



# **European Politics and Society: Václav Havel Joint Master Programme**

Leiden University

...

## **Understanding and Framing of Democratic Decline in the EU-funded Research Projects**

Master's Thesis

Author: **Irina Percemli**

Email address: **s3643719@umail.leidenuniv.nl**

Supervisor: **Dr Maxine David**

Wordcount: **19 011**

Submission date: **21.06.2024**

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr Maxine David for her constructive feedback and unwaning support on my path of learning how to do academic research. I also want to express immense gratitude to my partner Kirill and my friend Asher for their support and useful commentaries on my work. Lastly, I am extremely grateful to my parents and my therapist who emotionally supported me along the way of writing this MA thesis.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how democratic decline is conceptualized and studied in European Union (EU) funded research, analysing the alignment between EU policy priorities and academic knowledge production on this critical issue. Through a mixed-methods analysis of EU policy documents and Horizon 2020 research projects from 2014-2020, it reveals a predominant neoliberal orientation shaping both policy and research agendas. The study finds that funded the research agenda is largely focussed on issues like populism, extremism, and citizen engagement while paying less attention to structural economic factors undermining democracy. The thesis argues for expanding research to encompass more substantive conceptions of democracy that address economic inequalities and challenge prevailing ideological paradigm. It contributes to debates on the politics of research funding, the role of social sciences in European integration, and theoretical discussions on democracy and neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism; democracy; democratic decline; European Union; research funding.

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>List of Tables and Figures</b> .....                   | 5  |
| <b>1. Introduction</b> .....                              | 6  |
| <b>2. Literature Review</b> .....                         | 10 |
| 2.1. Neoliberalism.....                                   | 11 |
| 2.2. Neoliberalism and Democracy.....                     | 12 |
| 2.2.1. Democracy Conceptualisation.....                   | 12 |
| 2.2.2. Liberal Democracy.....                             | 13 |
| 2.2.3. Alternatives to Liberal Democracy.....             | 14 |
| 2.3. Democratic Decline in the EU Context .....           | 16 |
| 2.3.1. Democracy and Neoliberalism in the EU Context..... | 16 |
| 2.3.1. Democratic Decline in the EU.....                  | 19 |
| 2.4. Academia-EU Relations.....                           | 20 |
| <b>3. Research Design and Methodology</b> .....           | 23 |
| 3.1. Methodology.....                                     | 23 |
| 3.2. Data Sources and Timeframe.....                      | 24 |
| 3.3. Data Collection and Sampling.....                    | 26 |
| 3.4. Data Analysis.....                                   | 27 |
| 3.4.1. Analysis of the EU Policy Priorities.....          | 28 |
| 3.4.2. Analysis of the Research Projects.....             | 29 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>4. Analysis of EU policy priorities in 2014-2020</b> ..... | 31 |
| 4.1. Contextualisation of the EU priorities.....              | 31 |
| 4.2. The ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy.....                          | 32 |
| 4.3. Multiannual Financial Framework.....                     | 35 |
| <b>5. Distribution of EU-funded projects</b> .....            | 37 |
| 5.1. Citizen Engagement and Participation.....                | 39 |
| 5.2. Democratic Decline.....                                  | 41 |
| 5.3. Social Dimension.....                                    | 42 |
| <b>6. Content Analysis of the Projects</b> .....              | 43 |
| 6.1. Quantitative Analysis: A Concept Treemap.....            | 45 |
| 6.2. Qualitative Analysis.....                                | 47 |
| <b>7. Discussion of Results</b> .....                         | 48 |
| <b>8. Conclusion</b> .....                                    | 51 |
| <br>  |    |
| <b>Bibliography</b> .....                                     | 55 |
| <b>Appendices</b> .....                                       | 61 |

## List of tables

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Table 1</b> Coding Framework for the Analysis of ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy.....         | 28 |
| <b>Table 2</b> Headline Targets and Flagship Initiatives Proposed in ‘Europe 2020’..... | 33 |
| <b>Table 3</b> Distribution of research projects according to the prevalent themes..... | 39 |
| <b>Table 4</b> Projects selected for the analysis.....                                  | 44 |

## List of Figures

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Figure 1</b> A comparison of allocations for MFF 2007-2013 and MFF 2014-2020..... | 36 |
| <b>Figure 2</b> A Concept Treemap from reports on democratic decline.....            | 46 |

# 1. Introduction

Democracy around the world is facing unprecedented challenges. Since 2006, a global democratic recession has been deepening, and the pace of democratic breakdown accelerated (Diamond, 2021). There is an explosion of literature on the rise of right-wing populism in Western European countries (Norris, 2017; Wodak et al, 2013). Furthermore, extensive research on all the episodes of autocratisation from 1900 until the present day reveals that today's world is facing a third wave of autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). It primarily impacts democracies, not autocracies, like the waves before. In the context of the European Union (EU), Hungary and Poland are the two most prominent cases which threaten the stability of the EU. This phenomenon of democratic decline has become visible since the landslide election of Viktor Orbán's conservative-national Fidesz party in Hungary in 2010 (Greskovits and Wittenberg, 2016) and the rapid pace of dismantling the institutional checks and balances by the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland. From the rise of populist movements to growing economic inequalities, the foundations of democratic governance appear increasingly fragile. Thus, how these challenges are understood, researched, and addressed has profound implications for the future of democracy itself.

This thesis examines how democratic decline is conceptualised and studied in EU-funded research, analysing the alignment between EU policy priorities and academic knowledge production on this critical issue. The EU has long positioned itself as a champion of democracy, both within its borders and globally. Democracy is considered one of the core values of the European project, enshrined in its founding treaties and reiterated in its policy declarations (Ayers, 2008). However, the EU's understanding and promotion of democracy are not neutral or universal. Rather, they reflect particular ideological assumptions rooted in liberal conceptions of democracy and neoliberal economic orthodoxy. These assumptions shape not only EU policies but also the research it funds (Aliu et al, 2017; Dakowska, 2019; Felt, 2014).

This thesis argues that EU-funded research on democratic decline largely aligns with and reinforces a neoliberal worldview, characterised by a narrow focus on liberal notions of democracy, free market economy, and limited state power. While this research addresses important issues like populism and citizen engagement, it often overlooks deeper structural and economic factors undermining democratic processes. The starting point of this thesis is the assumption that by privileging certain perspectives and marginalising others, EU research funding may be constraining academic inquiry into the multifaceted dimensions of democracy

and democratic backsliding. The central research question guiding this study is: *How is democratic decline portrayed and understood in EU-funded research, and to what extent does this align with EU policy priorities?* To answer this question, the thesis analyses both EU policy documents outlining strategic priorities and a corpus of research projects funded under the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme from 2014-2020. This timeframe captures a critical period of democratic challenges in Europe following the 2008 financial crisis while also reflecting the evolution of EU research policy to more strategically prioritise social scientific inquiry.

Sheila Jasanoff (2004) coined the concept of co-production to analyse the relationship between knowledge production and policymaking. This approach recognises that scientific knowledge and social order are mutually constitutive — research shapes policy understandings even as policy priorities influence research agendas. The EU's role in science and research is significant. The Union started to fund knowledge production with the creation of the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) in the 1950s. Social sciences research was included gradually after the 1980s, with the first comprehensive Framework Programme (FP) for research and innovation launched in 1984. The funding has been increasing with every FP, from €800 million in 1984 to over €7 billion per year in 2007 (Heilbron, 2011). Currently, the ongoing programme Horizon Europe has a budget of €95.5 billion<sup>1</sup>. Given the immense budget and dissemination of project results, it is important to examine EU-funded projects in order to reveal how academic inquiry may reinforce or challenge dominant policy paradigms. A literature review revealed that while there is a considerable amount of research analysing the EU's influence on research (Fransman and Neuman, 2019; Krop and Larssen, 2022; Levidow and Neubauer, 2014; Felt, 2014; Primeri and Reale, 2012; Wickham, 2004), the EU-funded research specifically on democracy has not been addressed in the literature. Thus, this thesis aims to fill this gap.

Starting from the point that democracy is an essentially contested concept (Kurki, 2010), this study is grounded in an approach to democracy that goes beyond minimalist procedural definitions. While liberal conceptions of democracy emphasise political equality, civil liberties, and free elections (Dahl, 1971; Rhoden, 2015), this thesis argues for a more substantive understanding that encompasses economic equality as well. Drawing on scholars like Habermas

---

<sup>1</sup> Information provided on the EU official research and innovation website [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en) (accessed 21.06.2024)



(1981), Macpherson (1977), Mouffe (1999), and Sigman and Lindberg (2019), it considers how socioeconomic conditions and inequalities fundamentally shape the exercise of democratic citizenship and political participation. One of the central arguments of this thesis is that our understanding of democracy informs our understanding of challenges to democracy. Thus the definition of democratic decline depends on the underlying conceptualisation of democracy. While these terms will be discussed in detail in the second chapter, here is sufficient to say that my understanding of democracy in terms of economic equality in addition to political equality leads to the definition of democratic decline which includes the aspect of growing inequalities. Seen like this, democratic decline becomes an even more serious problem to address. If adopted, this definition of democratic decline would place many countries much lower in the democracy measurement indices.

The framework of this thesis draws heavily on critiques of neoliberalism, understood as both an economic doctrine and a broader political rationality that reshapes all domains of life according to market principles. Scholars like Fink (2016), Harvey (2005), and Mirowski (2013; 2014) have highlighted how neoliberal logic undermines democratic processes even as it claims to champion individual liberty. This lens allows for critical examination of how neoliberal assumptions may be embedded in EU policy priorities and research agendas. For the purpose of critical analysis, I adopt a definition of neoliberalism as ideology as understood by Fairclough (2003), who saw it as a representation of aspects of the world that contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination, and exploitation. This definition helps to analyse the texts by scrutinising the assumptions inside them.

To address the research question posed by this study, I employ a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Two main data sources are analysed: 1) EU policy documents outlining strategic priorities, specifically the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy and the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework, and 2) research projects on democracy funded under the Horizon 2020 ‘Societal Challenges’ pillar. For the policy documents, critical discourse analysis techniques are used to examine underlying assumptions about democracy, social and economic issues, and proposed solutions. A coding framework focused on framing of challenges, assignment of responsibilities, proposed solutions, and models of societal organisation guides this analysis. This multifaceted approach allows for the systematic examination of both explicit content and latent meanings across a large corpus of data. By triangulating between policy priorities and funded research outputs, it reveals points of alignment and divergence in how democratic challenges are framed and studied.

The analysis reveals several key findings that warrant further discussion. Firstly, the EU policy priorities as outlined in Europe 2020 and budget allocations demonstrate a clear neoliberal orientation, with heavy emphasis on economic growth, competitiveness, and market-oriented solutions to social issues. The research agenda reflected in Horizon 2020 projects largely aligns with these priorities. Projects predominantly focus on issues like populism, extremism, and citizen engagement while paying less attention to structural economic factors undermining democracy. There is a notable lack of research critically examining economic inequalities or exploring alternative economic models that could diminish inequalities and strengthen democracy. This limits understanding of the root causes of democratic decline and constrains the imagination of more egalitarian democratic alternatives. Most importantly, the convergence between EU policy priorities and research funding decisions reveals a persistent neoliberal undercurrent prioritising business interests over those of workers and marginalised communities. This ideological alignment hinders comprehensive examination of how neoliberal policies may be fueling democratic discontent.

These findings have significant implications for both academic research and democratic policymaking. By revealing how funding translates the policy priorities, which are reflected in the knowledge production on democracy, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the politics of research and the role of social sciences in European integration (Adler-Nissen and Kropp, 2015). It highlights how seemingly neutral or technocratic research agendas may reinforce particular ideological positions while marginalising alternative perspectives. The findings underscore the need for more diverse and critical research on the complex challenges facing European democracy. Populism framed as a threat to liberal democracy and citizen engagement in very narrow terms risks overlooking deeper structural drivers of democratic discontent. Examining how liberal conceptions of democracy align with neoliberal policy orientations reveals tensions and contradictions in prevailing models of democratic governance. This analysis supports calls for more substantive understandings of democracy that integrate political and economic equality. Finally, this research opens up important questions about the role of academia in imagining alternative futures. Even within constrained funding environments, scholars have a responsibility to critically examine dominant paradigms and explore new possibilities. This thesis argues for expanding the scope of democratic inquiry to encompass a wider range of perspectives, including those that challenge prevailing neoliberal orthodoxies.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 provides an in-depth literature review situating this study within broader debates on democracy, neoliberalism, and EU research policy. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology in greater detail. Chapters 4-6 present the empirical findings, analysing EU policy priorities, the landscape of funded research projects, and in-depth case studies of projects on democratic decline. Chapter 7 synthesises these findings and discusses their implications for understanding and addressing democratic decline in Europe. The conclusion summarises the key arguments and points to avenues for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

It is essential to note that ‘democracy’ and ‘neoliberalism’— the concepts that are central to this thesis — are all contested concepts with multiple definitions, which sometimes might even have opposing meanings. This makes them harder to research, but precisely for that reason, it is important to question them. Given the limit and scope of this research, covering all the possible and contested definitions of democracy is impossible and unnecessary. This is why this literature review will focus specifically on the EU’s understanding of democracy, which is dominated by liberal principles, accounting for how this relates to neoliberalism. I will also review the critiques directed towards liberalism and explore alternative conceptualisations, explaining why it is necessary to move onto a conceptualisation of democracy that encapsulates not only political equality but also economic equality.

The next section explores the notions of neoliberalism and democracy. It focuses on key tenets of neoliberalism as an ideology while also exploring the relations between neoliberalism and democracy. Section 2.2.3 provides alternative conceptualisations of democracy that will be useful for questioning the dominant neoliberal paradigm and understanding democratic decline. Section 2.3 discusses neoliberalism, democracy and democratic decline in the context of the EU. This section provides an overview of the EU’s understanding of these key matters before moving on to EU-research relations, discussed in Section 2.4.

### **2.1. Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism, similarly to democracy, has become a buzzword. It is used by many people as a ‘blanket swear-word for everything they despise, or a brainless synonym for modern capitalism’ (Mirowski, 2014). This made it harder to define, delimit and research, leading to many critiques

regarding the fluidity and inconsistency of the concept (Venugopal, 2015). Thus, scholars described neoliberalism variously as ‘a theory of politico-economic practices’ (Harvey, 2005), ‘a reactive body of thought’ (Biebricher, 2015), ‘a governing rationality’ (Dardot and Laval, 2019), or ‘a political project’ (Mirowski, 2013; Wacquant, 2012). Some regard it as an economic doctrine or school of thought (Venugopal, 2015), while others view it as a political philosophy that seeks to revise and revitalise certain aspects of classical liberalism in response to its perceived crisis (Biebricher, 2015).

Some scholars such as Mirowski (2014) and Fink (2016) draw attention to the intellectual history of neoliberalism, which started from the creation of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 and evolved through time via networks of think-tanks, universities and networks of many intellectuals, most prominent of them being Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Mirowski calls this political and intellectual movement the ‘Neoliberal Thought Collective’ (Mirowski, 2013; 2014). Other scholars attempt to analyse the ‘actually existing neoliberalisms’ (Venugopal, 2015; Wacquant, 2012). Mirowski (2014) also emphasises that neoliberalism should not be confined to its economic doctrines but rather viewed as a broader ‘philosophy of market society.’ He argues that neoliberalism actively seeks to dismantle aspects of society that may resist the purported logic of the free market, effectively reshaping it in the market’s image.

