HUMAN RIGHTS CAFÉ

Making Southern European Democracies Work

NOVEMBER – DECEMBER 2023

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MESSAGE FROM THE MANAGING DIRECTOR

Christine Nanteza

I am proud to present our first Human Rights Café report for the transnational events held in 2023. This report is a testament to the impact that our projects have had on students seeking practical ways to apply their knowledge of human rights; and to our commitment to promoting quality human rights education. The last couple of years have been challenging for human rights advocates, especially in areas facing devastating crises. The students we encounter are seeking like-minded communities working to make a difference. Our dedicated members work tirelessly to create a safe and inclusive space for intercultural dialogue. We continue to gather momentum thanks to the support of our funders, donors and community members. We remain steadfast in our mission to make human rights education accessible for all through challenge-based learning, knowledge translation, and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Alessia Ruta

MESSAGE FROM THE PROJECT MANAGER

The Human Rights Café (HRC) is a project not like any other - and I say that with great pride. SET Padova has transformed such conversations into a habit for many students living in the City of Padova (Italy). When I presented the concept to the organization's director, I imagined "an activity - as some kind of literary café or a book club where people discuss human rights instead of books." What began as an idea has birthed a community of volunteers, advocates, supporters, and funders for have contributed to the promotion of human rights education across European university campuses. These meetings have created more spaces for both local and international students to engage in fun, cultural exchanges. We also wanted to loosen institutional hierarchies preventing students and professors from debating candidly and strengthening relationships. The open circle setup of our meetings creates an atmosphere in which everyone's questions, responses, and opinions are equally heard. Our determination to encourage interdisciplinary perspectives attracted attendees from departments such as engineering, psychology, and mathematics to share and acquire tools to incorporate human rights into their fields. The expansion of the HRC into Granada (Spain) and Braga (Portugal) in 2023 has been a great accomplishment. As I write this message, I look forward to the launch of the second HRC transnational session taking place in Padova, Granada, Braga, Graz (Austria) and Leipzig (Germany) in 2024. Although the current times encourage people to stay silent and accept the status quo, our SET Padova community encourages you to speak up, in a safe space, a space where you can challenge your beliefs, assumptions, and yourself to go out and challenge the world! Leading this process has been an honour and a pleasant surprise.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was prepared by volunteers managed by The Student Engagement Team (SET Padova) to document the insights gathered during the Human Rights Cafè transnational session. This was the first transnational session under this project aimed at discussing the obstacles hindering South-European democracies.

The events took place in three locations on three separate dates.
1. November 28th, 2023 at Centro di Ateneo per i Diritti Umani "Antonio Papisca", Via Beato Pellegrino 28, Padova, Italy.
2. December 1st, 2023 at Biblioteca de Derecho, Universidad de Granada, Sala de Reuniones, Planta -1, C. Duquesa, 22, Granada, Spain.
3. December 4th, 2023 at Universidade do Minho Campus de Gualtar, Sala 1.05, Edifício 3, Braga, Portugal.

The project was funded by the Arqus Student Agora under the Arqus University Alliance with the aim of promoting cultural exchange and the integration of international students across member universities.

