub-empires, the Atlanticist and the BRICS, in the new global disorder based on the superpower of New Empires.

The “verbal wrestling match” staged by Trump during Zelensky’s visit to the Oval Office exemplifies the media logic of this dynamic. The event’s “violenza verbale e coreografica” reflects the cultural ethos of *White Trash America*. Zelensky’s public humiliation carried a dual meaning: it symbolically degraded Putin’s primary adversary—later accused of initiating the conflict—and it targeted Zelensky as the representative of a nation and culture opposed to the values claimed by MAGA and other right-wing formations. The scene revealed an implicit solidarity between the cultural imaginaries of the two nuclear superpowers’ leaders.

Only a megalomaniac could think of building something decent in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by humiliating President Zelensky and establishing a direct personal relationship with Putin, acknowledging the Russian autocrat's long-lost and irrecoverable power. No "just and lasting" peace would have resulted, however, and nothing to brag about (Pasquino 2025).

This episode also exposed the fallacy of the populist-sovereigntist “international,” along with the illusion that Putin—source of Western Populism—could be detached from China, leaving the latter as the principal adversary. After acknowledging the impossibility of a peace agreement, Trump extended his “wrestling diplomacy” to Putin, calling him “crazy” (Northam 2025) while offering no concrete measures to sanction Russia’s obstruction of peace talks beyond a vague warning: “you’re playing with fire.” Medvedev’s response—threatening nuclear war—followed almost reflexively.

The war in Ukraine first, and then in the Middle East, further undermined the accommodating order on which the globalist and neoliberal left had been built, creating turmoil even within right-wing groups that today face an increasingly problematic double bind: either consistently pursuing an identitarian and "retrotopian" conception (Bauman 2017) that seeks to turn back the clock on globalization and thus pander to Putinism, or

experimenting with variable geometries like that of the Brothers of Italy, which was born sovereignist but drew closer to Europe and the US in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Similarly, the radical left is experiencing a major split, forced to forget Ukraine in favor of unconditional support for the Palestinian cause.

The left's crisis in the face of major global issues is the result of an identity crisis and a substantial oscillation that makes it easy prey for emerging geopolitical powers and their new mythologies. Years before the actual turning point, the concept of “democratic regression” (Mounk 2018) pointed to a troubling shift: despite often being portrayed as more open-minded and democratic than previous generations, many members of Generation Z appear surprisingly unalarmed by the prospect of an authoritarian turn.

The Munich Security Conferences of 2025 and 2026 mark a revealing interval in which the international system appears to shift from the post–World War II order to a new, more openly imperial configuration grounded in the arbitrary exercise of power. In 2025, J. D. Vance criticized the European Union for allegedly betraying core values such as freedom of speech—understood, in his framing, as the freedom to circulate alternative “truths.” One year later, at the 2026 conference, Friedrich Merz argued that the world is not simply undergoing a transition but experiencing a genuine rupture with the previous order.

The rupture is produced by the intersection between the two processes of de-democratization (Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018) and de-europization (Börzel, Risse 2012). If de-Europeanization describes a gradual distancing from EU norms, institutions, and expectations, de-democratization refers to the slow erosion of democratic checks, rights, and accountability. Both processes unfold incrementally, often through legal tweaks, discursive shifts, and institutional capture. They share common drivers such as nationalism, executive centralization, and hostility toward external constraints. When governments weaken the rule of law, they simultaneously undermine EU compliance and democratic safeguards. Reducing alignment with EU standards removes external pressures that once protected domestic democratic institutions.

Both processes are often portrayed as spontaneous, bottom-up reactions—a popular revolt against technocracy, global elites, and the establishment. Yet, if we return to the earlier contrast between the two paradigms, it becomes evident that the rise of sovereigntist post-ideology is far from a naïve or organic development. Instead, it resembles a form of social engineering that aligns and empowers new political actors. Political actors increasingly exploit narratives of victimhood (Chouliaraki 2024), turning them into potent communicative weapons that polarize public opinion. This strategy fractures democratic societies into antagonistic, tribalized camps, deepening conflict and weakening the shared foundations needed for democratic and European norms to endure. In this sense, what appears to be a grassroots uprising is better understood as a top-down strategy carefully packaged as a bottom-up movement.

As democratic oversight erodes, leaders gain more freedom to challenge or ignore EU rules and monitoring. The two processes reinforce each other, creating a cycle of withdrawal from both European and liberal norms. They reshape political systems not through rupture but through steady, cumulative change. Together, they signal a broader retreat from the liberal-democratic model that Europeanization once promoted.

Depolarization cannot rely solely on reverse-engineering communication strategies, clever spin, or technocratic nudges designed to steer European public opinion. Such tools may soften surface tensions, but

they do not address the deeper social fractures that fuel polarization. The Left, in particular, needs to confront the uncomfortable reality that its own radicalization can intensify schismogenesis between already divided social groups. By hardening ideological boundaries, it risks deepening the very class-based rifts that make democratic and European cohesion more fragile. The growing vulnerability of Western middle classes—whose economic security has eroded further since the Credit Crunch and then triggered by the alert on immigration—has become a central socio-economic driver behind both de-democratization and de-Europeanization.

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