Thus, neoliberalism can be viewed as a political and economic philosophy that emerged in the late 20th century, advocating for free-market capitalism, limited government intervention in the economy, and the primacy of individual liberties over collective rights (Harvey, 2005; Mirowski, 2013). It is underpinned by the ideals of human dignity and individual freedom, which its proponents argued were threatened by excessive state intervention (Harvey, 2005). This conceptualisation is instrumental for this study in order to assess the underpinning logic of the documents that will be analysed. At the same time, it is useful to regard neoliberalism as an ideology – a representation of aspects of the world that contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination, and exploitation (Eagleton, 1991; Fairclough, 2003). These two conceptions are useful in denoting how neoliberalism manifests in reality and how neoliberal principles and rationalities manifest in European Union policy priorities and EU-funded research. By analysing neoliberalism as an ideology enacted through assumptions in texts, this research aims to situate its analysis within a broader critique of the social practices and power relations it shapes and reinforces. The next section looks at one of the key elements of neoliberalism, specifically the liberal notion of democracy.

## **2.2. Neoliberalism and Democracy**

### *2.2.1. Democracy Conceptualisation*

Since the aim of this thesis is to look at how EU-funded research deals with democracy and democratic decline, it is necessary to establish what democracy is. There is a vast amount of literature regarding democracy conceptualisation, studies of comparative democratisation, and democracy promotion (see Coppedge, 2012; Kurki, 2010; Karl and Schmitter, 1991; Lipset, 1993; Rueschemeyer et al, 1992). Some scholars also looked at democracy from the perspective of conceptual history, tracing how it evolved from its inception in Ancient Greece until now (Hidalgo, 2008). The fact that democracy is used as a legitimisation of political regimes or 'branding' strategy for states in international relations further complicates the matters (Arenilla, 2010; Cunningham, 2002). For the purpose of this study, it is essential to acknowledge that democracy is considered an 'essentially contested concept', meaning that this concept can have different meanings which are contested not only historically, but also that in principle it is impossible to decide on which meaning is correct (Kurki, 2010). This is important because it means that the decision on how to define democracy is a 'deeply political, normative and ideological matter' (Kurki, 2010).

There have been many definitions both of democracy as a normative model and to denote existing models or aspects of democracy. Scholars compared direct democracy and representative democracy (Rousseau, 1967, in Arenilla, 2010), but also described and theorised participatory and deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1981; Held, 2006). Over time democracy has become characterised by many adjectives to denote different modes, such as liberal, social, participatory, deliberative etc (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). While this chapter cannot devote to each of them the attention they deserve, it will focus specifically on the liberal notion of democracy firstly because it is the notion that is widespread currently, particularly in the EU's understanding of democracy, and secondly because the liberal notion of democracy is accepted and promoted by neoliberals.

### *2.2.2. Liberal Democracy*

The most widely established definition of democracy emerges from Schumpeter (2006), who considers democracy in minimalist definition as 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.'. This is a procedural definition that has been taken up by many

scholars, most notably Robert Dahl, who is considered the icon of democracy theorisation (Oleart and Theuns, 2022). Dahl (1971) coined the term polyarchy to denote the actual existing forms and separate them from the ideal democracy. Even though the term did not gain popularity in the literature, his procedural definition is still most widely used when referring to democracy. It includes seven features: free and fair elections, freedom of speech, rule of law, equal rights, freedom of associations, and free access to information (Dahl, 1971). Many scholars use definitions that are based on this minimal or descriptive definition, which places the greatest emphasis on democracy being a method for selecting rulers (and the possibility for anyone to potentially become a ruler themselves). These highlight that elections must be ‘clean’ and ‘competitive’, which presupposes the existence of a series of civil and political liberties. However, as Segrillo (2011) noted, this procedural definition is based on the liberal requirements of certain civil rights and political freedoms to be in place as prerequisites. Thus, the procedural definition of democracy turns liberal representative democracy into the only possible model of democracy.

If we look closer at liberalism, which can be traced back to John Locke’s ideas and was developed by thinkers such as Bentham and Mill, its core principle can be summarised as ‘equal liberty is the only acceptable form of equality’ (Rhoden, 2015). From its beginning, the liberal state was based on equality before the law and equality of rights, with a particular emphasis placed on the protection of private property rights (Arenilla, 2010; Cunningham, 2002; Rhoden, 2015). Rhoden (2015) also maintains that the current conceptual confusion around democracy is because of the conflation of liberalism and democracy, while they are separate things. While democracy refers only to the rule by the people, liberalism refers to freedom, rights, protection of minorities, rule of law and others.

Thus, Ayers (2008) provides four elements that constitute the ‘working ideology’ of many ‘social agents’, including the European Union, which adopts a particular notion of democracy. These elements are: “(i) constitutionalism, the rule of law and (a particular conception of) human rights; (ii) the periodic election of political representatives via ‘free and fair’ multiparty elections in which (virtually) all the adult population is eligible to vote; (iii) ‘good governance,’ characterised by minimal, ‘neutral’, accountable, transparent and participatory government with the separation of governmental powers and an effective bureaucracy; and (iv) an active, independent ‘civil society’”(Ayers, 2008). These elements entail very particular assumptions regarding the state, society and individual, and the separation of public from private and from economic (Ayers, 2008). Protection of individuals means protection of private property rights,

while freedom is equated with the market (Mirowski, 2014). Thus, this notion of liberal democracy is ideally compatible with and highly instrumental for neoliberalism, which seeks to advance privatisation, extend the market to all spheres of life, and limit the state power, but most importantly curtail the collective power of certain groups, namely labour unions (Ayers, 2008; Crouch et al, 2016; Held, 2006).

It is not surprising since neoliberalism is a body of thought that is ‘revising liberalism’ (Biebricher, 2015), so they stem from the same tradition and use the same principles (even though neoliberalism twists them). Thus, the basic principles of liberalism applied to the notion of democracy, as discussed above, provide a ‘best possible shell’ for capitalism, where ‘all the institutions are in place, where the rule of law exists, but all democratic debate happens around the margins of a society, which is really governed by the big economic forces, for whom the main rules ensure stability’ (Crouch et al, 2016).

As Harvey (2005) notes, ‘For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit’. This idea of freedom and human dignity served to become this conceptual apparatus, thus becoming ingrained in common sense and unquestioned. The liberal conceptualisation of democracy has become that ideal, ‘the central value of civilisation’. While this thesis does not aim to criticise liberal democracy’s principles as such, the purpose here is to show how it is used to preserve a particular type of societal order while also pointing out that this is a very narrow perspective and a wider conceptualisation can be imagined.

### *2.2.3. Alternatives to Liberal Democracy*

Liberal democracy has been criticised from many aspects, including from within liberalism. The most radical criticism comes from Marxists who see liberal democracy as a symptom of capitalism as a bourgeois ideology useful to maintain the relations of exploitation (Dean, 2011; Wood, 1978). Notably, some Marxists argue that democracy is a regime which enables capitalists to maintain their power and continue economic exploitation of labour, a ‘political ideal of wealthy and privileged’ (Dean, 2011, p.76). A less radical argument states that while liberal democracy is in favour of a minimal state and focuses mostly on political equality, political equality cannot be achieved without economic equality (Segrillo, 2011).

Many liberal scholars have also pointed out the problems of the liberal conception of democracy. For example, a segment of democratic liberal thought has incorporated elements of republican philosophy, recognising that civic engagement is not merely a means to maintain and enhance the state, peace, and individual freedoms. Rather, it is viewed as a fundamental aspect of good citizenship and a way to orient individual actions towards the collective welfare. Rousseau (quoted in Arenilla, 2010) claimed that ‘It is against the natural order for the many to govern and the few to be governed’, advocating against representative democracy. This perspective imbues participation with an educational dimension, seeing it as a process that shapes virtuous citizens (Held, 2006). Such scholars as Mouffe (1999, 2000) and Habermas (1981) devised a pluralist conception of democracy. This conception places emphasis on the need for deliberative participation and contestation of ideas in the political sphere. Similarly, Diamond (1990) also argued that democracy involves conflict and contestation. The common point of these scholars is that they put emphasis on active citizenship and political participation from below.

While pluralism and participation are crucial for democracy, it is also necessary to recognise that if socio-economic conditions are not equal, equal participation is also unlikely. This argument made by many authors including Rousseau (in Arenilla, 2010), Rawls (1971) and Macpherson (1977), can be placed between liberalism and Marxism. While Rawls and Macpherson do not necessarily contest the capitalist system as such (for which they were criticised by socialists such as Dean, 2011; Wood, 1978), they draw attention to inequalities caused by capitalism and advocate for regulation and redistribution. Some authors also suggested a model based on the same principle, egalitarian democracy, composed of ‘equal protection’, ‘equal distribution’ and ‘equal access’ (Sigman and Linberg, 2019).

These alternatives to liberal democracy are by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, they are sufficient for the purpose of this thesis to point out the possibility of a different conceptualisation of democracy that goes beyond the narrow understanding of liberal democracy. When it comes to my analysis, rather than adopting a single definition of democracy to guide the research, I will be looking at any alternative models that are discussed, assessing them relative to liberal democracy and in the context of neoliberalism. I will use the term substantive democracy to denote any alternatives that go beyond the liberal conception of democracy, at the same time giving special attention to how they address economic inequalities. The relations of conceptualisation of democracy and democratic decline are discussed in the next section.



## 2.3. Democratic Decline in the EU Context

Previous sections of this chapter discussed neoliberalism as a political project and ideology, the notion of liberal democracy employed by neoliberalism and some possible alternative conceptualisations of democracy. These parts are useful in order to set the stage for the analysis, operationalising all the central terms. Subsection 2.3.1 will look at how neoliberalism is translated into the EU context, exploring the EU's understanding of democracy which informs what the EU will see as challenges. Subsection 2.3.2 will then discuss the literature on democratic decline and populism, specifically in the context of the EU. Understanding these developments is necessary in order to assess how the EU-funded research understands democratic decline.

### *2.3.1 Democracy and Neoliberalism in the EU Context*

When it comes to democracy, it is considered one of the main values attributed to the EU, as well as one of the main foreign policy instruments (Ayers, 2008). However, as discussed above, it is a very specific notion of democracy. While the EU's understanding of democracy is liberal in its framing (Ayers, 2008), there is also extensive literature criticising the EU for its 'democratic deficit', referring to its highly technocratic institutional structure, where decisions are made by unelected experts who are not accountable and do not represent the European public (Bartl, 2015; Bellamy and Castiglione, 2000).

As Oleart and Theuns (2022) demonstrated in their analysis, where European Commission discursively conceives democracy in terms of the rule of law and 'quality of information'. While pointing out the limits of this understanding, they also argued that this narrow conception affects how the EU responds to democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland (Oleart and Theuns, 2022). While this analysis provides crucial insights regarding the EU's understanding of democracy, it does not go into the ideological underpinnings of this conception or the socio-economic inequalities that it perpetuates.

While there are many different theoretical perspectives on European integration, when it comes to its underlying economic logic, many scholars pointed out that the European Union's policies are increasingly neoliberal (Bernhard, 2010; Daly, 2012; Gill, 2007; Hermann, 2009; Streeck, 2020; Young, 2000). While some claim that the EU was a neoliberal project from the beginning (Young, 2000), others analyse concrete policies by which social democratic provisions were dismantled gradually (Daly, 2012; Rothschild, 2009). Nevertheless, from the point of this

thesis, the most important is how the EU endorses the logic of the market, protecting the businesses and eroding trade unions. Bernhard (2010) points out that debates on social policy in the EU have moved from the struggle between social democrats and neoliberals regarding the effects of markets to ‘a consensual constellation, where everyone agrees that social issues should be considered important as long as they improve competitiveness and are only regulated at a national level’ (Bernhard, 2010). Thus, the European Union’s mode of organisation is not only about economic reforms but also about ‘actively remaking the existing governance structures and state apparatuses to create the conditions for neoliberal capitalism’ (Young, 2000).

The current model of the EU as a supranational technocratic organisation designed to protect the market corresponds to how first neoliberals such as Hayek and Friedman conceived ideal societal organisation with a restricted representative democracy, which operates according to rule of law, but replaces the processes of representative democracy with market mechanisms (Biebricher, 2015). Furthermore, neoliberals thought of democracy in terms of ‘institutional competition and consumer sovereignty’ which in practice translates to citizens being excluded from the decision-making but instead choosing which ‘policy package’ to consume. Thus, the responsibility is put on the consumer (Biebricher, 2015). The evidence on depoliticisation and the lack of government-opposition logic in the EU (Mair, 2007), supports this claim. Acknowledgement of these conditions of how neoliberal ideology manifests in the EU enables us to not only comprehend the EU’s understanding of democracy and democratic decline, but also reflect on the causes of them. Moreover, recognising that this understanding is neither universal nor natural allows us to imagine different models of democracy explored in the previous section.

When it comes to relations between neoliberalism and democracy, there is an extensive debate on this, no less because of competing understandings of neoliberalism and democracy. There are two key arguments: the first posits that neoliberalism regards democracy as suitable to its interests (Ayers, 2008), while the second maintains that democracy actually hinders neoliberal interests hence it is currently being dismantled (Biebricher, 2015; Brown, 2015; Dardot and Laval, 2019; Monbiot, 2016). These arguments might seem completely opposite to each other, however, a closer examination reveals that they are to some extent complementary. Both groups of scholars provide compelling arguments which will be discussed below, however, it is useful to note at this point that this thesis will regard the liberal democratic notion as one of the key elements of neoliberalism in the EU context. This is rooted in the evidence of the convergence

of neoliberal practices and a specific EU way of understanding democracy (Ayers, 2008; Crouch et al, 2016; Young, 2000)

The second group of scholars provides arguments on how current trends towards the erosion of democracy also fit into the neoliberal agenda (Crouch et al, 2016; Dardot and Laval, 2019; Mirowski, 2013). Thus, it is claimed that growing populism and democratic decline actually serve the interests of neoliberals because neoliberalism does not need a mask of democracy anymore. Although these two groups of arguments promote opposite views of the relations, this actually aligns with Mirowski's (2013) thesis that this inconsistency is the inherent feature of neoliberalism because the interests of neoliberals are separate from the ideology they promote. Thus, Mirowski provides an extensive analysis of how the promotion of free markets and limited state intervention are framed as the principal aims and ideals, while in reality, neoliberals do not want to deregulate the state but rather to override and subjugate the state to their interests (Mirowski, 2013; 2014). These arguments are important because they point to the relationship of neoliberalism with current trends towards autocratisation and democratic decline.

As was discussed in the previous sections, the EU's understanding of democracy is very close to those limited and technocratic notions advocated by Hayek (Mirowski, 2013; Streeck, 2020). Instead of taking a position in this debate on which political system is more advantageous for neoliberalism, I want to draw attention to how the EU's understanding of democracy might be hindering the scope of the research that it funds. I will focus on the relationship of neoliberalism with liberal democracy, especially because I want to argue for a different understanding of democracy which is based on equality. From this perspective, neoliberalism contributes to the exacerbation of inequalities, and the liberal notion of democracy proves to be complicit because it only focuses on political equality.

