



Strengthening Democracy in Europe

How movement parties, social movements and active citizens are reshaping Europe

November 2022

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1. Introducing ProDem



ProDem is a 3-year research project (2020 - 2023) funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung under the call “Challenges for Europe”. The project is conducted by a consortium made up of Goethe University Frankfurt, University of Copenhagen, University of Milan, City, University of London, and Babeş-Bolyai University.

ProDem investigates how interactions between citizens, social movements, and a specific breed of political parties - so-called ‘**movement parties**’ - influence **democratic quality** in Europe. We approach democratic quality from a citizens’ perspective as the acquisition of political, civil, and social citizenship rights through democratic institutions and processes.⁶ The interplay among citizens, media, and political organisations is at the heart of our inquiry, focused on six countries: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the UK.

The five working groups of ProDem are led by the following principal investigators (PIs): **Claudius Wagemann** (Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany), **Christina Neumayer** (University of Copenhagen, Denmark), **Lorenzo Mosca** (University of Milan, Italy), **Dan Mercea**, (City, University of London, UK), **Toma Burean** (Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania). The ProDem team includes six postdoctoral researchers: Daria Glukhova (Goethe University Frankfurt), Matthias Hoffmann (University of Copenhagen), Fred Paxton (University of Milan), Felipe G. Santos (City, University of London), Diana Mărgărit and Dana S. Trif (Babeş-Bolyai University).



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2. Executive summary

Since 2011 and in the wake of the European financial, economic, and migration crises, mass protests engendered new social movements and political parties. The new parties that emerged from these protests, and hold close links with them, are often labelled ‘**movement parties**’. Examples of this type of party include the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece.

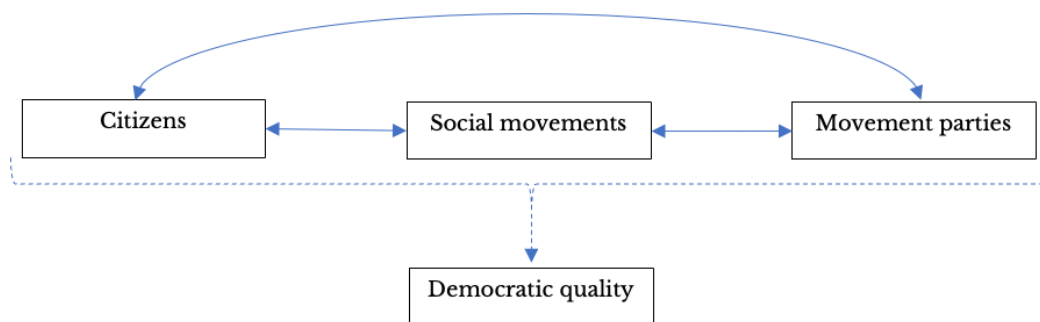
Key concepts

- **Movement parties:** political parties that are distinctive in their similarity to social movements in organisation and degree of involvement in protests.
- **Democratic quality:** the capacity for citizens to exercise their political, civil, and social citizenship rights through democratic institutions and processes.

What are the consequences of these newly emerged parties for European democracy, procedures, and institutions? Their increasing prominence tends to be interpreted in two contrasting ways. An optimistic perspective sees in them a rising participation of ‘critical citizens’, who question authority but remain committed to democratic values. A more fearful perspective instead focuses on the emergence of conflictual and polarising narratives challenging fundamental values of liberal democracies. Such discourses feed on, and exacerbate, the discontent of citizens and may serve to erode liberal democratic standards. ProDem enters this debate and seeks to provide robust and innovative answers to the question prompted by these developments.

To do so, **ProDem comparatively analyses the medium- and long-term effects of the triple interaction between citizens, social movements, and movement parties on democratic quality in European democracies**. We assess the consequences for democratic quality in six European countries (Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the UK) during a global wave of protests between 2011 and 2019.

Figure 1. The triple interaction between citizens, social movements and movement parties



In this report, we highlight some results of the ongoing research conducted in the ProDem project. Our research focuses in particular on the opinions regarding democracy held by citizens across Europe, the efforts by new parties to revitalise European democracy, and the contemporary challenges from political forces that are hostile towards liberal democracy. We would highlight the following key takeaways from the research so far conducted by ProDem.

Key takeaways

- **Declining democratic quality** is a concern in Europe, particularly in the last decade amid a global wave of protest.
- **Distrust of democracy** among European citizens is widespread across Europe, concerning both national and EU democratic institutions.
- State of the art survey experiments reveal that distrusting citizens are **less likely to participate in politics**, and **social inequalities are worsened by the perception that European democracies are in decline**.
- New **‘movement parties’** emerging from protests are making effective use of social media to become relevant forces in institutional politics.

As a result of these findings, ProDem makes some concrete recommendations to policy-makers in order to sustain and improve democratic quality in Europe.

Recommendations

- **EU institutions** (which tend to be more trusted than national institutions in countries with particularly low levels of political trust) must do more to improve citizens’ attitudes towards democracy.
- It is paramount that interventions are made to foster greater **political participation** to confront attempts to erode democratic principles and to demand necessary institutional reforms.
- Parties supportive of liberal democracy must be prepared to build **coalitions across the left-right divide** to avoid co-operation with forces threatening liberal democracy.
- To remedy existing inequalities, institutions should implement measures aiming at fostering the participation of **women and low-income groups**. In addition to targeted campaigns encouraging their participation, representatives should also facilitate participation in non-electoral (e.g., protest) activities.
- **Social media platforms** should be regulated so as to effectively restrict the spread of anti-democratic content in the public sphere.

- **News media organisations** must continue to give attention to the protest activities of radical political forces, and expose anti-democratic actors who are involved alongside them and their actions.