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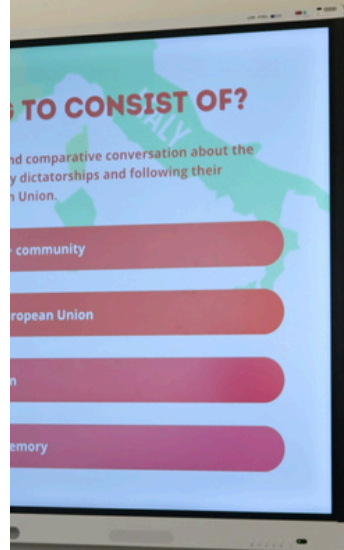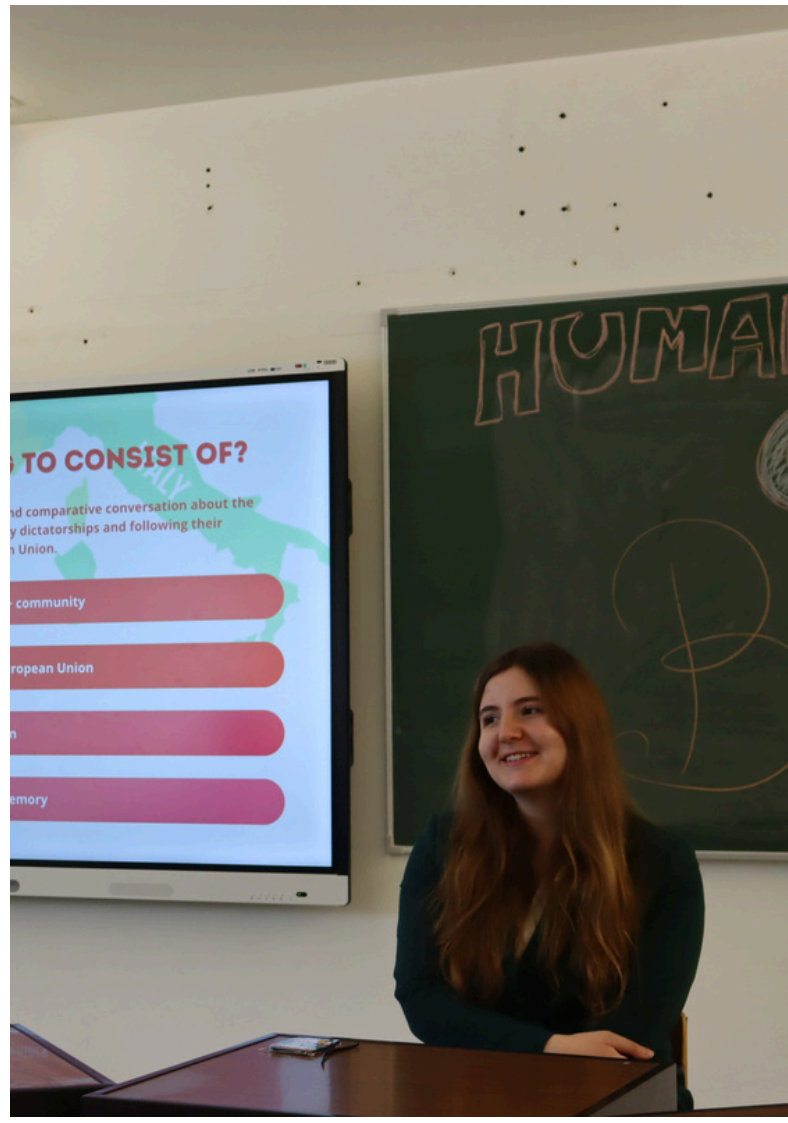
ITALY | THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC
Population 59,11 mi.

The Government

Italy, a country in south-central Europe, occupies a peninsula that juts deep into the Mediterranean Sea. Italy comprises some of the most varied and scenic landscapes on Earth and is often described as a country shaped like a boot.

Italy's political geography has been conditioned by this rugged landscape. With few direct roads between them, and with passage from one point to another traditionally difficult, Italy's towns and cities have a history of self-sufficiency, independence, and mutual mistrust.

Visitors today remark on how unlike one town is from the next, on the marked differences in cuisine and dialect, and on the many subtle divergences that make Italy seem less a single nation than a collection of culturally related points in an uncommonly pleasing setting.

Italy is a Democratic Republic, founded on work, from Article 1 of the Constitution. The Government is made up of the President of the Council of Ministers and his/her team of Ministers, who together form the Council of Ministers[1]

The President of the Council of Ministers and the Ministers he/she proposes are appointed by the President of the Italian Republic and are sworn in by the latter before taking office.[2] Ministers are individually responsible for the decisions and actions taken by their ministries, while they share joint responsibility for those approved by the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers defines general Government policy as well as provides general guidance for administrative action.