### *2.3.2. Democratic Decline in the EU*

This section explores how the literature addresses democratic decline in the EU, focusing specifically on conceptualisation and how it determines what is seen as a challenge to democracy. Notably, literature on democratic decline goes together with literature on populism. With some viewing it as a political movement (Lipset, 1960), political style (Mair, 2002), or political discourse (Laclau, 1977), populism's definition is also contested. The most widely accepted minimal definition was given by Mudde (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), who

conceptualised it as a thin-centred ideology that puts a ‘pure people’ against a ‘corrupt elite’. There is extensive literature explaining the factors contributing to populism, including sociopolitical, socio-economic, ideological and structural factors (Bakic, 2009; Bustikova, 2009 cited in Wodak et al., 2013). For the purpose of this thesis, the minimal definition by Mudde is adopted since this thesis regards populism as a symptom of the democratic decline triggered by the growing inequalities.

When it comes to democratic decline, before going into what the concept actually means, it is necessary to first be clear regarding the terms. The phenomenon of diminishing democracy has been addressed in many different terms. Most often it is referred to as democratic backsliding, but this term was criticised both ‘for its moralistic and normative overtones’, since originally it stemmed from religion and denoted ‘a failure to maintain piety and Christian faith’ (Cianetti et al., 2018). But more importantly, the backsliding paradigm itself was criticised for its linear approach to the decline in democracy (Cianetti and Hanley, 2021). Some other applied terms include ‘democratic regression’ (Diamond, 2021), ‘autocratisation’ (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), ‘erosion’ or ‘decay’ (Gerschewski, 2021), and democratic decline (Jakli et al, 2018)<sup>2</sup>.

As was discussed above, the definition of the term is naturally highly dependent on how democracy is conceptualised. Some scholars pointed out that the lack of a unified understanding of democratic decline stems from the lack of consensus on the meaning of democracy (Jee et al, 2022). The most widely cited conceptualisation was given by Nancy Bermeo (2016), who suggested that instead of a democratic breakdown happening overnight (such as a military coup or election fraud, for example), democratic backsliding today represents a ‘death by a thousand cuts’, where power-hungry executives hack away at core institutional checks and balances which ultimately distorts pluralism and political competitiveness. She called this process ‘executive aggrandisement’. Conceptualising democratic decline in this terms, academic literature gave immense attention to ‘watershed’ elections in Hungary and Poland and focused on analysing how, by incremental institutional changes, the power elites have been gradually undermining democracy in those countries (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Sata and Karolewski, 2020; Holesch and Kyriazi, 2022; Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2019). To be sure, socio-economic inequalities are not completely absent from analyses. Some authors explore them as

---

<sup>2</sup> For this study I mostly use the term ‘democratic decline’, because I consider it to be the most neutral term with less negative connotations both metaphorically and theoretically. However, sometimes I use other terms for narration purposes. This should not affect the meaning.

causes for democratic decline or the surge of populism (Ban et al, 2023; Berend and Bugarić, 2015), but still, these perspectives are encountered much less.

One particularly useful work from the perspective of this study is Oleart and Theuns's (2022) analysis of how the EU's democracy understanding is reflected in its responses to democratic decline. This analysis not only points out that the narrow understanding of democracy of the EU affects its policies but also provides an alternative understanding of democracy, deliberative pluralism advocated by Mouffe (2000) and Habermas (1981). This understanding posits that democracy requires more than the 'rule of law', 'quality of information' and 'media freedom', thus placing emphasis on the need for deliberative participation and contestation of ideas in the political sphere. While Oleart and Theuns's proposed conception of democracy is crucial, I argue that understanding democratic decline in terms of the erosion of economic democracy as well as political will yield even more useful results. This definition acknowledges the executive aggrandisement from the top but also includes the growing inequalities. Since this definition is much more susceptible to the erosion of workers' rights, it will yield higher potential to explain better why more and more citizens fall (or rather are pushed by the inequalities) into the arms of populists. Thus, this thesis aims to argue that populism is not a threat to democracy, it is rather only one of the symptoms of growing inequalities and democratic decline, which is related to the neoliberal societal order. Guided by these assumptions, this thesis dedicates special attention to how populism is explored and researched in the EU-funded research. To understand this relationship, the next section gives an overview of the literature on the EU's relations with scholarly research.

## **2.4. Academia-EU relations**

Scholars have long been interested in the effects of knowledge on the policy-making process and the interplay of knowledge and power (Radaelli, 1995). Generally, a central theoretical framework informing analyses of knowledge-policy relations is Sheila Jasanoff's (2004) notion of co-production. Her work demonstrates how scientific knowledge is inextricably embedded within and shaped by social identities, institutions, representations, and discourses, even as it simultaneously embeds and legitimises particular ways of understanding and controlling the world.

The EU's relationship with knowledge production has started to be scrutinised relatively recently. Given that the focus on social sciences from the part of the EU emerged quite gradually, many authors investigated the relations between the EU and social sciences and

humanities, trying to capture their role (Felt, 2014; Wickham, 2004) or advocate for more inclusion for social scientists (Griffin, 2006; Heilbron, 2011; Schindler-Daniels, 2014). Scholars such as Adler-Nissen and Kropp (2015) talked about the sociology of knowledge approach to the role of social sciences in shaping ideas and practices of European integration while also advocating for a self-reflectivist perspective of social scientists on how they shape the knowledge regarding the EU. Keeping in mind the discussion above regarding the interconnectedness of knowledge production and society organisation, many debates on the EU's role and influence emerged. A central concern revolves around the potential influence of EU priorities, ideologies and interests on shaping research agendas, framing issues, and determining what constitutes legitimate knowledge.

Some scholars focussed on the EU's promotion of cross-national research collaborations and attempted cultivation of an integrated 'European Research Area' (Primeri and Reale, 2012). Proponents see this as fostering knowledge-sharing and capacity-building across the continent (Felt, 2014; Schindler-Daniels, 2014), while critics provided evidence that the effect of EU funding on the 'Europeanisation of academic research' is rather limited (Primeri and Reale, 2012). Some scholars emphasise how social sciences contributed to the technocratic origins of European integration (Kaiser and Schot, 2014), consequently serving to 'reduce innovation to techno-fixes' (Levidow and Neubauer, 2014). The prioritisation of applied, 'policy-relevant' research (Wickham, 2004) is seen as promoting instrumentalist and technocratic approaches that may neglect more fundamental theoretical inquiries (Fischer, 2003).

While some argue that the internal heterogeneity of the EU hinders it from being a monolithic institution promoting particular agendas (Cuperus et al, 2019; Jacquier, 2022), many critics argue that the EU's influence on research perpetuates structural inequalities, problematising the EU's role as an increasingly powerful 'knowledge gatekeeper' in which researchers from peripheral regions or oppressed groups struggle for voice and visibility (Aliu et al, 2017; Fougere et al, 2017; Hamerslev, 2015; Heilbron, 2011). They argue that EU funding instruments and evaluation criteria systematically privilege certain types of research over others, thereby potentially marginalising critical perspectives that challenge dominant paradigms (Aliu et al, 2017; Fransman and Newman, 2019). Moreover, the research often reinforces EU policy assumptions, 'especially promoting technoscientific innovation and global competitiveness as essential means for societal progress' (Levidow and Neubauer, 2014). This interconnectedness of research and innovation in the EU's narrative drew attention to a very specific type of innovation and mode of knowledge production that is promoted (Felt, 2014;

Fougere et al, 2017; Kropp and Larsen, 2023; Wickham, 2004). Fougere et al. (2017) particularly stress how the EU's social innovation policy is being presented as the apolitical solution to 'all the European ills' without actually questioning the causes of those 'ills' and promoting neoliberal practical rationality (Fougere et al., 2017).

In sum, while acknowledging the funding opportunities provided, the literature reflects ongoing tensions around the EU's role in research - its agenda-setting power, ideological leanings, structural inequities, and competing visions of research's societal mission. The biggest insight from the literature is that almost all the authors (independent of their focus or attitudes) point out that EU-funded research is increasingly project-based, stakeholder-driven and market-oriented. At the same time, the underlying conditions of this shift contribute to the maintenance of the status quo which favours particular interests, exacerbating exploitation and inequalities (as demonstrated for example in Aliu et al, 2017, who pointed out that most the research does not consider trade unions as stakeholders). This has significant implications for understanding knowledge-policy relations and EU-funded research on issues like democracy and democratic decline.

While there are some scholarly works on how the EU's particular understanding of democracy informs its responses to democratic decline (Oleart and Theuns, 2022), there are no works accounting for how that understanding of democracy is reflected in the EU-funded research, thus perpetuating neoliberal rationality both in academic and political discourse. This thesis aims to fill this gap by looking at how the EU's policy priorities are reflected in the EU-funded research on democratic decline. This study aims to draw attention to which conceptualisations prevail in EU-funded research projects. For this study, I will argue that a substantive definition of democracy would be more useful in order to see the underlying conditions of democratic decline. A very narrow understanding of democracy in its liberal form suits to promote neoliberal logic and does not recognise structural inequalities. The next chapter will discuss the methodology of this thesis.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

My research starts with the hypothesis that EU-funded projects on democratic decline favour a particular worldview which promotes and perpetuates a neoliberal logic, characterised by the exclusively liberal notions of democracy, free market economy and limited state power (Harvey, 2005). As discussed in the previous chapter, most authors on EU-research relations,

regardless of their position on the matter, acknowledge that there is a shift towards short-term, project-based, stakeholder and policy-oriented research (Fransman and Neuman, 2019; Kropp and Larsen, 2022; Levidow and Neubauer, 2014; Felt, 2014; Primeri and Reale, 2012; Wickham, 2004). This serves as a starting point for curiosity about whether the content of the research on democracy also conforms to and conveys the dominant ideology.

Thus, this thesis will analyse how democratic decline is portrayed and understood in EU-funded research, trying to establish patterns of conceptualisation of democracy and its decline. Section 3.1 elaborates on the methodology of the thesis; Section 3.2 introduces the data sources and the analytical timeframe chosen for this study; Section 3.3 provides an overview of the sampling process. Finally, Section 3.4 discusses a step-by-step plan for executing the research design.

### **3.1. Methodology**

To answer the question posed in this thesis, this study utilises a content analysis approach to systematically examine the theoretical perspectives and conceptual framings present across a corpus of EU Framework Programme (FP) project outputs related to democratic decline and challenges to democracy in the European Union. Content analysis enables robust identification and interrogation of explicit and latent meanings, ideological underpinnings, and assumptions underlying textual data (Krippendorff, 2019; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The study uses both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques, as they prove useful for the purpose of this research. Quantitative analysis is valuable for identifying patterns across the data via quantification of word frequencies and co-occurrences (Krippendorff, 2019), whereas qualitative content analysis extends beyond this to enable systematic and rigorous interrogation of latent meanings and implicit communicative patterns embedded within textual data (Weber, 1990). This facility to capture implicit meanings and underlying ideological dispositions elevates it over simplistic word-count approaches.

Several factors render this approach most suitable for the purpose of this study. Firstly, qualitative content analysis anchors existing theoretical constructs through deductive coding processes (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). This deductive flexibility is vital to evaluate how established perspectives across disciplines are applied to conceptualise democratic backsliding dynamics. Additionally, the inductive coding cycles intrinsic to qualitative content analysis can capture novel conceptual framings emerging from immersive engagement with the data itself (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Moreover, content analysis affords systematic scrutiny of both manifest



denotative content as well as latent connotative representations across large corpora (Krippendorff, 2019).

Noting that each technique of text analysis has its own advantage for a particular purpose, my study employs several techniques of content analysis. Thus, as my thesis aims to assess the prevailing ideological assumptions in the documents containing the EU policy priorities, critical discourse analysis proves useful to establish how discourse is connected to social structures and how power and inequality are reproduced through discourse (Fairclough, 2003). At the same time, for the purpose of analysing the larger corpus of EU-funded research projects, both quantitative and qualitative content analysis will be employed. While qualitative content analysis is better suited for a bigger amount of text, critical discourse analysis mandates a smaller amount of text to perform fine-grained and in-depth textual analysis. This is why discourse analysis is often paired with content analysis as a so-called 'mixed method' (Creswell, 2009; Fairclough, 2003). Hence, my thesis will borrow some techniques from critical discourse analysis particularly when analysing the official documents from the European Union. The specific analytical methods used for this research will be further elaborated in Section 3.4. which explains the step-by-step process of how the data is analysed.

### **3.2. Data Sources and Timeframe**

My primary data sources for this study can be divided into two groups. The first includes the EU's communications and documents denoting the EU policy priorities, while the second comprises projects funded by the European Union framework programmes for research and innovation. To assess the EU policy priorities, two documents were chosen: the European Commission's policy strategy called 'Europe 2020' and the report on the EU's budget priorities. This choice is justified by the institutional structure of the EU and the purpose of this study. It is important to note here that the EU is not a unified homogenous actor, but rather it is a complex entity in which diverging interests of member-states, interest groups and institutions are in constant competition with each other (Bieler, 2002; Hammerslev, 2015). There is a debate regarding the contestation for the priority setting between EU organs, notable European Council and Commission (Cuperus et al., 2019). Still, since the European Commission is the executive body of the Union and the only one holding the legislative initiative, policy priorities proposed by it were selected over, for example, the Strategic Agenda by the European Council, formulated by the member-states' leaders. Keeping in mind this complex structure of the EU, a decision was made to also look at the multi-annual financial framework (MFF), the budget of

the EU. The fact that the budget is agreed upon by all the three main bodies of the EU serves to ensure that the discussed priorities are actually included in the funding and thus into policy cycle.

When it comes to EU's Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation, these multi-annual strategic initiatives represent one of the two principal funding instruments employed by the EU to support research in social sciences and humanities (Kropp and Larsen, 2022). The Framework Programmes (FPs) follow a top-down approach, where the European Commission issues periodic calls for proposals within pre-defined thematic areas and societal challenges. In contrast, the European Research Council (ERC) provides a bottom-up funding avenue for researcher-driven frontier research projects across all disciplines (Schindler-Daniels, 2014). While comparative analysis of ERC and FP projects could also yield insights, this study focuses specifically on FP outputs due to their higher potential for strategic alignment with EU policy priorities. Depending on the findings from this study, a comparison to ERC might be possible and desirable in future research.

The results from all projects are published on the public platform called the Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS). The CORDIS database is managed by the European Commission. It is the primary source of comprehensive information on the EU's research and innovation, providing access to project descriptions, participant information, final reports and result dissemination materials, such as published articles or other deliverables.

The rationale for choosing projects from Framework Programmes is that these projects compete for grants with the calls for proposals formulated by the EU. Since the past calls for proposals are not in open access, a comparison of the selected research projects with the EU policy priorities proves necessary in order to assess the convergence of research foci and policy priorities. Consequently, FP projects are not merely oriented towards issues of the most significant institutional concern but also represent domains where EU governance institutions have significant potential to exert considerable influence (Adler-Nissen and Kropp, 2015; Kropp and Larsen, 2022; ). The formulation of FP research agendas by the EU institutions, coupled with the transparency of CORDIS, renders FP project outputs a suitable data source for examining potential influences of EU policy framings on academic knowledge production related to issues like democratic backsliding. Comprehensively surveying this official corpus will enable the investigation of whether conceptual linkages exist between EU policy discourses and research emerging from FP initiatives.