3. Defining democratic quality

There is a growing concern with the global state of democracy. Global civil liberties have been declining for 16 consecutive years, according to reports by Freedom House. Moreover, according to the 2022 Economist's Global Democracy Index, there are more non-democratic than democratic regimes in the world and the majority of the world's population now lives under authoritarian rule. These claims are shared by other major democracy monitoring organisations such as the Varieties of Democracy Institute, The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), and the Bertelsmann Stiftung.¹

Since 2011 and in the wake of the European financial, economic, and migration crises, mass protests have engendered new social movements and political parties. This development has been interpreted in two main ways. Research into political culture describes the increase in protests as a consequence of long-term sociocultural change, leading to growing numbers of 'critical citizens' who question authority but remain committed to democratic values, procedures, and institutions.² **Protesting belongs to civic attitudes deeply rooted in European democracies.**

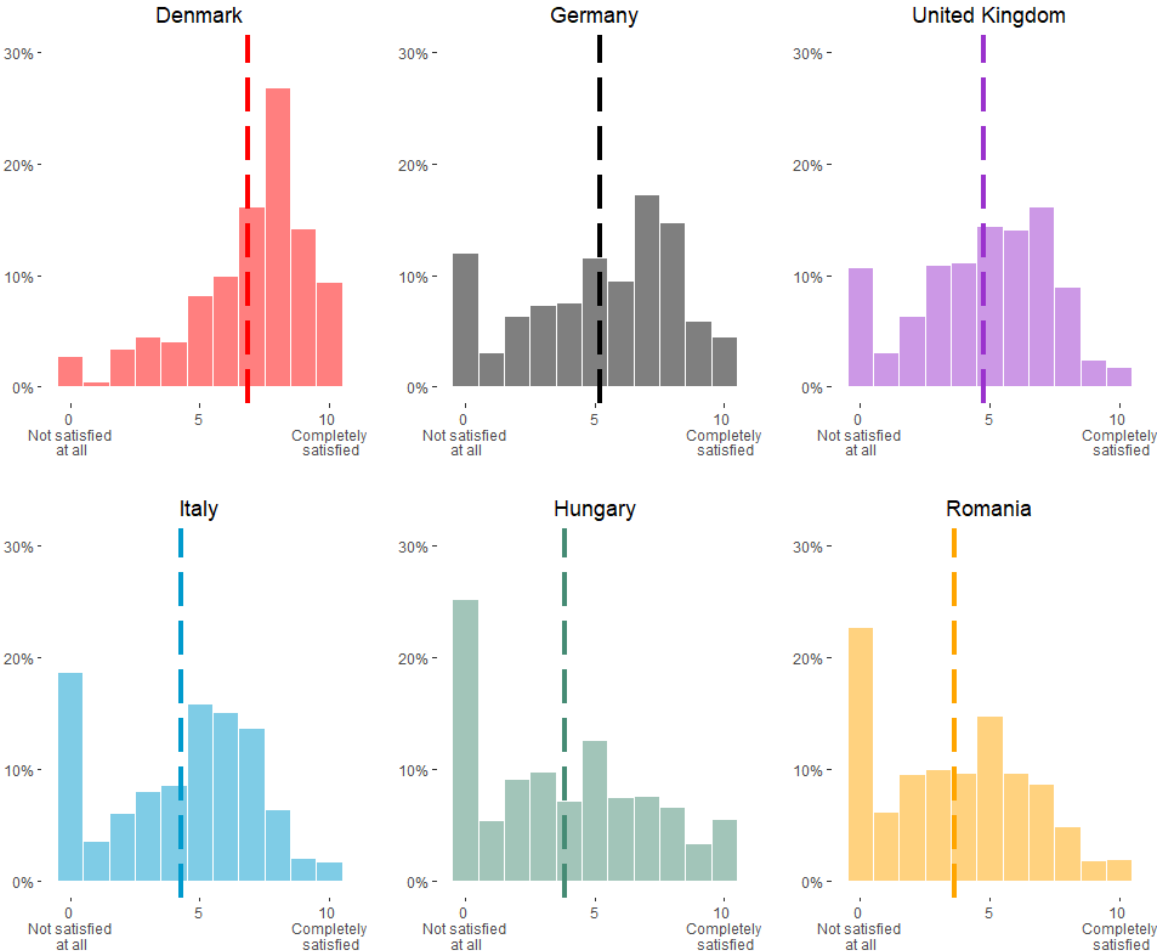
Researchers studying the 'quality of democracy' have developed a more ambivalent approach, regarding the spread of protests as symptomatic of democratic backsliding.³ Dissatisfied with the performance of democracies, sizable sections of the citizenry have protested by voting for anti-establishment parties. Some social movements and their party vehicles have mobilised citizens by framing political conflicts as a confrontation between corrupt, unaccountable, foreign-controlled, mainstream media-supported elites and ordinary people, expressing their grievances on social media. **Polarising worldviews, often coupled with nativist frames, tend to negate political pluralism and erode attachment to the norms underpinning liberal democracy.**⁴ Activists have, however, also resorted to protest to resist illiberal policies.⁵

ProDem approaches democratic quality from a citizens' perspective as the acquisition of political, civil, and social citizenship rights through democratic institutions and processes.⁶ **The interactions between citizens, the media, and political organisations is at the heart of our inquiry into democratic quality.**