Article 92 of the Italian Constitution sets forth how the Government is formed, giving the President of the Italian Republic the power to appoint the President of the Council of Ministers and the Ministers proposed by the latter.[3]

Within ten days of being officially appointed, the Government must present its program to both Houses of Parliament and obtain their confidence, as required by Articles 93 and 94 of the Constitution. The Government contributes to providing political guidance and exercising the executive function and regulatory powers. The Government provides significant economic policy guidance through its budget bill and related acts.

Regarding lawmaking, the Government possesses the authority to initiate legislation and may exercise legislative powers in two specific cases, both exclusively provided for and governed by the Constitution: when Parliament expressly requests the Government to do so and in urgent circumstances requiring immediate action. Under its ordinary powers, the Government can issue regulations. Alongside its regulatory powers, the Government is responsible for appointing top-level officials within central government and public bodies.[4]

The President of the Council of Ministers:

1 Guides and is ultimately accountable for general Government policy.
2 Ensures the consistency of political and administrative actions.
3 Drives and coordinates the work of Government ministers.
4 Performs all other duties conferred upon him/her by the law.

Particularly, he/she informs the Houses of Parliament (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate) about the composition of his/her Government, presents the Government's program to Parliament to secure the relative vote of confidence, and maintains regular relations with the President of the Italian Republic.

If the President of the Council of Ministers tenders his/her resignation, the Government falls. The Council of Ministers (the Italian cabinet) holds the fundamental powers conferred upon the Government by the Italian Constitution and constitutional laws. Government ministers are appointed by the President of the Italian Republic based on proposals submitted by the President of the Council of Ministers. Ministers are individually responsible for the decisions and actions taken by their ministries, while jointly sharing responsibility for those approved by the Council of Ministers.

Recent Trends

Italy's parliamentary system features competitive multiparty elections. Civil liberties are generally respected, but concerns about the rights of migrants and LGBT+ people persist, and regional inequalities are persistent and substantial. Endemic problems with corruption and organized crime pose an enduring challenge to the rule of law and economic growth.

In July, Prime Minister Mario Draghi resigned following the collapse of his national unity government.[5] Draghi's coalition fell apart when three of his main partners boycotted a confidence vote he had called.

In September snap elections, a right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni of the far-right Brothers of Italy party won the largest share of the vote and Meloni became Italy's first female prime minister. In January, Sergio Mattarella was reelected Italian president after eight rounds of voting.

Political parties are generally able to form and operate freely, and the political landscape features a high level of pluralism and competition. Since the beginning of the 1990s, politics have been characterized by unstable coalitions and the frequent emergence of new parties.

Following violent protests against COVID-19 vaccinations that took place in October 2021, some parties called on the government to ban neofascist movements that participated in the protests, but it did not do so.

Women and LGBTQIA+ Rights

Electoral laws contain provisions designed to encourage political participation by linguistic minorities, and to promote gender parity, though progress toward full political representation for women and LGBT+ people remains slow. Although Meloni is Italy's first-ever female prime minister, women's representation in parliament decreased following the 2022 elections, against the positive trend recorded in the past two decades. After the election, women made up 32 percent of the Chamber of Deputies and 34 percent of the Senate. During the 2022 vote, transgender and gender-nonconforming voters complained of discrimination at many polling stations, where voters were forced into gender-segregated queues to vote.[6]

The political participation rights accorded to migrants, and even to their descendants born in Italy, are extremely limited in national and local politics, a dynamic exacerbated by the emergence of a xenophobic and nationalist discourse in recent years and by the failure of

citizenship reforms. In March 2022, a draft reform of the citizenship law to grant Italian citizenship to those born in Italy to foreign parents, those who entered Italy before the age of 12, and those who regularly attended school in the country, was adopted by the Chamber of Deputies but did not progress. According to survey data collected by the organization ActionAid, between 1.8 million and 2.5 million people are excluded from citizenship in Italy despite being born or raised there.

EU Membership: Democractic Impact

As a founding country, Italy has accompanied the process of European integration in all its stages, making Rome an essential crossroads in the history of the construction of European unity. Italy therefore sees in its EU membership a historic choice that has united the continent after decades of wars and that today enables Member States to address global challenges – from climate change to digital transition, to health and energy emergencies – that individual countries would not be able to tackle equally effectively on their own.