The scope of this study is delimited to the most recently concluded FP, Horizon 2020 (2014-2020), specifically the projects funded under the ‘Societal Challenges’ pillar. This pillar contains the research projects concerning social sciences. The analytical timeframe spanning 2014-2020 is justified by two intersecting reasons: the political developments witnessed across the Union and the evolution of the EU’s research policy agenda. From a historical perspective, this period critically encapsulates the democratic backsliding dynamics that manifested in the European Union after the 2008 financial crisis. Concurrently, the EU’s Framework Programmes underwent a reconceptualisation to strategically prioritise social scientific research as a vital knowledge domain for grappling with complex societal challenges confronting Europe. While social scientific inquiry remained largely peripheral within the earliest FPs launched in the 1980s, the gradual inclusion of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) finally ‘came of age’ only in the FP7 (Schindler-Daniels, 2014, p. 182). Horizon Europe (2021-2027), the most recent FP, is not included in this study because it is still ongoing, therefore many projects’ results are not available to access yet.

### **3.3. Data Collection and Sampling**

As discussed above, the data for this study includes the official documents and reports stating the EU policy priorities and the research projects on democracy funded under the ‘Societal Pillar’ of the FP Horizon 2020. The documents were downloaded from the EU’s official website, while the projects were downloaded from the CORDIS database. During the sampling process, the keyword ‘democracy’ was used to ensure the widest scope of reach. The necessity for such a broad approach stems directly from the objective to explore research into challenges to or prerequisites for democracy, and thus to understand whether it aligns with the EU policy priorities. Drawing on the idea that democracy is an essentially contested concept (Kurki, 2010), and given the different existing definitions of democracy and the multitude of terms referred to democratic decline (covered in-depth in the literature review), the decision to use the keyword ‘democracy’ is crucial. This step helped to ensure that no important data were omitted. The information on what exactly constitutes a challenge to democracy is not always openly stated, but might be hidden and can be unravelled by looking at these projects.

The initial pool included 110 projects related to democracy. The first stage of filtering involved excluding the projects that did not fall into the realm of social sciences (such as projects related to energy or agriculture) since they were not useful for the purpose of this research. The ongoing projects were also excluded since they do not contain all the necessary information for analysis.

In the first stage, the project descriptions were read one by one in order to establish the relevance for the research topic of this thesis. This also proved useful for the later stages of the analysis since during this stage an inductive approach was used to gain a preliminary understanding of topics and themes employed in these projects. This purposive sampling included all the projects which were related to democratic decline and also all the projects that mentioned democracy to justify their research topics. This included both projects which claimed to research specific challenges to democracy and the projects which focused on strengthening democracy. Consequently, a sample of 42 projects was drawn<sup>3</sup>.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The data analysis process for this thesis includes two steps which were undertaken in parallel and informed each other. The first step comprises the analysis of the EU policy priorities as stated in the ‘Europe 2020’ and the budget allocations for 2014-2020, while the second step analyses the EU-funded research project, assessing their convergence with the EU policy priorities. This section explains how the data analysis is performed step-by-step, including the analytical constructs, techniques and coding frameworks that were used in the process.

#### *3.4.1. Analysis of the EU policy priorities*

This part of the analysis focuses on investigating the underlying assumptions guiding these priorities. For this, a mixed method of qualitative content analysis with some elements of basic techniques of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) was applied. Guided by the conceptualisation of democracy that is discussed in-depth in the literature review, I paid special attention to how social and economic provisions and democracy (or organisation of society in general) are framed in the text of ‘Europe 2020’. Table 3.1 below provides the coding framework, which includes guiding questions regarding the challenges, solutions, responsibilities and the overall promoted model of society that can be inferred from the document. This framework was developed both deductively (based on the key tenets of neoliberalism discussed in the literature review) and inductively (based on the patterns discovered in the text itself). It should be noted that this framework is more of a general guideline rather than a rigid coding rulebook. The categories presented in the table are neither

---

<sup>3</sup> The table with full names, project codes, links to the projects and the assigned categories can be found in the Appendix. For convenience, inside the text projects will be addressed by the code names assigned to them for the analysis (the first column in the Appendix)

mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. So are the examples of keywords, which are provided here mostly for the reader's better understanding of the focus of each category.

**Table 1** Coding Framework for the Analysis of 'Europe 2020' Strategy

| Category                     | Coding rules  | Examples of keywords  |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Challenges                   | What is framed as a problem/challenge to be addressed?  | 'crisis', 'unemployment', 'poverty', 'productivity gap', 'demographic ageing' |
| Responsibility/<br>Attitudes | Which actors are held responsible for what? What are the underlying attitudes towards different actors? | 'labour', 'business', 'policy', 'citizens', 'institutions', 'markets'         |
| Solutions                    | Which solutions to the challenges are proposed? What is seen as a goal or as a positive initiative?     | 'growth', 'social inclusion', 'education', 'cohesion', 'innovation'           |
| Societal organisation        | What kind of political agenda is promoted?  | 'democracy', '(single) market', 'regulation', 'state'                         |

The text was coded with the help of Atlas.ti assisting software. As Krippendorff (2019) noted, Atlas.ti is an advantageous analytical aid because it assures that 'text explorations are systematic, effectively countering the natural tendency of humans to read and recall selectively' (Krippendorff, 2019, p.385). It also proved useful for analysing the research projects. As discussed above, reading all the project descriptions during the sampling enabled the identification of some emerging patterns which informed the choice of analytical methods. I observed that some common themes (for example, the protection of liberal democracy or the threat of 'populist antidemocratic alternatives') occurred in many projects on different topics. These themes were noted down and were further used in the second step of the analytical process.

#### *3.4.2. Analysis of the research projects*

In the second step of the analytical process, the projects were coded using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and categorised via the clustering technique from Krippendorff (2019). This process enabled the discernment of specific topics researched under the umbrella of democracy. Starting from the widest scope possible enables us to gain a comprehensive understanding of how democracy is perceived and portrayed in EU-funded research. Applying a similar coding framework to the one provided above (Table 3.1) while systematically reviewing the project descriptions and stated objectives, I tried to identify which topics are

researched when referring to democracy and which factors are seen (explicitly or implicitly) as the main challenges threatening democracy.

After the descriptions of the projects, objectives and brief results were read and coded, emergent themes were noted. At this stage it became visible that some themes are very close to each other and can be combined together. This is where the clustering technique proved useful. As Krippendorff (2019) notes, clustering involves ‘forming perceptual wholes from things that are connected, belong together, or have common meanings, while separating them from things whose relationships seem accidental or meaningless’ (pp. 213-214). While during clustering the loss of some elements of the data is unavoidable, this technique is useful because it invites abstraction, preserves what matters and omits only insignificant details from the original data (Krippendorff, 2019).

The process involves merging together two most similar themes to form a cluster. After the first cluster is formed, all the themes are scanned again to find relationships between parallel themes or between themes and the newly merged cluster. Thus, the themes that are most similar to each other are gradually merged together, which continues until no clusters can be merged together anymore. For example, ‘radicalisation’, ‘extremism’, ‘violence’, and ‘organised crime’ were gradually all merged together into one cluster ‘Radicalisation and Extremism’. Similarly, the themes such as ‘elections’ legitimacy’, ‘youth participation’, and ‘deliberative citizen engagement’ eventually comprised the category ‘Citizen engagement’, because they were all associated with different aspects and forms of citizens’ participation in public life. After this clustering technique, the clusters formed the categories into which all the projects were classified.

After this step was finished, the analysis delved into the content of the research projects to gain an overview regarding the conceptualisation of democracy in the research projects. For this purpose, a concept treemap was established based on the reports from the four projects (P5, P25, P29, P32) most directly associated with democratic decline. This selection is justified given that they address democratic decline explicitly, so these projects are more likely to provide useful information regarding the conceptualisation of democracy and the underlying conditions. Quantitative analysis was applied to 98 reports via using Atlas.ti software to derive a treemap of concepts most frequently used in these projects. While it must be noted that this last section bears a supportive character to the main analysis, thus limiting its reach, it will still

be insightful and serve to support the main argument of this thesis. The next chapters discuss the findings from the analysis.

## **4. Analysis of the EU policy priorities in 2014-2020**

As was discussed in the methodological chapter, this chapter seeks to establish the underlying assumptions guiding the EU policy and research by looking at which topics are seen as incorporating challenges to democracy. Analysing these projects within the context of the EU policy priorities for the same time period allows us to draw conclusions regarding the overlap between the EU priorities and the research funded by the EU, answering the research question posed in this thesis.

Section 4.1 will give an overview of the context in which the EU policy priorities were adopted. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 discuss the ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy and the Multi-annual Financial Framework of the EU respectively, focusing specifically on the underpinning assumptions. The chapter ends with a brief summary and sets the stage for the next part of the analysis — the analysis of the EU-funded projects.

### **4.1. Contextualisation of the EU policy priorities**

To assess the potential relationship of the European Union with the research it funds, this section provides an overview of the EU policy priorities for the period corresponding to the Horizon 2020 framework programme (2014-2020). Together with this, it also contextualises the findings to gain a better understanding of why specific topics might have dominated the research agenda in that particular period.

The major historical event that shook Europe in this period and informed EU priorities for the foreseeable future was the 2007-2008 financial crisis. It triggered a series of economic crises in the Eurozone, including the banking crisis and the sovereign debt crisis. Some authors asserted that the crises caused more lasting economic damage in Europe than the Great Depression of the 1930s (Copelovitch et al, 2016). Thus, severe austerity measures, dissatisfaction of citizens triggered by unemployment, rising poverty and the burden of bailouts put on taxpayers and debtor states (Frieden and Walter, 2017) constituted the context for the legislative period under research. The 6th report on economic, social and territorial cohesion published by the European Commission in 2014 gives a good summary of the context that is drastically different from the conditions in 2007:

Since 2008, public debt has increased dramatically, income has declined for many people across the EU, employment rates have fallen in most countries and unemployment is higher than for over 20 years, while poverty and social exclusion have tended to become more widespread. At the same time, regional disparities in employment and unemployment rates have widened as have those in GDP per head in many countries while in others they have stopped narrowing. These developments mean that the Europe 2020 employment and poverty targets are now significantly further away than when they were first set and it will require a substantial effort over the next 6 years to achieve them in a context of significant budgetary constraints (European Commission, 2014).

This was the environment in which the European Commission adopted the ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy in 2010, facing the need for both fiscal prudence and addressing societal needs. This was also the context for the adoption of the Strategic Agenda by the European Council and the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), which is the EU’s budget. Both of them were adopted in 2014 as an overarching response to tackle complex economic and social challenges in the next policy cycle of 2014-2020. The following subsections will first look at the policy priorities stated in the ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy and then briefly at the MFF spending allocations. This will not only give us an overview of what was prioritised by the EU’s executive body but also provide an additional assessment of what was agreed upon by all three main bodies of the EU to fund. This overview is important in order to see whether the research projects related to democracy reflect the policy priorities of the EU.

## **4.2. The ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy**

The ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy was announced by the European Commission in 2010. It identifies the main challenges for the Union and the goals to be achieved by 2020. Even though the document states the financial crisis as the main challenge, the strategy’s three major priorities are all oriented to growth: smart growth pertains to an ‘economy based on knowledge and innovation’; sustainable growth denotes a ‘more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy’; and, finally, inclusive growth is about high employment and ‘social and territorial cohesion’ (European Commission, 2010, p. 5). The outline in the document is multi-layered, proposing headline targets and seven ‘flagship initiatives’ to achieve the stated goals. Table 1 lists these initiatives with their descriptions as stated in the ‘Europe 2020’ document.

These priorities constituted guidelines for the MFF that was adopted in 2014. Even though ‘Europe 2020’ acknowledges the need to address social problems such as poverty and



unemployment, the solutions for them are still seen from a market-oriented neoliberal prism. For example, the solutions for unemployment include ‘life-long learning’ for workers to adapt to new conditions and increase labour productivity, labour mobility and ‘flexicurity’, which merges flexibility with social security (European Commission, 2010, p. 18). Thus, the emphasis is not put on the protection of workers or redistribution of resources but rather on the need to increase competitiveness and shape labour according to the business demands. Similarly, education is regarded as an investment for employability with the aim to ‘enhance the performance’ and promote ‘entrepreneurship through mobility’ (European Commission, 2010, p.13). These are the most prominent examples demonstrating the neoliberal orientation of the social policy priorities of the EU.

One might argue that the heavy emphasis put on economic matters can be attributed to the Union’s legislative and institutional structure, as it was originally conceived as a Single Market, granting it extensive authority in economic affairs. In contrast, social and political matters largely fall under the competencies of individual member states, thereby limiting the EU’s influence in these domains. However, this perceived separation of the economy from politics is not a natural or inevitable phenomenon. Instead, it reflects a conscious ideological choice rooted in the neoliberal worldview, which seeks to depoliticise the economy and shield it from the demands of substantive democracy and popular sovereignty (Crouch et al, 2016; Gill, 2007; Streeck, 2020).

One might argue that the heavy emphasis put on economic matters can be attributed to the Union’s legislative and institutional structure, as it was originally conceived as a Single Market, granting it extensive authority in economic affairs. In contrast, social and political matters largely fall under the competencies of individual member states, thereby limiting the EU’s influence in these domains. However, this perceived separation of the economy from politics is not a natural or inevitable phenomenon. Instead, it reflects a conscious ideological choice rooted in the neoliberal worldview, which seeks to depoliticise the economy and shield it from the demands of substantive democracy and popular sovereignty (Crouch et al, 2016; Gill, 2007; Streeck, 2020). The neoliberal paradigm treats the economy as a technocratic realm governed by immutable market principles and best managed by unelected experts, isolated from the messiness of political contestation and popular sovereignty (Rothschild, 2009).

**Table 2:** Headline Targets and Flagship Initiatives Proposed in 'Europe 2020'. Adapted from European Commission, 2010, p.3

| Headline Targets  |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Raise the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 from the current 69% to at least 75%.</li> <li>– Achieve the target of investing 3% of GDP in R&amp;D in particular by improving the conditions for R&amp;D investment by the private sector, and develop a new indicator to track innovation.</li> <li>– Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% compared to 1990 levels or by 30% if the conditions are right, increase the share of renewable energy in our final energy consumption to 20%, and achieve a 20% increase in energy efficiency.</li> <li>– Reduce the share of early school leavers to 10% from the current 15% and increase the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40%.</li> <li>– Reduce the number of Europeans living below national poverty lines by 25%, lifting 20 million people out of poverty.</li> </ul> |  |   |
| Smart Growth  | Sustainable Growth   | Inclusive Growth  |
| <p><b>Innovation</b><br/> <i>'Innovation Union'</i> to improve framework conditions and access to finance for research and innovation so as to strengthen the innovation chain and boost levels of investment throughout the Union.</p> <p><b>Education</b><br/> <i>'Youth on the move'</i> to enhance the performance of education systems and to reinforce the international attractiveness of Europe's higher education.</p> <p><b>Digital Society</b><br/> <i>'A digital agenda for Europe'</i> to speed up the roll-out of high-speed internet and reap the benefits of a digital single market for households and firms.</p>  | <p><b>Climate, Energy and Mobility</b><br/> <i>'Resource efficient Europe'</i> to help decouple economic growth from the use of resources, by decarbonising our economy, increasing the use of renewable sources, modernising our transport sector and promoting energy efficiency.</p> <p><b>Competitiveness</b><br/> <i>'An industrial policy for the globalisation era'</i> to improve the business environment, especially for SMEs, and to support the development of a strong and sustainable industrial base able to compete globally</p> | <p><b>Employment and Skills</b><br/> <i>'An agenda for new skills and jobs'</i> to modernise labour markets by facilitating labour mobility and the development of skills throughout the lifecycle with a view to increase labour participation and better match labour supply and demand.</p> <p><b>Fighting poverty</b><br/> <i>'European platform against poverty'</i> to ensure social and territorial cohesion such that the benefits of growth and jobs are widely shared and people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are enabled to live in dignity and take an active part in society.</p> |

By framing economic policymaking as a purely technical exercise, devoid of ideological or normative considerations, the neoliberal project effectively removes a critical sphere of social life from democratic control and accountability. Still, even in these conditions, the fact that rhetoric of social inclusion was added to the 'Europe 2020' indicates the grave extent of the consequences of the economic crises since 2008.