4. Breaking the cycle of distrust

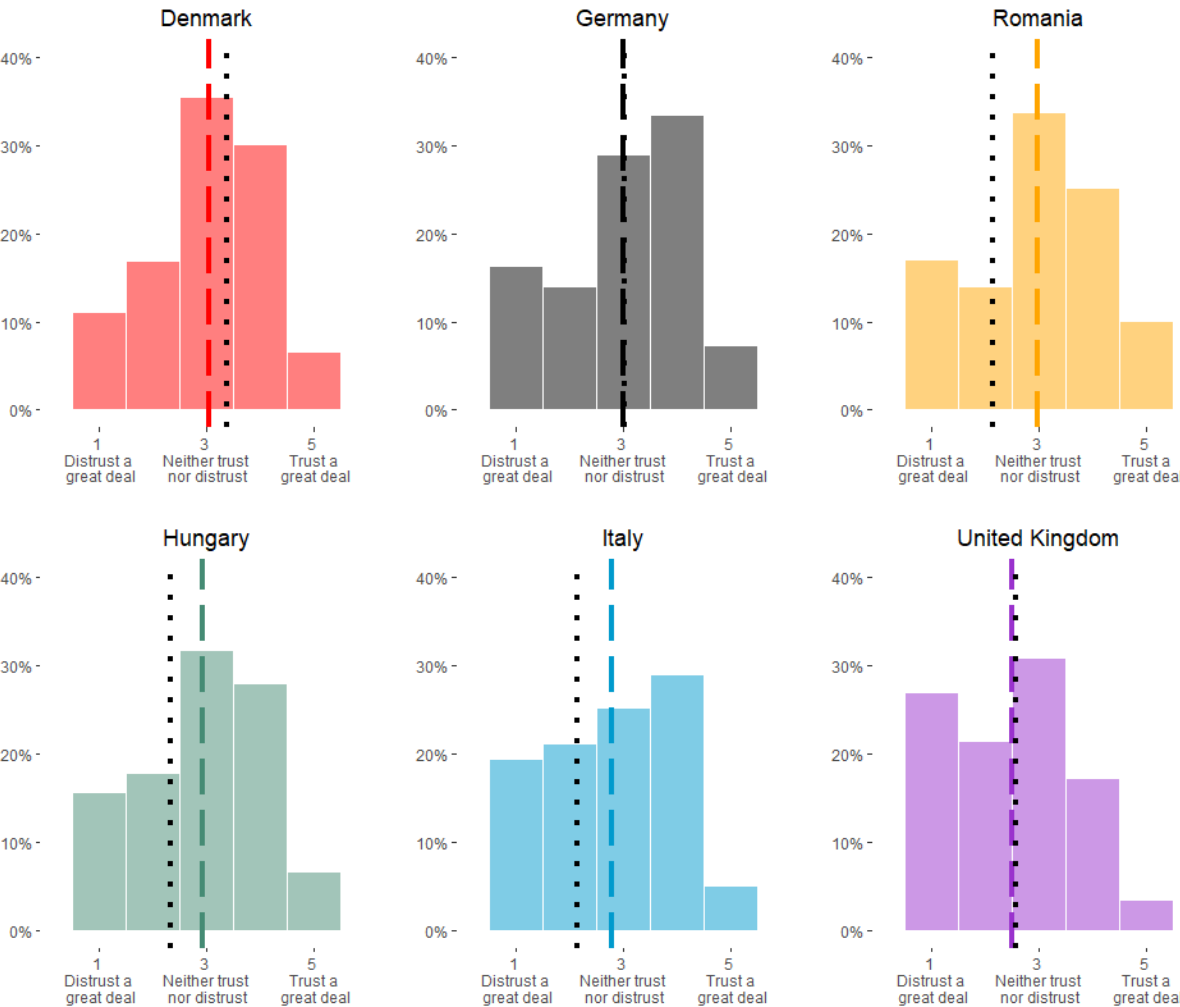
Dissatisfaction with democracy is widespread among citizens across Europe. ProDem conducted a survey that asked citizens from Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the UK about their **satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country**, on a scale of 0 ('not satisfied at all') to 10 ('completely satisfied'). The results are shown in **Figure 2**. The dashed vertical lines that appear in each chart represent the average citizen's assessment of democracy. **Only Danish and German citizens give their democracies a 'passing grade', i.e. more than 5 out of 10.** While in the United Kingdom average satisfaction with democracy is a little under 5, citizens in Italy, Hungary and Romania are far less satisfied. In all countries besides Denmark, **there is a high proportion of citizens who state that they are 'not satisfied at all' (0 out of 10) with the way democracy works in their country.** In sum, these data demonstrate that democracy is not working for a substantial proportion of European citizens.

Figure 2. Satisfaction with democracy across European countries



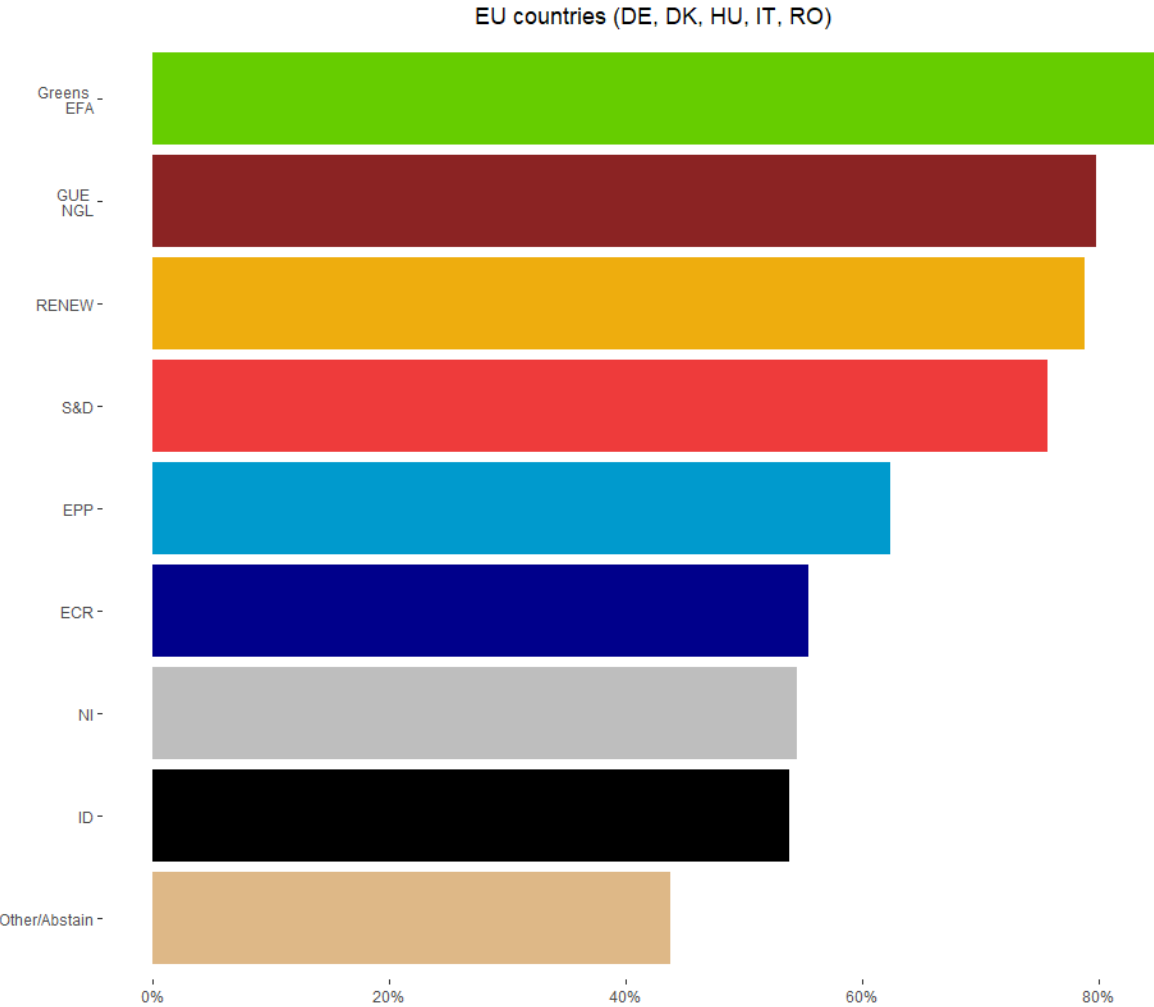
As well as asking about the satisfaction with the overall democratic system, we also inquired into how much **trust** citizens have in different institutions, including the European Union. **Figure 3** shows the results. The coloured dashed line represents the average trust in the EU in each country, while the dotted black line represents the average trust in national institutions (the national judiciary, parliament and political parties), provided for comparison. We can see that in none of the countries is the average above ‘neither trust nor distrust’, for either EU or national institutions. Yet there are some noteworthy differences in sentiment between the two. **In countries where the average citizen distrusts its national institutions (Romania, Italy and Hungary), the level of trust towards the EU is higher.** These are also the countries where citizens are the most dissatisfied with democracy. **As a result, particularly in countries where national institutions are not as trusted by citizens, there is room for the more trusted EU institutions to improve citizens’ attitudes towards democracy.**