Regional Identities

There is a strong sense of regional identity in Italy , as it was not unified until 1871 when Rome became the capital.[7] There are 20 regions, each of which has its own capital. Each region is then divided into a number of provinces which take their names from the main towns. The provinces themselves are then further divided into smaller administrative bodies called 'comune', which are a kind of local council. a country of 20 regions, each with its own unique traditions, history, and language (dialect).

When contemplating the notion of national identity, is it any wonder that

Italians have coined the word "campanilismo" stemming from "campanile" (meaning tower, a landmark typical of each Italian town and city).[8] "Campanilismo" best conveys the notion of identity in that an Italian feels himself first and foremost a citizen of the town and region in which he was born.

Hence, in answer to "Di dove sei?" (where are you from?) – an Italian might very well answer "Sono piemontese; Sono toscano, Sono friulano…" (I am from Piedmont, from Tuscany, from Friuli).

What is Italian national identity? The answer is a complex one, as Italian identity is made up of traditions, ways of living, thinking, and speaking that tie each Italian to the "Campanile" of the particular town/city/region in which he was born. Perhaps Italian national identity could be considered a multifaceted one that has given rise to extraordinary creativity leading to so many "firsts" in so many fields… the flip side is that multiple individualities are difficult to govern, hence the 61 changes of government in Italy has experienced in the 70-odd years since WWII.

Democratic and Colonial Memory

Colonialism in contemporary Italian public and political debate has been overwhelmingly neglected, although political discourse on immigration is especially dense with colonial tropes.[9] Therefore, probing deep into the Italian political memory of colonialism is arduous, which significantly contributes to the scarce existing literature on the topic. While ample literature has focused on the Italian populist radical right, including its anti-immigrant racism, and a post-colonial critique of Italian culture, a post-colonial critique of the Italian populist radical right is still absent.

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SPAIN | THE KINGDOM OF SPAIN
Population 48, 3 mi.

The Government

Spain is a parliamentary monarchy under the 1978 Constitution.[1] The head of the government is the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, who leads the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE). The head of state is the monarch, who serves solely as the ceremonial head of the government. The current monarch is Felipe VI.

With the constitution, there was a separation of powers into legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The executive branch is led by the Prime Minister, who heads the national government. This branch includes Deputy Prime Ministers and other ministers. The legislative branch consists of the Parliament, which is composed of the Congress of Deputies and the Senate.

The Congress has 300-400 members, while the Senate has 266 members, with 208 elected directly.[2] The remaining members are appointed by the regional assemblies, known as Autonomous Communities. The Senate has the authority to override decisions made by the autonomous communities. Members of the Senate are grouped based on their political affiliations, regardless of their geographical origin.[3]

Since the establishment of the Constitution in 1978, Spain has had three levels of government: central, regional, and local. Autonomous communities are not defined by the constitution but rather by an agreement between regions interested in constituting themselves. Currently, there are 17 autonomous communities, 50 provinces, and more than 8,000 municipalities.

The local electoral system is proportional, allowing Spanish and resident European Union citizens to participate in municipal elections. The election for the Mayor (head of local government) is indirect, except in open Councils where all inhabitants directly elect the Mayor. This system is only applied in small municipalities. According to the Economic Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, Spain ranked 22nd in the 2020 rankings.

Recent Trends

While most European democracies suffered from the fragmentation of the electoral space into different political forces, Spain seemed to be immune to this trend. For decades, the two dominant parties were the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), also known as the Spanish Socialist Party, and the Partido Popular (PP), the People's Party.[4] They managed to become truly catch-all parties at the national level. Although it is true that regional parties have always played an important role, PSOE and PP were ideally conditioned to become hegemonic actors nationwide.

Consequently, the 2008 financial crisis led to high unemployment rates in Spain, sparking protests in the whole country. This, in turn, gave rise to new anti-establishment parties, namely Unidas Podemos ("Together We Can") and Ciudadanos ("The Citizens' Party").