An in-depth analysis of each priority is beyond the scope of this section, as many aspects of 'Europe 2020's social provisions have already been criticised by scholars (see Arriazu and Solari, 2015; Daly, 2012; Wandel, 2016). Instead, I focus on analysing the document from the perspective of democracy, assessing which model of democracy and societal organisation is promoted by it. The examination provided here serves to demonstrate the underlying assumptions which guide the EU priorities. The primary assumption is that growth is the ultimate goal to be achieved and that growth will automatically bring social inclusion, thus constructing employment and growth as 'twin overriding goals' while the social dimension becomes an 'add-on' or an afterthought (Daly, 2012).

In the 'Europe 2020' document, businesses are mostly mentioned in the context of protecting, supporting, improving or responding to their needs. Trade unions are never directly mentioned at all. Instead, the term 'social partners' is employed several times, which encompasses trade unions together with employer organisations. Labour is mentioned solely in the contexts of efficient division of labour, labour mobility and flexibility, modernisation of the labour market, matching supply and demand or 'labour market needs'. Thus, we can see a heavy emphasis on marketisation and competitiveness, the key tenets of neoliberalism. This suggests the legitimisation of a societal order where inequalities are not addressed but rather fostered and even exacerbated and the responsibility for this is put on the less advantageous groups (Dardot and Laval, 2019). By prioritising economic growth over social inclusion and equality, the strategy aligns with the neoliberal agenda of depoliticising the economy and removing it from democratic oversight. This directly contradicts the substantive conception of democracy articulated by scholars like Macpherson (1977), Held (2006), and Mouffe (1999, 2000), which posits that genuine democracy requires extending democratic principles to the economic sphere and empowering citizens to shape decisions that impact their lives, including economic policies and outcomes.

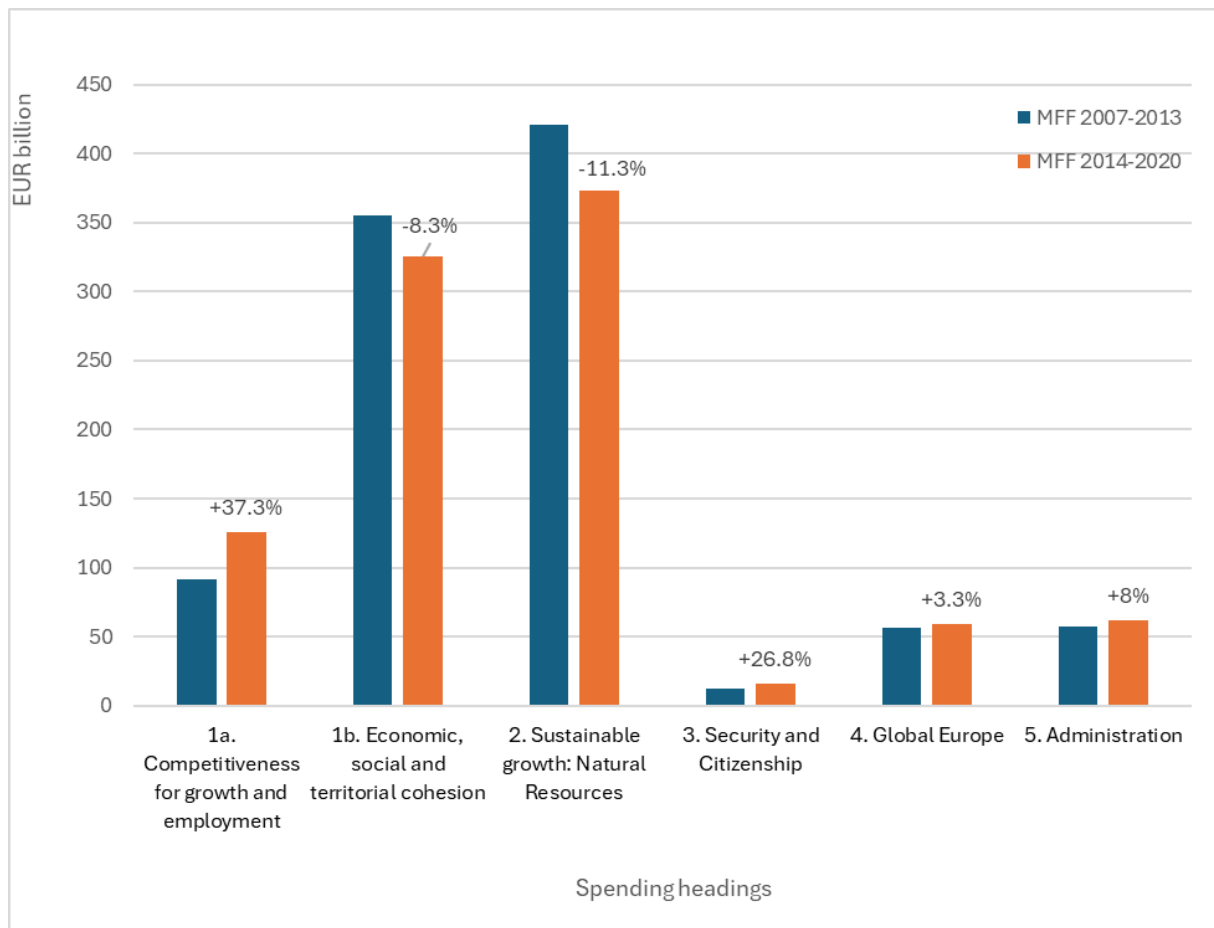
This depoliticisation (or rather the marketisation of politics) is even more visible if we look at how the document talks about citizens, as they are seen either as consumers or as passive

receivers of the policies. Most prominently, the document states that ‘citizens must be empowered to play a full part in the single market’ via ‘strengthening their ability and confidence to buy goods and services crossborder, in particular on-line’ (European Commission, 2010, p. 20). Here we can see how empowerment is equated with the promotion of consumerism and how it is amalgamated with digitalisation and information technology, supporting a particular type of innovation-driven approach discussed by Felt (2014). In other mentions, the document places responsibility on the European Parliament to ‘mobilise’ the citizens for the implementation of the Strategy or to explain to the citizens ‘why the reforms are necessary and inevitable to maintain our quality of life’ (European Commission, 2010, p. 30) rather than to discuss the reforms with citizens. This also aligns with Felt’s assertion that the EU is driven by ‘the fear that citizens are not going to support these policies, so they need to be convinced rather than introduced into the debate’ (Felt, 2014, p. 387). This further proves the argument made by Oleari and Theuns (2023) about the Commission’s conception of ‘democracy without politics’. All of these observations are important to demonstrate the direction of the policies of the EU and the understanding of society and democracy that it promotes. The next section supports these arguments by giving a short overview of the EU budget shifts for 2014-2020, which point to the same conclusions.

### **4.3. Multiannual Financial Framework of the EU**

To further the point elaborated in the previous section, this section looks at the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), the EU budget, in which the principles of the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy served as guidelines. This is essential because it not only serves to demonstrate that the EU priorities stated in the Strategy actually get translated into funding but also enables us to see the shifts that ‘Europe 2020’ triggered. Figure 4.1 below demonstrates the changes in budget allocations to different policy areas (headings) from 2007-2013 to 2014-2020. This figure is useful for two purposes: first, to comprehend which topics are prioritised most by the EU in the given period; and second, to understand which headings gained relatively more importance in 2014. This will directly inform our further analysis.

**Figure 1:** A comparison of allocations for MFF 2007-2013 and MFF 2014-2020 by spending headings (prices of 2011). Data source: European Commission (2013).



Not surprisingly, the biggest share of the EU funding remained in Heading 2, ‘Sustainable growth’ which included the common agricultural policy, common fisheries policy, rural development and environmental measures. The second biggest share is Heading 1b which deals with the developmental convergence of the EU regions. The biggest increase in allocation from 2007-2013 to 2014-2020 is for ‘Competitiveness for growth and employment’ (Heading 1a) which sees a 37.3% rise, getting over €34 billion more. This Heading also includes allocations for Research and Development (R&D). ‘Economic, social and territorial cohesion’ (Heading 1b), on the contrary, declines by 8.4%. Here we can see a major prioritisation of policies and spending aimed at boosting economic competitiveness, growth, and job creation, completely in line with ‘Europe 2020’ goals.

The smallest portion of the budget is allocated to the ‘Security and Citizenship’ heading, which includes a wide array of topics including justice and home affairs, border protection, immigration and asylum policy, but also public health, consumer protection, culture, youth, information and dialogue with citizens (European Commission, 2013). And even though this Heading gained 26.8% more when compared to the MFF 2007-2013, it still remains a sector with the least financing. The merging of such disparate domains under a single budgetary

category is problematic in itself, as it conflates issues of security and internal affairs with fundamental social and economic rights. Whether this is an exercise of deliberate securitisation or just a simple merge of all the categories that are considered minor, both would indicate that active political citizenship is not an EU priority. Moreover, citizens again are put together with information and consumer protection, confirming the neoliberal attitude which constructs citizens in a democracy as consumers of policies (Biebricher, 2015). This observation aligns with the critiques of Crouch et al. (2016) who have highlighted the ‘market-conforming’ nature of democracy in neoliberalism, where the political and legislative processes must serve the market needs.

In essence, this chapter shows that while the EU’s policy priorities for 2014-2020 paid lip service to social inclusion and environmental sustainability, their core tenets remained firmly rooted in neoliberal orthodoxy, prioritising market forces, private sector growth, and economic governance mechanisms that perpetuate existing power structures and inequalities. ‘Europe 2020’ posits that ‘our democratic institutions’ are one of the strengths of Europe (European Commission, 2010, p. 9), but from the evidence above we can see that the understanding of democracy promoted by the EU involves a very specific way of organisation of society based on protection of economic inequalities and depoliticisation of society. This is essential for our analysis since the understanding of democracy informs what will be perceived and portrayed as challenges to democracy. If the funding by the EU reflects the EU priorities, it means that the challenges that endanger this status quo will more likely be constructed as challenges worth researching. The next section will further explore this by looking at the thematic distribution of the EU-funded research projects during this period to see if these priorities are also reflected in the projects.

## **5. Distribution of EU-funded projects**

This chapter examines EU-funded research on portrayed challenges to democracy. This level encompasses a broad scope, comprising an analysis of the descriptions and objectives of all democracy-related projects financed under the Horizon 2020 framework programme from 2014 to 2020. As we saw from the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy and the budget allocations discussed in the previous section, boosting competitiveness and creating a knowledge-based economy were the main goals for the EU. Thus, Heading 1a which among others comprises the funding for research and innovation gained the biggest increase in allocations. Concurrently, the Horizon

2020 programme, which is part of Heading 1a, also increased its budget from around €70 to €88 billion in 2014 and rose to €116 billion in 2020. This was a 25% increase over the budget allocated to the previous Research and Development (R&D) framework programme (Kölling, 2014).

Thus, keeping in mind that the EU started to include social provisions in its democracy promotion efforts (Kurki, 2014) and to allocate more funds to social sciences and humanities (Felt, 2014; Schindler-Daniels, 2014), we can infer that in this period societal challenges have become more important for the EU. It can be argued that this demonstrates the EU's preparedness to reflect on its problems and change its policies (for example, see Felt, 2014). At the same time, it can also be argued that the EU's influence on the research it funds would perpetuate the dominance of a prevalent ideological lens (as evidenced by Aliu et al, 2017; Levidow and Neubauer, 2014; Kropp and Larsen, 2022; Primeri and Reale, 2012). This chapter aims to shed light on how this relationship manifests in EU-funded research projects on challenges to democracy. Section 5.1 analyses the research projects, assesses the extent to which they correspond to the EU policy priorities, and seeks to find overlap in ideological underpinnings.

This section examines the broader thematic contours of the 42 Horizon 2020 projects engaging with issues of democracy. After reviewing the descriptions, stated objectives and results sections of each project, these projects were classified into categories which were created by using the principles of clustering technique (Krippendorff, 2019), discussed at length in the methodological chapter. Table 3 demonstrates the number of projects corresponding to topic clusters revealed after systematically categorising these initiatives. This thematic mapping elucidates the prioritisation of certain dimensions over others within its democracy-related research agenda. While projects examining such topics as citizen engagement, radicalisation and extremism, populism and governance feature prominently, questions of labour rights and socioeconomic welfare receive comparatively scant attention.

The highest concentration is evident in the area of citizen engagement (9 projects), which includes research on deliberative communication, voter-centred perspectives on elections, youth participation and solidarity. In the middle of the distribution are the projects on energy and environment, migration and trust, with each category containing three projects.

**Table 3.** Distribution of research projects according to the prevalent themes

| <b>Topics</b>                       | <b>Number of projects</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Citizen Engagement                  | 9                         |
| Radicalisation and Extremism        | 6                         |
| Populism and Democratic Decline     | 5                         |
| Governance and Integration          | 5                         |
| Energy and Environment              | 4                         |
| Migration                           | 3                         |
| Trust                               | 3                         |
| Culture and Identity                | 2                         |
| Social welfare and labour           | 2                         |
| Education                           | 2                         |
| Eastern Partnership and Geopolitics | 1                         |
| Total                               | 42                        |

Going back to the topics discussed in the ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy and the budget allocations, these projects align with the EU’s stated interest in energy transition and environmental issues, curbing migration and restoring citizens’ trust in European governance. These topics relate directly to the challenges faced by the EU in the context of the economic and refugee crises that were discussed in the previous section, so it is not surprising to see them present in the distribution. Other topics in the distribution, such as culture and identity, social welfare and labour, and education, include two projects per topic. While this distribution as a whole indicates a recognition of the multifaceted nature of democratic societies, it is concerning that topics such as education and socio-economic rights are given much less attention compared to the top four research priorities. The middle of the distribution The following subsections will discuss the key findings from the analysis: Section 5.1 talks about citizen engagement and participation, Section 5.2 discusses the trends related to democratic decline, and Section 5.3 draws attention to the lack of prioritisation of the social dimension.

### **5.1. Citizen Engagement and Participation**

These might seem like quite a diverse range of topics but what unites them is the focus on citizenship. The projects in this category research different aspects of citizen engagement,



including the reasons for disengagement and design tools to increase participation. The fact that around one-fifth of the projects are related to researching active citizenship shows that lack of participation is regarded as a serious challenge. This suggests that researching active citizenship is prioritised by scholars, thus showing a higher prioritisation of citizens than what was discussed in the EU policy priorities section above. This might be seen as a positive signal that the EU aims to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind citizen disengagement and explore potential strategies to foster greater participation and active citizenship. At the same time, this might demonstrate that scholars are interested in embracing more substantive models of democracy.