Figure 3. Trust in the European Union, compared with trust in national institutions



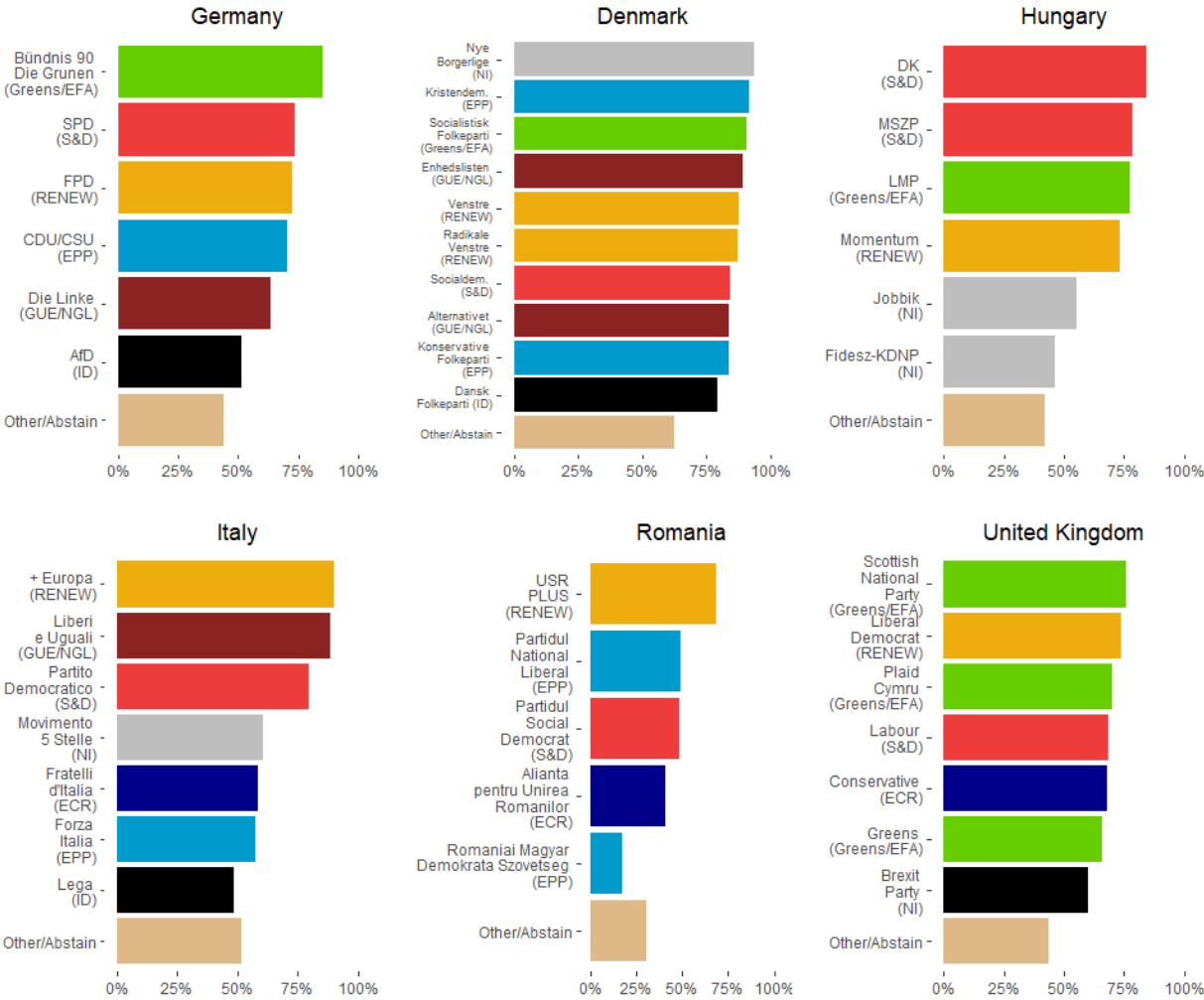
Next, we turn to support for democracy as a system of government. We focus on the views of voters in the EU countries in our sample (Germany, Denmark, Hungary, Italy and Romania). As shown in **Figure 4**, with the results broken down by the different political groups of the European Parliament, there is a clear answer regarding which voters are less likely to support democracy. **Voters of political parties that are members of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, and those who are not attached to any European grouping (the *Non-inscrits*) stand out for their low level of support for democracy.**

Figure 4. Percentage of voters who think democracy is the best system of government by EP group



When we instead split voters by country, the results are similar (see [Figure 5](#)). In those countries with parties from the ID group (Germany, Denmark, Italy and the UK), the voters of these parties are always at the bottom of the table in each of the countries. **Voters of parties from the ID group show the lowest levels of support for democracy. Voters of parties from the ECR and *Non-inscrits* show similar attitudes towards democracy.** The cases of AfD voters in Germany, Lega voters in Italy, Fidesz-KDNP voters in Hungary, and AUR in Romania are particularly worrying, as the majority of these voters do not think democracy is the best system of government.

Figure 5. Percentage of voters who think democracy is the best system of government by country



While the UK is no longer part of the EU and does not hold seats in the European Parliament, the affiliation of national parties to the party groups of the European Parliament is shown from the preceding period.

