



Rebuilding European democracy: resistance and renewal in an illiberal age

by Richard Youngs, London, I.B. Tauris Press, 2022, 256 pp., £21.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780755639724

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Northern Ireland ...', this was just a restatement of what had been British policy since the early 1970s.

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Rebuilding European democracy: resistance and renewal in an illiberal age, by Richard Youngs, London, I.B. Tauris Press, 2022, 256 pp., £21.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780755639724

As far back as the mid-2000s, topics such as populism, illiberalism, and challenges to democracy have proven to be a fertile ground for researchers of European politics. Beginning in 2008 with the global financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone crisis, continuing with the successes of various populist political leaders and movements throughout the continent in the 2010s, and most recently strained by the demands of the COVID-19 crisis, the vitality of European democracy has been buffeted on many sides. Throughout this time, the causes and potential consequences of anti-democratic trends in Europe have been dissected, studied, and analysed in minute detail. The sheer volume of such work can sometimes create a sense that the utter collapse of liberal democracy in Europe is impending. In contrast to this, far less attention has been paid to pro-democratic responses throughout the continent. Even in those publications that offer some correctives or potential solutions to counter-democratic trends, such suggestions often tend to be prescriptive, aspirational, or otherwise hypothetical. Judging by this alone, one might be forgiven for thinking that European liberals and pro-democrats alike have become utterly frozen in the face of an anti-democratic, illiberal, and authoritarian tsunami.

In this context, then, Richard Youngs's *Rebuilding European Democracy* is a timely addition to the literature. Youngs fills an important niche by focusing his attention squarely on efforts to resist or reverse anti-democratic trends on the continent. He begins with the contention that while there has been a significant and protracted decline in the quality of European democracy, that this decline is far less dramatic than it could have been. This is a result of multi-layered effort to resist the decay, and to rebuild European democracy (p. 2). Youngs focuses on two particular dynamics: *democratic resistance*, which he describes as the new strategies that have emerged to defend democratic and liberal practices against explicitly anti-democratic threats. And *democratic*

renewal, which encompasses those initiatives proactively aimed at improving the quality and resonance of European democracy. Youngs examines these dynamics through mapping out behaviours in six dimensions: citizen mobilisation to defend democracy; European governmental initiatives for improving democratic consultation and participation; the renewed efforts by formal political parties and actors to actively contribute to European democracy; strategies and efforts to re-democratise the digital sphere; actions taken by the EU to more effectively respond to threats to democracy; and efforts to increase democratic accountability and participation at the European level. Over the next several chapters, Youngs sketches the empirical and practical examples of the ways in which polities throughout Europe have sought to contest and reverse democratic decline, and to retool European democracy for the twenty-first century.

It is a genuine strength of this book that Youngs is not naïve about the scale of the task facing the defenders and advocates of European democracy. Indeed, Youngs acknowledges that, to date, these efforts have not been sufficient to arrest this democratic decline, and that greater ambition is needed. He is particularly critical of the EU's efforts to re-embed its democratic roots and to boost its popular sovereignty. Youngs argues that the Union remains wedded to using technocratic solutions to policy problems, which itself often contributed to and exacerbated problems of democracy in the member states in the past (p. 184; pp. 203–204). And in the realm of democratic participation, Youngs contends that the EU continues to conflate explaining itself and its functions to the European citizenry with broadening the bases of its popular sovereignty (p. 200). Youngs is also reserved about the potential impacts of some forms of citizen engagement (pp. 64–65), and of direct referenda (p. 76), a phenomenon that has led to as many harmful outcomes for democracy as beneficial ones in several countries.


In contrast, a potential weakness of the book is the relative lack of consideration given to the actual, tangible impact some more positive developments have had. For instance, Youngs discusses in some detail the new tactics adopted by civil society in responding to anti-democratic challenges (pp. 51–58). However, several of these tactics seem more designed to protect civil society organisations themselves, for better or worse. The book tells us very little new about how CSOs have gone about defending and deepening democracy more broadly (that is, outside of the oftentimes elitist circles of civil society), and how successful these efforts have been in practice.

With that said, this is an important book coming at just the right time. Youngs has provided a major contribution to our understanding of the democratic dynamics of Europe, at a crucial time. While the weight of research might superficially suggest that European democracy is on its last legs, Youngs demonstrates that this is far from the case, and that with some foresight, ambition, and

continued engagement on the part of the supporters of democracy, a corner may yet be turned.

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Deniable Contact: Back Channel Negotiation in Northern Ireland, by Niall Ó Dochartaigh, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, 336 pp., £75.00 (Hardback), ISBN 9780192894762

'When violent conflict escalates but no party looks likely to achieve a swift or decisive victory, it can be difficult to bring hostilities to an end through negotiated compromise,' writes Professor Niall Ó Dochartaigh in the introduction to his important new book, *Deniable Contact*. For Ó Dochartaigh, the Northern Ireland conflict 'provides a revelatory case of back-channel negotiation' where, he argues, it is possible to 'obtain an unusually accurate and finely grained picture – one that illuminates those shadowy spaces where the parties to the conflict attempted to talk their way out of violence' (p. 1). Ó Dochartaigh takes us through the twists and turns in this secret diplomacy, with particular attention directed towards three initiatives – the first in 1975–76, the second in 1981 and the third in 1990–91 – when the British government and Provisional Irish Republican Army 'initiated back-channel contacts aimed at a peaceful compromise' (p. 2) of the conflict.

Much of the academic literature on the strategic dimension of the Northern Ireland Troubles focuses on the use of force. Few scholars, however, have dealt with the secret dialogue that ran subterranean-like beneath the violent conflict. *Deniable Contact*, therefore, is a timely intervention, keeping to the forefront of its analysis those courageous and imaginative efforts aimed at trying to 'slow the acceleration of violence, to impose limits to conflict, and to maintain order on the basis of limited but tangible shared interests' (p. 19). The past decade has seen the opening of new avenues of academic research into such parallel diplomacy, as well as covert action and secret intelligence. It is in this light that we must see Ó Dochartaigh's exploration of what he calls a 'bargaining move' (p. 151) between the British state and the Provisional IRA.

Conceptually, *Deniable Contact* builds on I. William Zartman's influential work on 'mutually hurting stalemates' and 'ripe moments' (pp. 266–270). However, Ó Dochartaigh innovatively mines the 'nexus of information, biological processes, and communication' (p. 166) to explain how these impacted on secret dialogue.