However, when we look closer at these projects, this attempt to bring more deliberation and participation into the prevailing mode of liberal democracy still remains confined in the existing structures. Notably, much emphasis is placed on creating tools and instrumental solutions. Some projects note that the reasons for the lack of trust and disengagement are growing inequalities, unemployment, and ‘anxieties concerning social, economic and cultural change’ (P13). Still, none actually focus their research on addressing these root causes, nor do they voice the necessity to challenge the structures that bring and maintain these inequalities. Instead, they focus on developing various tools such as participatory budgeting on a local level (P6) or digital solutions (P1, P13, P19). This corresponds to the argument made by Levidow and Neubauer (2014), who claim that EU-funded social science has reduced innovation to ‘techno-fixes’ thus promoting techno-scientific and digital innovation as a means for societal transformation.

Noting that each of these projects has important aims and furthers our understanding of various complex phenomena, this thesis should not be seen as a critique of innovation or technological solutions. However, it is still important to acknowledge the shift of focus in the research from welfare distribution and integration to marketable solutions that place much more responsibility on individuals confined within a particular system. This observation indicates a particular set of priorities within the research agenda, wherein an emphasis on technological advancements and data-driven solutions overshadows social rights and labour issues. This aligns with Kropp and Larsen’s findings regarding the shift of EU-funded social science research from ‘social integration to market innovation’ (Kropp and Larssen, 2023).

To summarise, the fact that there is the highest number of projects related to citizen engagement can be seen as a positive result, diverging from the EU’s policy priorities and pointing to the researchers’ willingness to imagine alternative visions for society. However, keeping in mind

that these projects on citizen participation are still confined into a liberalist tradition meaning that they focus on engaging citizens in political democracy rather than economic one, it can be concluded that the neoliberal logic potentially translated by the funding constrains the limits of possible. Still, it is important to note that from this analysis it is impossible to conclude whether it is the scholars' interests that align with the EU's priorities or whether the EU's priorities limit scholars. Most probably, the relationship is mutual, as stated by Jasanoff's notion of 'co-production'.

## **5.2. Democratic Decline**

'Radicalisation and Extremism', 'Populism and Democratic Decline', and 'Governance and Integration' constitute the other three most highly represented categories of research projects. They all show a pronounced emphasis on issues that pose potential challenges to democratic processes and institutions, including the rise of extremist ideologies, the proliferation of populist movements, and the erosion of effective governance mechanisms. These particular foci can be explained by the context of the challenges faced by the EU in this period, which included the rise of far-right and extremist movements and the surge of populist parties across various member-states including France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Poland (Wodak et al, 2013). Particularly after 2015, the parties and groups with nationalist, anti-immigrant, and Eurosceptic ideologies have gained substantial influence across the EU.

This context explains the focus on researching populism and its implications for democratic decline. This finding also aligns with Norris's (2017) assertion that Western democracies face the biggest threat from 'twin forces' seeking to undermine the regime: sporadic terrorist attacks that damage the feeling of security and populist-authoritarian forces that 'feed parasitically' upon people's fears. This might explain why radicalisation, extremism, and populism weigh equally in the research priorities.

What is interesting here is that the projects most directly related to democratic decline are all focused on populism. While it is understandable to research populism, given the prevalence of right-wing populist parties engaging in anti-democratic rhetoric and efforts to undermine democratic systems, this narrow focus reveals a limited conceptualisation of democracy itself. The concentration on populism as a threat to liberal democracy suggests that the understanding of democratic decline is confined to a narrow, procedural interpretation of democracy, neglecting the substantive dimensions of economic and social justice that underpin genuine democratic participation. This shortsighted view fails to recognise that it is precisely the

neoliberal logic, which has exacerbated inequalities and burdened disadvantaged groups, that has fueled the disillusionment and alienation driving the rise of populism in the first place.

This considerable emphasis placed on such topics as radicalisation, extremism and populism could be interpreted as a preoccupation with maintaining the status quo and marginalisation of alternative viewpoints that challenge the established order. While populism and extremism certainly have to be dealt with, the framing of these issues as threats to be contained aligns also with a broader trend towards securitisation in the EU (Flonk and McNeil-Willson, 2023; Kaunert and Lenard, 2021). This trend is potentially dangerous since it takes political discussion out of the table whereby legitimate expressions of discontent or calls for systemic change are viewed through a security lens.

Ironically, the very policies and research agendas guided by this neoliberal paradigm may be perpetuating the conditions that worsen inequalities and push marginalised communities toward populist movements. Consequently, if the EU's research on democratic decline remains entrapped within this neoliberal framing, it will hinder opportunities for scholars to focus on the root causes of democratic erosion and envision alternative models that address the systemic economic and social disparities undermining substantive democracy. The next section looks at the topics that are least represented in the distribution and discuss the implications of that.

### **5.3. Social Dimension**

As we have seen above, the distribution of research foci within these EU-funded projects aligns with the EU policy priorities. In the same way as the social dimension is not prioritised by the EU's policies, it is also not as prioritised in the research, with topics such as social welfare, education and culture remaining in the bottom of the table. As education is the main instrument to foster critical thinking and civic consciousness, thus resisting dogmatism and enabling social transformation (Held, 2006; Freire, 1990 in Arriazu and Solari, 2015), such scarce attention to this topic contributes to the perpetuation of the status quo. Even more importantly, the limited number of projects under the 'Social welfare and labour' category is particularly concerning from a substantive democracy perspective, as it suggests a lack of attention to the economic and social rights of citizens, which are fundamental to their ability to participate meaningfully in democratic processes (Macpherson, 1977).

There is a noticeable shortage of projects dedicated to examining the structural inequalities and power dynamics inherent within the current socioeconomic system. The limited attention

devoted to domains such as social welfare, labour rights, and economic justice could be perceived as a tacit endorsement of the prevailing neoliberal model, which prioritises market forces and business interests over the well-being of marginalised communities and the working class (Hermann, 2009; Streeck, 2020; Young, 2000). Furthermore, the relatively sparse focus on education and cultural identity may be viewed as a missed opportunity to foster critical thinking, empowerment, and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives – all of which are crucial for challenging hegemonic narratives and promoting genuine democratic participation.

These research priorities that receive the least attention are in fact the foundation and the explanation for the issues that dominate the top of the research agenda, such as governance challenges, erosion of trust, citizen disengagement, populism, and extremism as pointed out by many scholars of democratic decline and populism (Ban et al, 2023; Wodak et al, 2013). These socio-economic factors are not merely additional concerns but are preconditions for a well-functioning and substantive democratic society (Macpherson, 1977; Mouffe, 1999). Yet, the distribution of research priorities fails to reflect this reality, with the most fundamental issues receiving the least attention, undermining the potential for a comprehensive understanding and effective mitigation of democratic decline.

Overall, the distribution of projects across these topics suggests a neoliberal bias in the EU's research agenda, with a focus on addressing the symptoms of democratic decline, such as populism and extremism, rather than critically examining the underlying structural issues and economic models that may be contributing to democratic erosion. This approach risks perpetuating a superficial understanding of democratic challenges and failing to address the deeper systemic issues that undermine substantive democracy, such as economic inequality, corporate influence, and the marginalisation of vulnerable groups. The next chapter will illustrate this conceptual domination via quantitative analysis of the reports from the EU-funded research on democratic decline and qualitative analysis of the projects' descriptions and results. A discussion of all results will be provided in chapter 7.

## **6. Content Analysis of the Projects on Democratic Decline**

As discussed above, the findings from categorisation and thematic analysis of the projects related to democracy demonstrate the extensive neoliberalisation of research. Still, each research project constitutes a multi-partnered, multiannual, interdisciplinary and comprehensive initiative with extensive conceptual and theoretical frameworks. This means

that the contents of the projects can vary and incorporate multiple perspectives. In order to check the conclusions reached above, this section delves deeper into the contents of the projects to discern whether there are different concepts employed on a deeper level.

A critical finding from the analysis above indicates that projects centred on populism were the ones most directly relevant to democracy and democratic decline. Notably, P5 claims its main objective was to address the challenge of populism, ‘thereby ensuring stability of liberal democracies’. The conceptualisation of democracy proves pivotal in determining the subsequent definition of challenges and the criteria for identifying democratic backsliding. Guided by this premise, the present research employed quantitative content analysis on reports from four comprehensive projects investigating democratic decline. These four projects’ reports were downloaded in order to create a Concept Treemap. Table 3.2 contains these projects, including the number of reports in each project.

## 6.1. Quantitative Analysis: A Concept Treemap

**Table 4.** Projects selected for the analysis

| Assigned code | Project code name and link | Project name  | No of reports |
|---------------|----------------------------|---|---------------|
| P5            | DEMOS                      | Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe   | 16            |
| P25           | PaCE                       | Populism And Civic Engagement – a fine-grained, dynamic, context-sensitive and forward-looking response to negative populist tendencies | 23            |
| P32           | RECONNECT                  | Reconciling Europe with its Citizens through Democracy and Rule of Law  | 47            |
| P29           | POPREBEL                   | Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism                               | 12            |
| Total         |                            |   | 98            |

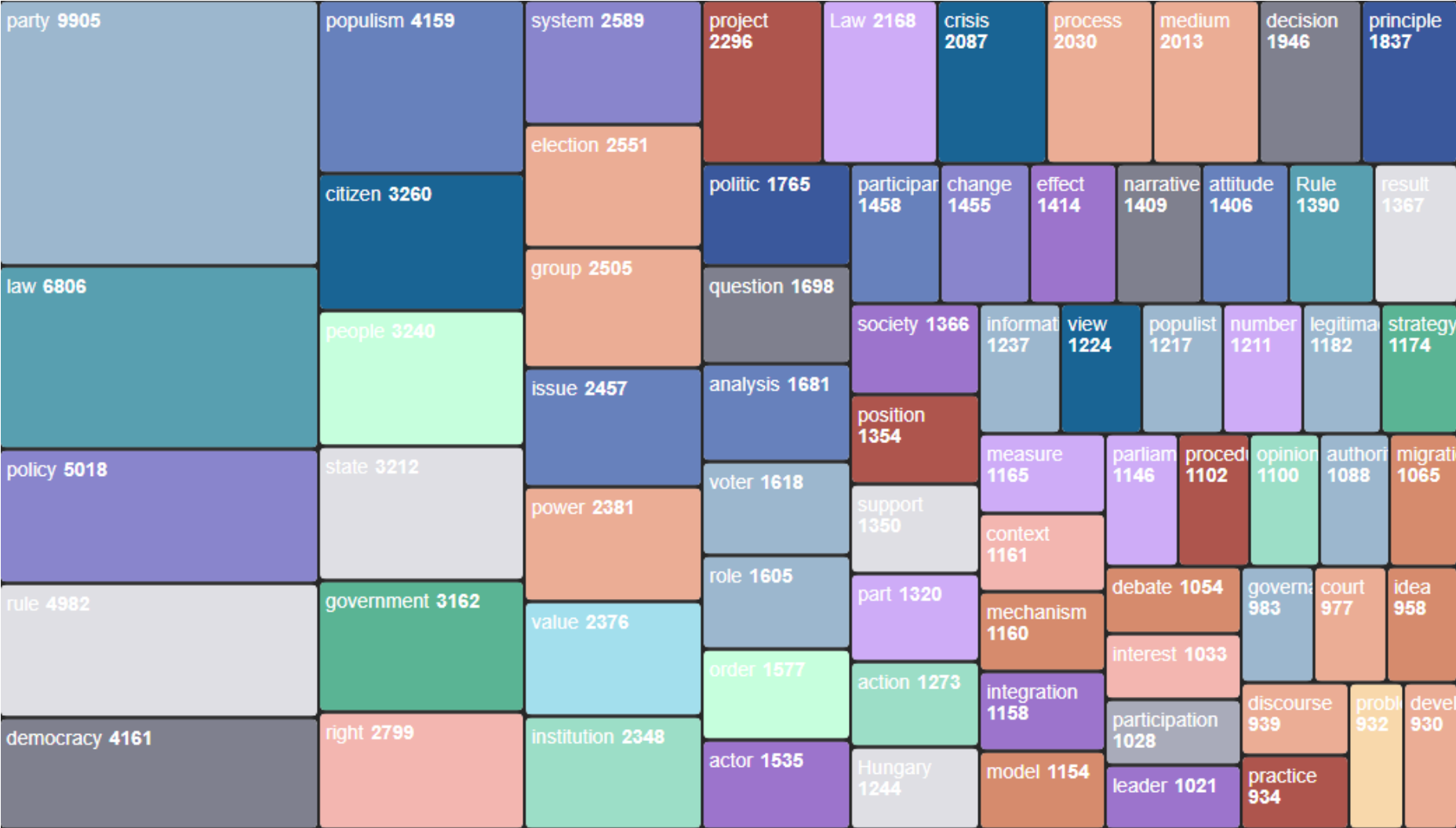
## 6.1. Quantitative Analysis: A Concept Treemap

A total of 98 reports from these four projects were downloaded and examined with the help of the ATLAS.ti software. These reports include working papers, conceptual and theoretical framework reports, findings and results reports, annual progress reports and policy briefs and recommendations. The primary focus during the analysis was on how democracy is conceptualised and which models of democracy are discussed.

The concept analysis treemap (Figure 2) revealed that the word ‘democracy’ is used throughout the documents 4161 times. The variations of ‘liberal democracy’ occur 228 times, while other word combinations appear significantly less often. Some word combinations denote models representing a specific aspect of the liberal notion of democracy, such as ‘representative democracy’ (51) or ‘constitutional democracy’ (60). Some other word combinations include alternatives such as ‘direct democracy’ (57), ‘deliberative democracy’ (30) and ‘militant democracy’ (41). Notably, ‘social democracy’ occurs only 8 times. This demonstrates a significant skew towards liberal democracy. Although one could argue its prominence stems from being the predominant model that presently exists, the near absence of economic democracy models indicates their marginalisation. This finding suggests that the liberal conceptualisation of democracy occupies a hegemonic position within the research landscape examined. Still, it should be kept in mind that this quantitative analysis does not represent the attitudes of the researchers towards the term, so it yields only limited insights. In other words, from this treemap, we cannot understand whether the researchers use the term to denote the state of the art, to defend this political system or to criticise it. Still, the treemap is useful to get an overview of which terms are employed most thereby indicating where the researchers’ focus is, and most importantly it is useful for the detection of absences.

Furthermore, examining other frequently employed concepts within the research corpus, we can see that the most widely used concepts are ‘party’, ‘law’, ‘policy’, ‘rule’, ‘citizen’, ‘government’, ‘populism’, and ‘right’. While the utilisation of such terminology is not inherently negative or atypical within the context of the research being analysed, and no criticism is directed towards the scholars for employing these terms, a more concerning observation emerges from the conspicuous absence of notions such as ‘inequality’, ‘labour’, ‘economic’ or ‘welfare’. This absence suggests that these issues are marginalised and largely disregarded within the majority of the research initiatives under scrutiny.

Figure 2. A Concept Treemap derived from 98 reports from projects on democratic decline



While this treemap is useful for demonstrating the dominant lens and inferring major trends, it is highly important to note that it can only give limited insights since the context and meanings in which these terms are used can not be established from this data. Still, this treemap is provided here in order to illustrate that the focus on social welfare and labour is absent not only in the project descriptions but also in the contents of the projects. The next section further illustrates this by the qualitative analysis of these projects' descriptions and results.