Our analysis shows that, across Europe, there are concerningly low levels of satisfaction with democracy, trust in democratic institutions, and belief that democracy is the best system of government. **It is therefore paramount that interventions are made to foster greater political participation to confront attempts to erode democratic principles and to demand necessary institutional reforms.**

These data also support the efforts by democratic parties in the European Parliament and most national parliaments to avoid cooperation with anti-democratic forces. The inclusion in government of parties with little intention to advance the democratic reforms needed for institutions to be more responsive to the citizenry is likely to limit governmental incentives and capacity to address citizens' satisfaction with democracy and trust in democratic institutions. It should be noted, however, that such a strategy requires broad support across the spectrum of pro-democratic parties. **In many cases, pro-democratic coalitions would require agreements across the left-right divide.**



5. Targeting the vulnerable and increasing their political participation

As well as assessing the level of satisfaction with and trust in democracy, ProDem has investigated the consequences for **participation** using state of the art survey experiments. **We found that when citizens are more concerned about democratic quality, they are less willing to participate in politics.** More specifically, they are less willing to join political parties and civil society organisations, to participate in demonstrations, and instead more likely to stop participating in politics altogether. This means that institutions cannot stay passive in face of democratic decline, hoping for citizens to react and demand greater democratic quality. There needs to be decisive action to reverse the cycle of democratic deterioration.

Declines in democratic quality deepen already existing social inequalities. We have found that, when presented with the notion that democracy suffers with multiple problems (e.g. unresponsive governments, curbs on protests), the political participation of **women and low-income groups** is more heavily hampered than that of men and higher-income people. Thus, when made aware of an erosion of democratic quality, women are more likely than men to say that they will not vote in the next election and that they are not willing to participate in demonstrations.



When it comes to low-income groups, their exposure to problems with democracy leads to them being less willing to join a political party, to vote in the next election and join civil society organisations, in comparison to higher-income citizens. Consequently, our analysis shows that, beyond the institutional problems that are created by the erosion of democratic quality, such an erosion is also likely to discourage women and low-income citizens even further in their attempts to participate politically to redress social inequalities.

To remedy these inequalities, institutions should implement measures aimed at fostering the participation of women and low-income groups. In addition to targeted campaigns encouraging their participation, representatives should also facilitate participation in non-electoral activities. Academic research convincingly shows that participation in protests and social movements is an effective tool for empowering groups underrepresented in politics.⁷ However, scholars have also pointed out that these groups are more risk-averse when it comes to participating in politics.⁸ Institutions need to make participation in demonstrations and social movements safer, to encourage wider political engagement by women and low-income groups. This objective requires significant reforms to the policing of demonstrations and social movements, decreasing the number of instances when police agents crack down on these groups, particularly in cases of non-violent activities.



6. Addressing challenges to democracy

Beyond investigating the attitudes of citizens towards democracy, ProDem has conducted research into the **actions of political parties and their consequences for democratic quality**. In particular, we focus on new challenger parties that have emerged from and/or interact closely with protest movements: the so-called ‘**movement parties**’.

As detailed below, we conducted analyses of the **interactions between movement parties and other, more traditional parties on social media**. We found that the acceptance of these new parties within established institutional politics is strongly related to their electoral performance. That is, the better that movement parties perform electorally, the more recognition they gain from other parties online.

This, in turn, means that **established parties should carefully review their stance toward challengers in digital communicative arenas**. On the one hand, doing so can serve as an effective ‘*cordon sanitaire*’ to contain anti-democratic forces and avoid steering attention towards their narratives. On the other hand, withholding recognition from challengers to the establishment might lead to (further) alienation of their supporters from institutional politics.

We also support the use of **platform regulations to effectively contain the development of anti-democratic content and networks**. Effective monitoring of anti-democratic accounts and pages severely limits the capacity to (publicly) network between civil society organisations and movement parties. While networking activities among far-right parties and civil society organisations may still take place on less visible and recognized social media platforms, effective regulations on major social media platforms can help to contain the spread of anti-democratic content.

We base these recommendations on analyses conducted into the social media presence of movement parties and the news media coverage of (far-right) movement parties. It is to these analyses that we turn next.

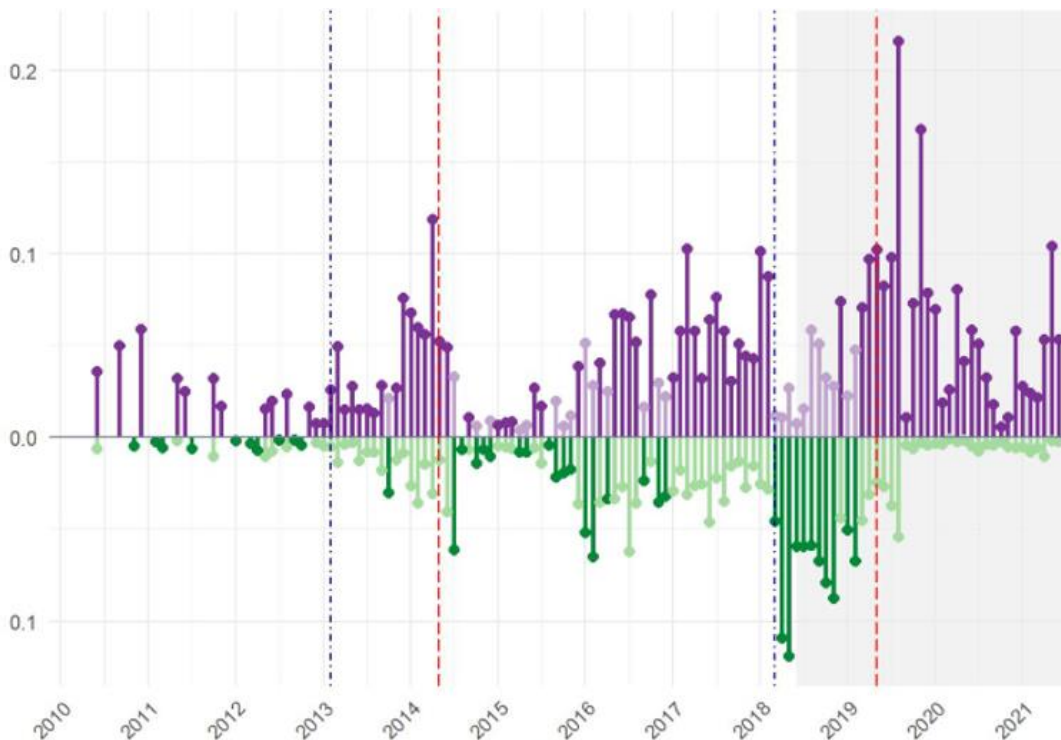


The social media presence of movement parties

ProDem has mapped the social media presence of movement parties across six European countries. **Our analyses have identified substantial shifts over time in their activities online, and the networks they have formed with social movements, media, civil society, and political institutions.**

Our analysis of referencing patterns between movement parties and traditional parties on Twitter and Facebook in six different countries supports the idea that ‘movement parties’ are likely transitional phenomena. As movement parties develop over time, there are shifts in the (mutual) recognition patterns between traditional and movement parties. We see this clearly in **Figure 6**, in the case of Italy.

Figure 6. Monthly share of references made by Italian movement party (Five Star Movement) to traditional parties (PD, Lega), and vice versa



Note: movement party's activity on the upper side, traditional parties' activity on the lower side. Darker shading of lines indicates that party group had a higher referencing ratio that month. Blue dot-dashed vertical lines mark national elections. Red dashed vertical lines mark European elections. Grey background indicates period of movement party government participation.

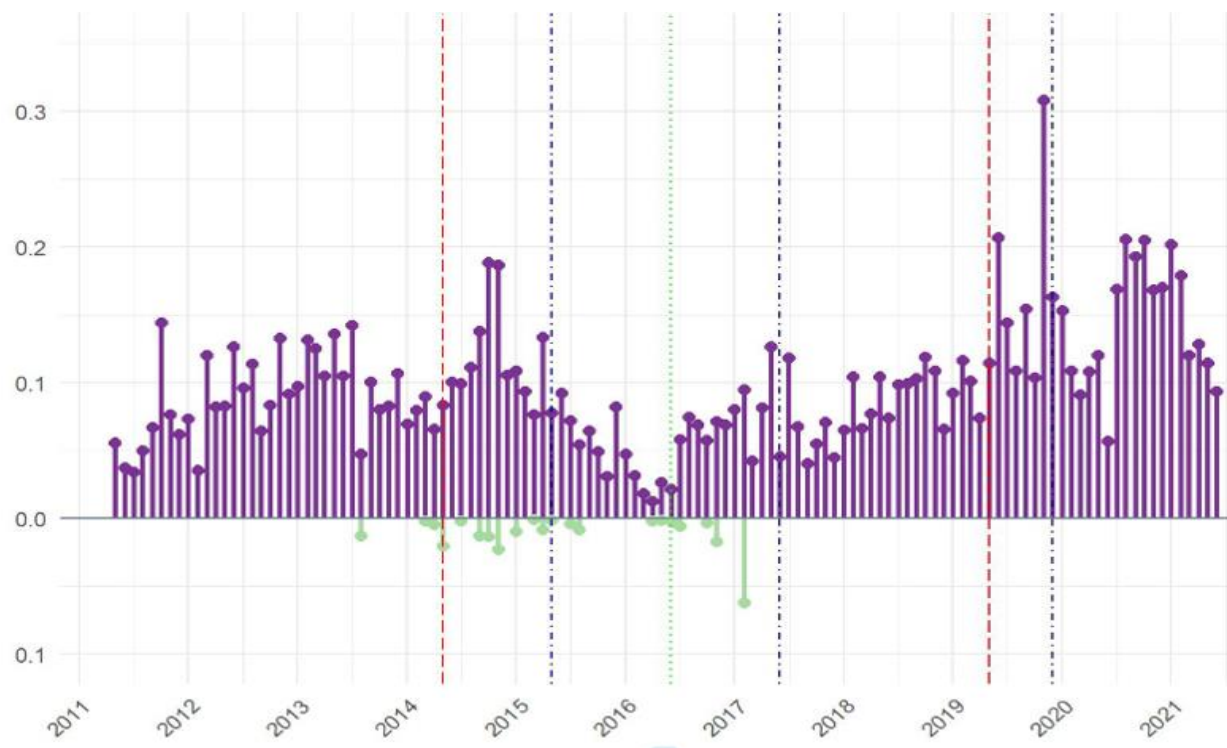
Passing the parliamentary representation threshold changes the dynamics of referencing patterns. **Once they enter parliament, movement parties can no longer be ignored - also online - and begin to be recognized by traditional parties**

as **relevant competitors**. In turn, the referencing of traditional parties by movement parties often reduces after the passing of the representation threshold.

There are different trajectories, depending on the movement parties' further progress. Parties that clearly succeed in becoming *relevant* members of institutional politics can reverse the referencing patterns between challenger and established party and hence attract more recognition from established parties than they sent out to them. This is the case for movement parties that go on to participate in government, like the Five Star Movement in Italy, as shown in **Figure 6**, and USR-PLUS in Romania.

On the other hand, where movement parties disintegrate and lose electoral relevance, the observed changes in recognition patterns may roll back to previous dynamics of outsider parties heavily referencing established actors, but being neglected in turn (see the British case in **Figure 7** and the interactions between UKIP and the mainstream parties).

Figure 7. Monthly share of references made by British movement party (UKIP) to traditional parties (Labour, Conservative), and vice versa



Note: movement party's activity on the upper side, traditional parties' activity on the lower side. Blue dot-dashed vertical lines mark national elections. Red dashed vertical lines mark European elections. The green dotted vertical line marks the Brexit referendum.