## 6.2. Qualitative Analysis

Project descriptions and results confirm these findings. Even though in the descriptions these projects promised to look into the causes of populism and the 'disconnect between the Union and its citizens' (P32), the results sections of the projects reveal that their focus is not on the socio-economic conditions of the emergence of populism. In P29, 'dramatic changes in culture, society and politics, and the move away from traditional ways of understanding sexual roles and family models' are understood to be the universal factor driving populism. The 2008 economic crisis is seen as a process that 'ignited the resentment of people hit by this cultural shift' (P29). Thus the emphasis is shifted away from the material conditions while labour is not mentioned at all. More importantly, the economic crisis is seen as a given and not as the very consequence of neoliberal developments. This confirms the arguments by Dean (2011) and Fairclough (2003) regarding the permeation of neoliberal ideology.

Another interesting pattern emerges when looking at education. As discussed above, education is critical for active citizenship and participatory democracy (Held, 2006). However, in the context of these projects, education is reduced to digital tools or the instruments necessary 'to instil in citizens a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities in liberal democracy' (P29), thus proving that liberal democracy is seen as the ideal to be preserved and promoted. In other cases, education is conflated with digital tools, such as using AI 'to study, monitor and track populist movements in the online realm, especially on social media' and creating online 'Democracy labs in the COVID era' (P25). Another example is an educational tool 'to help players learn about a possible path to becoming active citizens, to raise awareness of the skills needed to stand up against an authoritarian regime' (P5). Notably, P32's main findings were EU citizens' limited understanding of the EU and its capabilities and a decline in the quality of public discourse. Thus, the main solutions included a 'massive open online course' and policy recommendations such as compulsory voting and concurrent elections to increase turnout (P32).



To summarise, these findings demonstrate that the research on democratic decline funded by the EU reflects neoliberal ideology, designing quick and marketable solutions, viewing education as a passive process of informing rather than fostering critical thinking and placing a significant emphasis on digitalisation and individual responsibility. While not trying to criticise the research conducted by these projects and acknowledging their relevance and value, this thesis aims to draw attention to the shift of focus from socio-economic relations and the implications of neoliberalism for structural inequalities. While financial crises and economic inequalities are mentioned as drivers of populism, they are not questioned and challenged. This is best summarised in the last paragraph of the project description of P29, which states that the project relies on ‘deep involvement with activists, policymakers, and civil society actors to boost the immune system of European democracy’. While this is crucial for democracy, labour or trade unions are not part of the equation.

To clarify, this thesis does not aim to make claims about the scholars’ ideologies or criticise their competencies. While noting that these results yield only limited insights enabled by the analysis of the project descriptions and general results thus omitting nuances and complexities of the academic papers resulted from this research, it could still be concluded that the EU’s ideological framework constrains the scope of academic inquiry via requirement of certain modes of knowledge production and by setting the research agenda. This fact thereby affects the research in a general sense, as these funded projects produce a significant amount of output and are further disseminated in respected academic journals and published as books and monographs, consequently increasing the number of peer-reviewed articles exhibiting a specific perspective. This increases the amount of discourses that support the neoliberal ideology thus making it further ingrained in the society and harder to challenge. The next chapter will discuss the results and implications of all three parts of the analysis, together with the limitations of this research.

## **7. Discussion of Results**

This chapter systematises the results of the analysis of EU policy priorities, budget allocations, and funded research projects on democracy revealing several key points that warrant further discussion. First of all, the examination of the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy and the Multiannual Financial Framework demonstrates a clear neoliberal orientation in EU policy priorities. This is evidenced by the heavy emphasis on economic growth, competitiveness, and market-oriented

solutions to social issues. The research agenda, as reflected in the distribution of Horizon 2020 projects, largely aligns with these priorities. This alignment suggests that EU funding reflects the EU priorities and thus may be constraining the scope of academic inquiry into democracy, potentially limiting the exploration of alternative models or more critical perspectives. This bears significant importance in how we understand democratic decline. While growth remains a key strategy, the inequalities exacerbate, and this is exactly how populists gain more legitimacy.

The predominant focus on populism, extremism, and citizen engagement in the research projects indicates a serious concern, but a relatively narrow understanding of the challenges facing democracy. While these are undoubtedly important issues, this focus risks overlooking the deeper structural and economic factors that may be undermining democratic processes. This is especially clearly seen in the four projects on democratic decline analysed in Chapter 6. Even more importantly, a shortage of research on economic inequalities as revealed in Chapter 5 not only limits our understanding of the reasons for the democratic decline but also undermines the ability to imagine a democracy that goes beyond the liberal understanding and includes socio-economic equality as a basic prerequisite of democracy. In contrast to the liberal emphasis on individual rights and procedural fairness, an egalitarian democratic agenda would prioritise the redistribution of resources, the strengthening of social safety nets, and the empowerment of workers and marginalised groups. To facilitate transformative dialogue, there is a need to focus on uncovering the root causes of economic disparities, investigating the concentration of wealth and power, and exploring alternative economic models that promote greater equity and democratic control over the means of production.

Many of the funded projects emphasise technological solutions, digital tools, and market-compatible approaches to addressing democratic challenges. This is seen both in the analysis of the larger corpus of projects and in the in-depth investigation of the content. While innovation is important, the EU's understanding of innovation rooted in 'techno-fixes' may be displacing more fundamental discussions about power structures, economic models, and systemic inequalities that affect democratic processes. Moreover, combined with the emphasis on communication with citizens, this aligns with what Felt (2014) called the 'fear that citizens are not going to support these policies, so they need to be convinced rather than introduced into the debate'.

The EU's policy priorities, with their heavy emphasis on economic growth and a marginal focus on welfare, reflect a fundamental disconnect between policymakers and the lived realities of citizens. This disconnect is further exacerbated by the absence of critical inquiry into the necessity of perpetual economic growth. While the issues of citizen engagement, governance, and communication are definitely important for democracy, they cannot be fully exercised in conditions of unequal access to resources and opportunities (Sigman and Lindberg, 2019). Consequently, despite rhetoric emphasising social inclusion and combating poverty, the convergence between the EU's policy priorities and its research funding decisions reveals a persistent neoliberal undercurrent that prioritises the interests of businesses and markets over those of workers and marginalised communities. This ideological alignment hinders a comprehensive and critical examination of the systemic failings of neoliberal economic policies, ultimately impeding the development of effective strategies to address the complex challenges facing democracy in Europe.

Overall, the analysis of the project descriptions and objectives demonstrates that the projects financed by the EU reinforce a neoliberal social order by concentrating on topics that maintain stability and conformity while neglecting to critically examine the root causes of inequalities and the perpetuation of power imbalances. Consequently, the findings indicate that the EU's policy priorities align with the research it funds, constraining the breadth and depth of academic inquiry into the multifaceted dimensions of democracy. This alignment of the research agenda with the EU's pro-business policy orientation effectively reinforces a neoliberal paradigm that deprioritises the well-being of the working class and perpetuates a narrow understanding of the root causes behind democratic backsliding. This approach obscures links between neoliberal labour policies favouring businesses over workers and the disillusionment and socioeconomic precariousness that have fueled the growth of populism across Europe. This ideological imprint risks perpetuating a narrow and homogenised understanding of democratic principles, ultimately undermining the very essence of pluralistic discourse and the critical examination of power dynamics that are fundamental to a thriving democratic society. As such, these research priorities serve as a testament to the pervasive impact of the neoliberal paradigm on the intellectual exploration of democracy, shaping the contours of knowledge production and potentially stifling alternative perspectives that could challenge the prevailing orthodoxy. However, as the findings suggested, the whole picture is not all gloomy, and there are projects which aim to establish more active citizenship and suggest alternatives to liberal democracy.

Even though these alternatives still do not fully encompass economic democracy, a shift in focus is already a positive development.

Whether the EU is currently capable of producing alternative solutions is up to debate. Scholars who see the EU as a neoliberal project driven by capitalists' interest would respond negatively, while neofunctionalists might be more optimistic regarding this perspective. It is true that even if we assume that a scenario of change is possible, the EU is still confined in its multi-level institutional structure where many diverging interests (neoliberal or not) compete for influence. However, the point of this thesis is to turn the focus not towards the EU, but towards academia. As discussed in the literature review, knowledge and policymaking are intertwined in the process of co-production (Jasanoff, 2004). This means that while the EU is able to affect and constrain knowledge production, the opposite is also true. As Fink (2016) pointed out, neoliberalism also commenced as an intellectual movement, starting from universities, think tanks and networks and gradually embracing more and more spaces until it became a major mode of government or ideology, some principles of which are currently unquestioned. In line with Fink (2016), this thesis argues that even in the conditions of constraint and dominant ideological setting, academics should be able to imagine alternative modes of organisation of society.

## **8. Conclusion**

This thesis set out to examine how democratic decline is portrayed and understood in EU-funded research, and to what extent this aligns with EU policy priorities. Through a comprehensive analysis of EU policy documents and Horizon 2020 research projects, several key findings have emerged that shed light on the complex interplay between EU priorities, research funding, and academic knowledge production on democracy. The analysis revealed a clear neoliberal orientation in EU policy priorities, as evidenced by the Europe 2020 strategy and budget allocations. This orientation is characterised by a heavy emphasis on economic growth, competitiveness, and market-oriented solutions to social issues. Significantly, the research agenda reflected in Horizon 2020 projects largely aligns with these priorities.

Projects predominantly focused on issues such as populism, extremism, and citizen engagement, while paying less attention to structural economic factors which are actually the foundation of the above-described problems. This alignment suggests that EU funding may be constraining the scope of academic inquiry into democracy, potentially limiting the exploration

of alternative models or more critical perspectives. While noting that this thesis does not draw conclusions about scholars' ideologies, it is still important to acknowledge that a particular research agenda promotes particular questions to be answered and topics to be researched. Thus, a notable finding was the lack of research critically examining economic inequalities or exploring alternative economic models that could strengthen democracy.

Furthermore, the framing of populism as a threat to liberal democracy pointed out a trend toward securitisation which might pose a significant danger. The securitisation of populism poses significant risks to democratic societies. By framing populist movements and ideologies as security threats, governments and institutions may justify exceptional measures that curtail civil liberties and democratic processes in the name of protecting democracy itself. This approach can lead to a paradoxical situation where efforts to safeguard democratic institutions actually undermine the very principles they aim to protect. Securitisation can also exacerbate societal divisions, potentially radicalising moderate populist supporters and reinforcing their narrative of elite persecution. But most importantly for this research, it may divert attention from legitimate grievances and structural issues that fuel populist sentiment, such as economic inequalities translated into feelings of political disenfranchisement.

By treating populism primarily as a security issue rather than a political phenomenon, we risk overlooking the need for substantive democratic reforms. This gap limits our understanding of the root causes of democratic decline and constrains the imagination of more egalitarian democratic alternatives. Instead, many funded projects emphasised technological solutions and digital tools for addressing democratic challenges. While innovation is important, this technocratic approach may displace more fundamental discussions about power structures and systemic inequalities. Most importantly, convergence between EU policy priorities and research funding decisions reveals a persistent neoliberal undercurrent that prioritises business interests over those of workers and marginalised communities. This ideological alignment hinders comprehensive examination of how neoliberal policies may be fueling democratic discontent.

Coming to the present time, it is interesting to note that EU priorities increased emphasis on democracy and the rule of law. The European Commission's priorities for 2019-2024 include 'A new push for European democracy' and 'Promoting our European way of life.'<sup>4</sup> These

---

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024_en) (accessed 21.06.2024)

priorities acknowledge the challenges facing democracy in Europe and emphasise the need to protect the rule of law and core EU values. Thus, the focus remains formulated in liberal notions and in terms of ‘from external interference such as disinformation and online hate messages’. With other priorities addressing the Green Deal, ‘the digital age’ and the power in the global arena, we can clearly see that addressing the widening economic inequality gap and workers’ rights are not among the Commission’s priorities. Moreover, other priorities continue to emphasise economic growth and creating ‘a more attractive investment environment,’ indicating that the fundamental neoliberal orientation remains intact. This persistence of neoliberal logic, even as the EU expresses growing concern about democratic decline, underscores the need for more critical and diverse research on the complex challenges facing European democracy. While concerns regarding communication, technology and protection against external interference are certainly important, framing democracy in this way reflects a technocratic and depoliticised approach to democracy and leaves deeper economic issues unaddressed.

Thus, it is essential that this topic become even more important in the future. This thesis sets the stage for more in-depth analyses in this area. By revealing how funding priorities shape knowledge production on democracy, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the politics of research and the role of social sciences in European integration. It highlights how seemingly neutral or technocratic research agendas may reinforce particular ideological positions while marginalising alternative perspectives. While this thesis focussed solely on Framework Programme projects, further research in this field might focus on comparing these projects with the research funded through other mechanisms like the European Research Council (ERC). As ERC funds proposals formulated by researchers themselves, this could yield useful insights regarding whether the researchers’ agency affects a range of perspectives. It could also contribute to our understanding of whether the neoliberal logic can be more attributed to the EU or whether it is a dominant paradigm independently of funding.

Additionally, this study was limited to the Horizon 2020 period (2014-2020). As EU priorities continue to evolve, future research could examine how the research agenda on democracy may be shifting under Horizon Europe (2021-2027). This could include investigating whether major events like the war in Ukraine have influenced perceptions of democracy within the EU and affected research priorities. Related to this, another potential avenue for future research is a more in-depth analysis of how the EU’s understanding of democracy has changed over time.

This could involve comparing projects and priorities across multiple framework programmes to identify long-term trends and shifts in conceptual approaches.

Finally, as this study focused mostly on the project descriptions, objectives and results, it is crucial to note that the alignment between EU priorities and research outputs does not necessarily imply a direct or simplistic causal relationship. Researchers may employ strategic framing to secure EU funding while still maintaining agency in their work. The findings of this thesis do not suggest that researchers are merely passive recipients of EU influence. Rather, it may be that researchers' views align with those promoted by the EU or that they strategically frame their work to fit funding priorities while pursuing their own research agendas. For this, a more in-depth content analysis of the outputs such as books, monographs and academic articles compiled from the findings of the EU-funded research projects would be desirable.

To conclude, this thesis has demonstrated the complex interplay between EU policy priorities, research funding, and academic knowledge production on democracy. The findings reveal a predominant neoliberal orientation that shapes both policy and research agendas, potentially constraining our understanding of democratic decline and limiting the exploration of alternative democratic models. Regardless of whether one views the EU as capable of fundamental change, this thesis argues for the crucial role of academics in imagining alternative futures. Even within constrained funding environments, scholars have a responsibility to critically examine dominant paradigms and explore new possibilities. This is particularly important given the persistent influence of neoliberal ideology on both policy and research agendas. The challenge for researchers is to expand the scope of democratic inquiry to encompass a wider range of perspectives, including those that challenge prevailing neoliberal orthodoxies. This may involve reimagining democracy in ways that more fully integrate economic and social justice, exploring alternative economic models, and critically examining the relationship between capitalism and democratic processes. As the quote from Tkacik (cited in Mirowski, 2013) suggests about neoliberal ideology in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, 'What was easy to convey was that something about the past ten years had been unsustainable. But the truth—that an entire ideology had been unsustainable—is one that we have not yet grasped.' This thesis contends that moving beyond this unsustainable ideology is necessary for achieving a more genuinely democratic society.