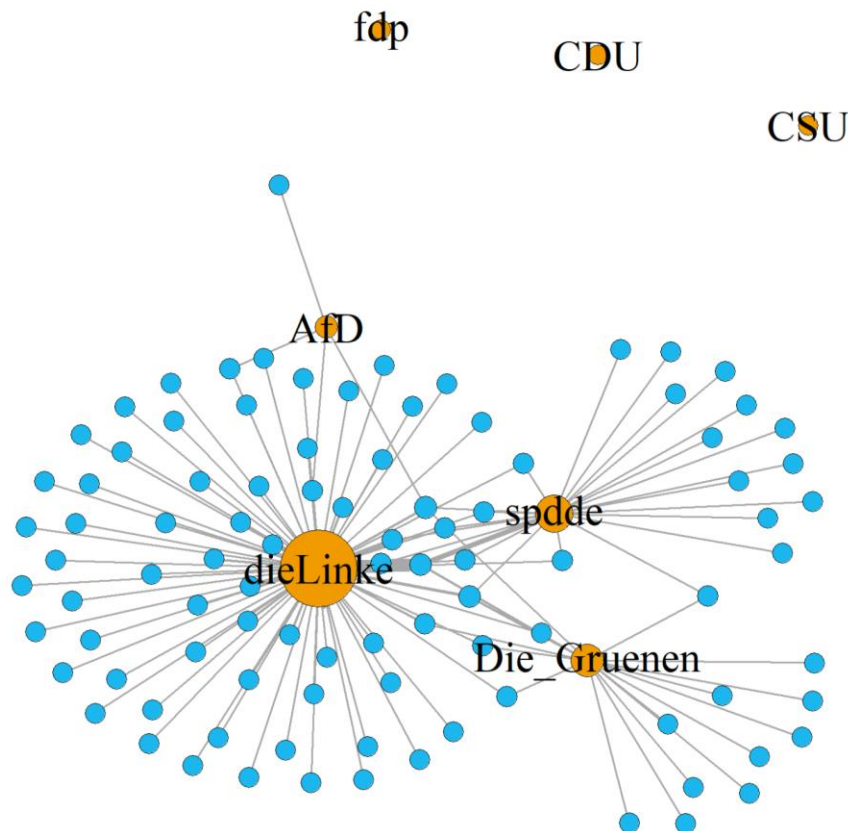
Regarding protest-related communications by political parties on social media, our findings suggest that by referencing protest activities and movement organisations

in their official communication channels movement parties follow similar 'strategic action repertoires' to those of social movements.

We find that **movement parties engage more with protest and social movement organisations than other, more traditional parties**. Then, focusing on German parties, we find that the **networks formed between political parties and movement organisations consist of both supportive and antagonistic ties**.

Left and progressive parties from different historic waves of movement parties - from the long-established social democratic parties to the more recently emerging green parties - display intense supportive connections to movement organisations. Far-right movement parties, on the other hand, tend to hold more antagonistic ties and so lack the opportunity to publicly display supportive links to civil society organisations. One reason for the lack of opportunity to publicly display linkages to anti-democratic civil society organisations on mainstream social media is the more or less effective moderation of offensive content, which may lead to the exclusion of certain accounts from a platform. Parties who are instead conceived as outside of the movement party category (for example, liberals, conservatives) often display limited interactions with movement organisations or remain isolated in a social movement-to-political party network (as shown in [Figure 8](#)).

Figure 8. German political parties' (yellow circles) Twitter mentions of social movement organisations (blue circles) in protest-related tweets



How the news media respond to movement parties of the far-right

Far-right parties across Europe have made remarkable gains in support in recent years, raising fears about their impact on liberal democracy. At the same time, many have increasingly participated in protests, emphasising their movement-like characteristics and connections. ProDem analyses how newspapers have reported on their protest activities and links with protest movements. We find evidence of **overwhelmingly negative news media coverage which may limit the effectiveness of far-right parties 'protest turn' as a strategy to gain wider support.**

We focused on three Western European far-right parties that have been viewed through the 'movement party' lens: the AfD in Germany, *Nye Borgerlige* (The New Right) in Denmark, and UKIP. Having developed a new dataset of news media coverage of these parties, we analysed various aspects of the content of these articles: the salience of their involvement in protest, the issues they protested about, the social movements with whom they were involved, and the tone of the coverage.

We find that the attention given to the far-right movement parties' protest activities is rather low. Closer examination reveals it varies in significant ways. **When far-right parties protest alongside social movements from the radical fringe this gains them more attention from newspapers, but a more negative tone of coverage.**

We also find that a notable shift in media coverage of the AfD and UKIP can be observed at several 'critical junctures'. For the AfD, change occurs first with the migration crisis, and then with the Covid pandemic. For UKIP, change comes following the Leave victory in the Brexit referendum and the subsequent negotiations between the UK government and the EU. These events led to the parties forming new alliances with protest movements – in particular with radical fringe movements - which led to an increasingly negative tone in their newspaper coverage.

In brief, **the more attention that newspapers paid to far-right parties' protest activities, the more visible their links to radical fringe movements became, and the more negatively they were represented by the media.** As a result, these protest activities are unlikely to mobilise support from the mainstream public. **It is therefore imperative for democratic quality that newspapers continue to scrutinise these protest activities, and to take note and publicise any anti-democratic actors who are involved alongside them.**

7. Conclusion

The survey research conducted by ProDem shows that a substantial proportion of European citizens have lost faith in democracy. In countries with particularly low levels of trust in national institutions (Romania, Italy and Hungary), the level of trust towards the EU is higher. This presents an **opportunity for EU institutions to take advantage of their more trustworthy reputation and take action to promote democratic quality.**

It is paramount that politicians, national governments, and the EU make **greater efforts to foster political participation.** Low levels of political participation are especially worrying for **low-income groups and women.** National and European institutions should target these groups through dedicated campaigns aimed at restoring their confidence in European democracy and the value of participation.

Our analysis shows that a new breed of political parties that emerged from the protests of the last decade have made their presence felt in the public sphere, both online and offline. These **'movement parties'** have increasingly connected with other, more traditional parties and transitioned towards becoming established members of our democratic political systems. Their interactions with traditional parties online points to an increasing level of recognition of newcomers by their more established peers, especially when the movement parties pass the threshold of electoral representation. These parties are more likely to **establish ties to social movements and other movement organisations,** although the nature of these ties - whether cooperative or antagonistic - varies.

This closeness to movements is seen among parties from across the political spectrum, including the far-right. **It is imperative for democratic quality that newspapers continue to focus on and scrutinise such protest activities, to expose anti-democratic actors who are involved in them and their actions.** It is likewise crucial that online content is actively moderated in accordance with EU regulations to **restrict the spread of anti-democratic content in the public sphere.**

In conclusion, while trust in democracy appears to be shaken, ProDem has generated several evidence-based recommendations for politicians and civil society organisations. Following these steps will help to **repair the 'bridge' between citizens and their elected representatives** and so to restore confidence in a strengthened European democracy.