## Bibliography

- Adler-Nissen, R., & Kropp, K. (2015). A Sociology of Knowledge Approach to European Integration: Four Analytical Principles. *Journal of European Integration*, 37(2), 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2014.990133>
- Aliu, D., Akatay, A., Aliu, A., & Eroglu, U. (2017). Public Policy Influences on Academia in the European Union. *SAGE Open*, 7(1), 215824401769516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017695169>
- Arenilla, M. (2010). Concepts in Democratic Theory. *E-Democracy*, 15–30. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9045-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9045-4_2)
- Arriazu, R., & Solari Maccabelli, Mariana. (2015). *The role of education in times of crisis: A critical analysis of the Europe 2020 strategy*. 12, 129–149.
- Bartl, M. (2015). The Way We Do Europe: Subsidiarity and the Substantive Democratic Deficit. *European Law Journal*, 21(1), 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12115>
- Bellamy, R., & Castiglione, D. (2000). The Normative Turn in European Union Studies: Legitimacy, Identity and Democracy. *RUSEL Working Paper No. 38*.
- Cas Mudde, & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. (2012). *Populism in Europe and the Americas : threat or corrective for democracy?* Cambridge University Press.
- Copelovitch, M., Frieden, J., & Walter, S. (2016). The Political Economy of the Euro Crisis. *Comparative Political Studies*, 49(7), 811–840. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414016633227>
- Coppedge, M. (2012). *Democratization and research methods : the methodology of comparative politics*. Cambridge Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design : Qualitative, quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Cunningham, F. (2002). *Theories of Democracy*. Routledge.
- Cuperus, R., Dhéret, C., Kok, S., & Padberg, C. (2019). *The European Council's Strategic Agenda Setting the EU's political priorities*. Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*. Yale University Press.



- Dakowska, D. (2019). Higher Education Policy in the European Union. *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1480>
- Daly, M. (2012). Paradigms in EU social policy: a critical account of Europe 2020. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 18(3), 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258912448598>
- Dardot, P., Laval, C., & Elliott, G. (2019). *Never ending nightmare : the neoliberal assault on democracy*. London ; New York Verso.
- Diamond, L. J. (1990). Three Paradoxes of Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(3), 48–60. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1990.0047>
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The Qualitative Content Analysis Process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x>
- European Commission. (2010). *Communication from the Commission Europe 2020. A Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*. European Commission.
- European Commission. (2014). *Investment for jobs and growth. Promoting development and good governance in EU regions and cities. Sixth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*. European Commission.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse : textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.
- Felt, U. (2014). Within, Across and Beyond: Reconsidering the Role of Social Sciences and Humanities in Europe. *Science as Culture*, 23(3), 384–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2014.926146>
- Fink, B. (2016). How Neoliberalism Got Organized: A Usable History for Resisters, With Special Reference to Education. *The Good Society*, 25(2), 158–171. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/678315>.
- Fischer, F. (2001). *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*. Oxford University Press, 266.
- Fougère, M., Segercrantz, B., & Seeck, H. (2017). A critical reading of the European Union's social innovation policy discourse: (Re)legitimizing neoliberalism. *Organization*, 24(6), 819–843. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508416685171>

- Fransman, J., & Newman, K. (2019). Rethinking research partnerships: Evidence and the politics of participation in research partnerships for international development. *Journal of International Development*, 31(7), 523–544. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3417>
- Frieden, J., & Walter, S. (2017). Understanding the Political Economy of the Eurozone Crisis. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1), 371–390.
- Habermas, J. (1981). *The theory of communicative action*. (Vol. 1). Beacon Press,.
- Hammerslev, O. (2015). Reforming the Bulgarian State of Knowledge: Legal Expertise as a Resource in Modelling States. *Journal of European Integration*, 37(2), 247–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2014.990138>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. OUP Oxford.
- Heilbron, J. (2011). But What About the European Union of Scholars? *Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3.
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy*. Polity.
- Hermann, C. (2009). Neoliberalism in the European Union. *Dynamics of National Employment Models (DYNAMO)*.
- Hidalgo, O. (2008). Conceptual History and Politics: Is the Concept of Democracy Essentially Contested? *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 4(2), 176–201. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23730897>
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Jakli, L., Fish, M. S., & Wittenberg, J. (2018). A Decade of Democratic Decline and Stagnation. In *Democratization*. Thomson Digital.
- Jasanoff, S. (2004). *States of knowledge : the co-production of science and social order*. Routledge.
- Jee, H., Lueders, H., & Myrick, R. (2021). Towards a Unified Approach to Research on Democratic Backsliding. *Democratization*, 29(4), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2010709>

- Kölling, M. (2014). The Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020 and the Europe 2020 Strategy – Ambitions beyond (Financial) Capacities? Path Dependency and the EU Budget. *Politologický Časopis - Czech Journal of Political Science*, 21(2), 114–130. <https://doi.org/10.5817/pc2014-2-114>
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content Analysis : an Introduction to Its Methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Kropp, K., & Larsen, A. G. (2022). Changing the topics: the social sciences in EU-funded research projects. *Comparative European Politics*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00313-5>
- Kurki, M. (2010). Democracy and Conceptual Contestability: Reconsidering Conceptions of Democracy in Democracy Promotion. *International Studies Review*, 12(3), 362–386. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40931113>
- Kurki, M. (2013). Politico-Economic Models of Democracy in Democracy Promotion. *International Studies Perspectives*, 15(2), 121–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2012.00512.x>
- Levidow, L., & Neubauer, C. (2014). EU Research Agendas: Embedding What Future? *Science as Culture*, 23(3), 397–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2014.926149>
- Lipset, S. M. (1960). *Political man: the social bases of politics*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Macpherson, C. B. (1977). *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford [Eng.] : Oxford University Press.
- Mirowski, P. (2014a). *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go to Waste*. Verso Books.
- Mirowski, P. (2014b). The Political Movement that Dared Not Speak its Own Name: The Neoliberal Thought Collective Under Erasure. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2682892>
- Monbiot, G. (2016). Neoliberalism - The Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems. *Economic Reform*, 28(4), 2–5.
- MOUFFE, C. (1999). Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? *Social Research*, 66(3), 745–758. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40971349>

- Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. Verso.
- Multiannual financial framework 2014–2020 and EU budget 2014. The figures*. (2013). Publications Office of the European Union.
- Norris, P. (2017). Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, RWP17-012. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2933655>
- Primeri, E., & Reale, E. (2012). How Europe Shapes Academic Research: insights from participation in European Union Framework Programmes. *European Journal of Education*, 47(1), 104–121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2011.01511.x>
- Radaelli, C. M. (1995). The role of knowledge in the policy process. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2(2), 159–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501769508406981>
- Reillon, V. (2017). *EU framework programmes for research and innovation. Evolution and key data from FP1 to Horizon 2020 in view of FP9*. European Parliamentary Research Service.
- Rhoden, T. F. (2013). The liberal in liberal democracy. *Democratization*, 22(3), 560–578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.851672>
- Sakellariopoulos, S. (2017). On the Class Character of the European Communities/European Union: A Marxist Approach. *Science & Society*, 81(2), 220–247. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26571338>
- Schindler-Daniels, A. (2014). Shaping the Horizon: social sciences and humanities in the EU framework programme “Horizon 2020.” *Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 17(S6), 179–194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11618-014-0580-8>
- Schmitter, P. C., & Karl, T. L. (1991). What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(3), 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033>
- Schumpeter, J. A. (2006). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Routledge.
- Segrillo, A. (2011). Liberalism, Marxism and Democratic Theory Revisited: Proposal of a Joint Index of Political and Economic Democracy. *Bras. Political Sci. Rev.*, 6(2), 8–27. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s1981-38212012000200001>

- Sigman, R., & Lindberg, S. I. (2018). Democracy for All: Conceptualizing and Measuring Egalitarian Democracy. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 7(3), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2018.6>
- Venugopal, R. (2015). Neoliberalism as Concept. *Economy and Society*, 44(2), 165–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2015.1013356>
- Wacquant, L. (2012). Three steps to a historical anthropology of actually existing neoliberalism. *Social Anthropology*, 20(1), 66–79.
- Wandel, J. (2016). The Role of Government and Markets in the Strategy “Europe 2020” of the European Union: A Robust Political Economy Analysis. *International Journal of Management and Economics*, 49(1), 7–33. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijme-2016-0002>
- Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic content analysis*. Sage.
- Wickham, J. (2004). Something new in old Europe? *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 17(3), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1351161042000241135>
- Wood, E. (1978). C.B. Macpherson: Liberalism, And The Task Of Socialist Political Theory. *Socialist Register*, 15, 215–240.
- Young, B. (2000). Disciplinary Neoliberalism in the European Union and Gender Politics. *New Political Economy*, 5(1), 77–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460050001998>

## Appendices

**Appendix 1:** The list with the analysed projects with assigned code numbers, project codes, names and assigned categories, arranged alphabetically by the code name..

|    | Project code name and link | Project name   | Cluster/ Category               |
|----|----------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| P1 | <a href="#">CATCH-EyoU</a> | Constructing AcTive CitizensHip with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions   | Citizen Engagement              |
| P2 | <a href="#">CHIEF</a>      | Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future  | Culture                         |
| P3 | <a href="#">CONNEKT</a>    | CONtexts of extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies   | Radicalisation and Extremism    |
| P4 | <a href="#">DARE</a>       | Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality   | Radicalisation and Extremism    |
| P5 | <a href="#">DEMOS</a>      | Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe  | Populism and Democratic Decline |
| P6 | <a href="#">DEMOTEC</a>    | Democratising Territorial Cohesion: Experimenting with deliberative citizen engagement and participatory budgeting in European regional and urban policies | Citizen Engagement              |
| P7 | <a href="#">ENABLE.EU</a>  | Enabling the Energy Union through understanding the drivers of individual and collective energy choices in Europe  | Energy and Environment          |

|     | Project code name and link        | Project name  | Cluster/ Category                   |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| P8  | <a href="#">ENLIVEN</a>           | Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe   | Social Welfare and Labour           |
| P9  | <a href="#">EnTrust</a>           | Enlightened trust: An examination of trust and distrust in governance – conditions, effects and remedies            | Trust                               |
| P10 | <a href="#">EU-LISTCO</a>         | Europe's External Action and the Dual Challenges of Limited Statehood and Contested Orders                          | Radicalisation and Extremism        |
| P11 | <a href="#">EU-STRAT</a>          | EU-STRAT - The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries: An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment                | Eastern Partnership and Geopolitics |
| P12 | <a href="#">EU3D</a>              | EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy   | Governance and Integration          |
| P13 | <a href="#">EUARENAS</a>          | Cities as Arenas of Political Innovation in the Strengthening of Deliberative and Participatory Democracy           | Citizen Engagement                  |
| P14 | <a href="#">Governance</a>        | Democratic governance in a turbulent age  | Populism and Democratic Decline     |
| P15 | <a href="#">HERA-JRP-PS</a>       | HERA Joint Research Programme Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe                                      | Culture                             |
| P16 | <a href="#">Inclusion4Schools</a> | School-community Partnership for Reversing Inequality and Exclusion: Transformative Practices of Segregated Schools | Education                           |
| P17 | <a href="#">InDivEU</a>           | HERA Joint Research Programme Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe                                      | Governance and                      |

|     | Project code name and link    | Project name  | Cluster/ Category               |
|-----|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
|     |                               |   | Integration                     |
| P18 | <a href="#">INFORM</a>        | Closing The Gap Between Formal And Informal Institutions In The Balkans   | Governance and Integration      |
| P19 | <a href="#">ISEED</a>         | Inclusive Science and European Democracies  | Citizen Engagement              |
| P20 | <a href="#">MAGYC</a>         | MigrAtion Governance and asYlum Crises  | Migration                       |
| P21 | <a href="#">MEDIADEL COM</a>  | Critical Exploration of Media-Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape                 | Citizen Engagement              |
| P22 | <a href="#">MESOC</a>         | Measuring the Social Dimension of Culture   | Governance and Integration      |
| P23 | <a href="#">NET4SOCIETY4</a>  | Transnational network of National Contact Points (NCPs) of Societal Challenge 6 'Europe in a changing world - inclusive, innovative and reflective Societies' (SC6) | Education                       |
| P24 | <a href="#">NoVaMigra</a>     | Norms and Values in the European Migration and Refugee Crisis   | Migration                       |
| P25 | <a href="#">PaCE</a>          | Populism And Civic Engagement – a fine-grained, dynamic, context-sensitive and forward-looking response to negative populist tendencies                             | Populism and Democratic Decline |
| P26 | <a href="#">PARTICIPATION</a> | Analysing and Preventing Extremism Via Participation  | Radicalisation and Extremism    |



|     | Project code name and link  | Project name  | Cluster/ Category               |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| P27 | <a href="#">PERCEPTIONS</a> | Understanding the Impact of Narratives and Perceptions of Europe on Migration and Providing Practices, Tools and Guides for Practitioners   | Migration                       |
| P28 | <a href="#">PERITIA</a>     | Policy, Expertise, and Trust in Action  | Trust                           |
| P29 | <a href="#">POPREBEL</a>    | Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism   | Populism and Democratic Decline |
| P30 | <a href="#">RE-InVEST</a>   | Rebuilding an Inclusive, Value-based Europe of Solidarity and Trust through Social Investments  | Social Welfare and Labour       |
| P31 | <a href="#">REAL DEAL</a>   | Reshaping European Advances Towards Green Leadership Through Deliberative Approaches and Learning   | Citizen Engagement              |
| P32 | <a href="#">RECONNECT</a>   | Reconciling Europe with its Citizens through Democracy and Rule of Law  | Populism and Democratic Decline |
| P33 | <a href="#">RED-Alert</a>   | Real-time Early Detection and Alert System for Online Terrorist Content based on Natural Language Processing, Social Network Analysis, Artificial Intelligence and Complex Event Processing | Radicalisation and Extremism    |
| P34 | <a href="#">REDEM</a>       | Reconstructing Democracy in Times of Crisis: A Voter-Centred Perspective  | Citizen Engagement              |
| P35 | <a href="#">ROBUST</a>      | Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies   | Governance and Integration      |

|     | Project code name and link        | Project name   | Cluster/ Category            |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| P36 | <a href="#">SCORE</a>             | Supporting Consumer Co-Ownership in Renewable Energies   | Energy and Environment       |
| P37 | <a href="#">SHAR-Q</a>            | Storage capacity sharing over virtual neighbourhoods of energy ecosystems  | Energy and Environment       |
| P38 | <a href="#">SHARED GREEN DEAL</a> | Social sciences & Humanities for Achieving a Responsible, Equitable and Desirable GREEN DEAL   | Energy and Environment       |
| P39 | <a href="#">SOLIDUS</a>           | Solidarity in European societies: empowerment, social justice and citizenship  | Citizen Engagement           |
| P40 | <a href="#">TAKEDOWN</a>          | Understand the Dimensions of Organised Crime and Terrorist Networks for Developing Effective and Efficient Security Solutions for First-line-practitioners and Professionals | Radicalisation and Extremism |
| P41 | <a href="#">TiGRE</a>             | Trust in Governance and Regulation in Europe   | Trust                        |
| P42 | <a href="#">TROPICO</a>           | Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments   | Citizen Engagement           |