Appendix: Methods

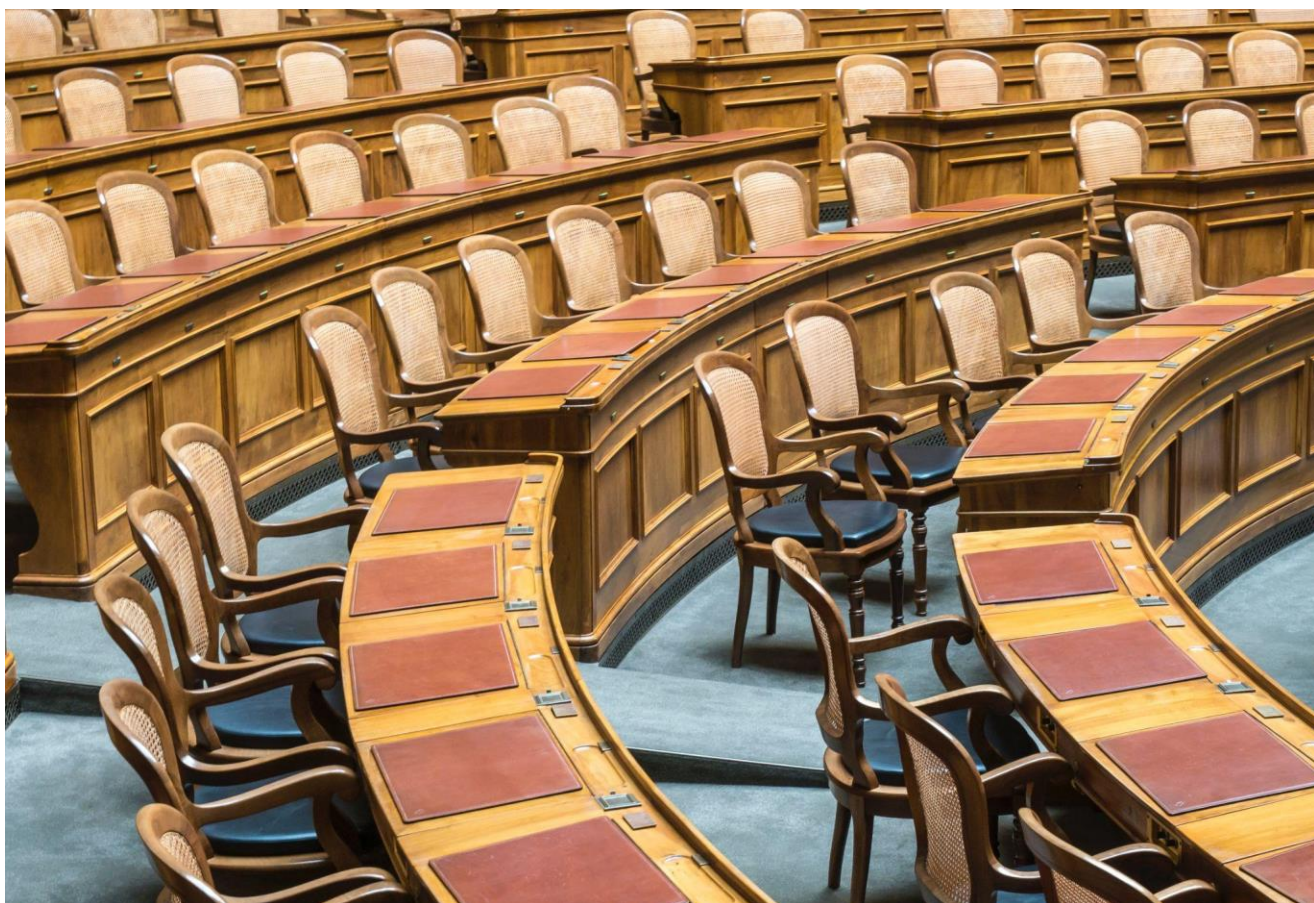
Our findings are based on data from nationally representative surveys fielded by the public opinion and data company YouGov between 21 February 2022 and 11 March 2022, in Denmark (N = 1,001), Germany (N = 2,024), Hungary (N = 2,051), Italy (N = 2,101), Romania (N = 946), and the United Kingdom (N = 2,224), making a total number of 10,347 respondents. In these surveys, we asked citizens about their views on democracy and democratic institutions as well as their political participation. These data provided us valuable insights about the opinions from voters of different political parties, men and women, as well as people with different incomes.

The surveys contained an experimental element through the inclusion of a vignette. A vignette is a short text describing a situation, person or object holding a set of characteristics that are shown to respondents with the objective of inquiring into their intended behaviour and attitudes with respect to the scenario presented. We randomly divided respondents in five groups, each of which saw a different message highlighting a concern with democracy. After the message, we asked participants about whether they would be willing to participate in a number of actions to express how their country should be run. As participants are randomly allocated in the different groups, it can be assumed that differences among groups are due to the different messages they read. Comparing the responses from groups that saw messages highlighting concerns with democracy to a control group that did not read such messages, we can explore how concerns with democracy affect citizen participation.

ProDem's social media and news media analyses are based on a mixed-methods approach that combines large-scale quantitative as well as in-depth qualitative approaches. Data on parties' and civil society organisations' activities on the major social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram is collected via the respective Application Programming Interfaces. The resulting datasets are analysed as time-series of activities, with dictionary-based quantitative content analyses to identify interactions among actors, and with qualitative techniques such as visual analyses to assess the meaning and narratives constructed and disseminated via digital social media. Newspaper data were then collected for the entire lifespan of the parties in focus through online databases Factiva and Media Cloud, and then, using the R package Quanteda, refined by searching for articles that also refer to protest. These were also then analysed using a combination of dictionary-based quantitative content analysis and in-depth qualitative techniques.

Table 1. Movement parties considered in the analyses of ProDem

Country	Movement parties
Denmark	Alternativet, Nye Borgerlige
Germany	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; AfD; Die Linke
Hungary	LMP; Párbeszéd Magyarországért; Jobbik; Mi Hazánk Mozgalom; Momentum
Italy	Movimento 5 Stelle
UK	Green Party of England and Wales; Scottish Greens; Sinn Fein; UKIP; Brexit Party
Romania	AUR; USR PLUS



Endnotes

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⁸ Grasso, Maria, & Smith, Katherine. 2022. Gender inequalities in political participation and political engagement among young people in Europe: Are young women less politically engaged than young men?. *Politics*, 42(1), 39-57.

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