The 2015 general elections saw the main party, Partido Popular, losing seats. Over a hundred seats were then distributed between Unidas Podemos and Ciudadanos, resulting in the most fragmented parliament. On top of this, the more recent appearance of the populist radical right party VOX further complicated the PP situation, fragmenting the right-wing block even

further.

Subsequent elections, rising opposition, and chaos, Pedro Sanchez of the PSOE ultimately took leadership and has held the position of Prime Minister ever since.[5] However, Unidas Podemos and Ciudadanos have lost influence over the last years, leaving the floor to the coalition Sumar, now forming part of the coalition government with PSOE.

Women and LGBTQIA+ Rights

Spain has made outstanding achievements in developing the rights of women and the LGBTQ+ community by passing legislation such as marriage equality, gender recognition, and measures to combat violence against women. Moreover, in March 2023, Spain passed the "trans law," expanding the pro protection of the LGBTQ+ community.[6] This legislation[7] allows gender recognition based on self-identification through a simple administrative process, while also strengthening sexuality education and parental recognition for unmarried same-sex couples.[8]

However, the actions taken by the Ministry of Equality have also received harsh criticism, especially due to the controversial Sólo sí es sí law (Only yes means yes). This new piece of legislation, which put explicit consent as key in determining assault cases, also had a loophole that allowed offenders to get reduced sentences. This situation prompted a confrontation between the legislators, who argued judges were biased and needed to be further educated on gender issues, and the Judicial branch and the opposition, who insisted the law was poorly drafted.[9]

EU Membership: Democratic Impact

A significant milestone in Spain's democratic history was its accession to the European Economic Community (EEC), now the EU, in 1985, marked by the signing of Spain's Treaty of Accession in Madrid. In 1991, Spain furthered its European integration by signing the Schengen Agreement, eliminating border controls between member states. Spain actively contributed to the development of the European Union, making substantial contributions in areas such as citizenship, cohesion, cultural and linguistic diversity, counterterrorism, and fostering relationships in Latin America and the Mediterranean region.[10]

As one of the largest beneficiaries of the EU Cohesion Policy 2021-2027, Spain receives €37.3 billion in funding, intended to facilitate the country's green transition, finance innovation, and contribute to its economic recovery. Spain is a principal recipient of the EU's Recovery Plan, focusing on promoting growth and jobs, digital transformation, and the green transition.[11]

Regional Identities

Spain is divided into 19 "autonomies" or regions (17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities), which constitute the first sub-national level of political and administrative decisions. They were created in accordance with the Spanish Constitution of 1978, with the aim of guaranteeing limited autonomy of the nationalities and regions that make up the country.

The State of Autonomies, as established in Article 2 of the Constitution, has been argued to be based on four principles: willingness to accede to autonomy, unity in diversity, autonomy but not sovereignty of the communities, and solidarity among them all.

Spain is an extremely diverse country, which has prompted the resurgence of

peripheral nationalism. Especially in regions like Galicia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia, there are movements demanding independence or self-government on the basis of differentiated identities and languages, among other reasons.

Although Spanish remains the only official language of the State, other languages are co-official with Spanish in the communities that have been regulated accordingly.

In the past years, the Catalan movement has made headlines and gained great relevance within the political landscape.

On the 1st of October 2017, Catalonia's pro-independence leaders went ahead with a referendum regarding the question of self-determination, which was declared illegal by the Spanish Constitutional Court. Around 90% percent of voters supported independence, although participation was scarce following a boycott by unionists and police acting against its execution.[12]

Following the referendum, pro-independence political leaders were convicted of crimes of sedition and misuse of public funds, among others.

In the past months, we have witnessed how the Catalan separatist movement has lost the support it enjoyed in the months following the referendum, as proved by the results of the latest national elections. However, recently this issue has regained great relevance, after the deal made with PSOE, which resulted in the Amnesty Law.[13]

Democratic and Colonial Memory

In the 1970s, Spain transitioned to democracy following Francisco Franco's death, led by former King Juan Carlos I.

This culminated in the 1978 Constitution, shaped by factors such as public mobilization, opposition members, and reformists from previous regimes.[14] Key figures, including King Juan Carlos and Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez, played pivotal roles in drafting the constitution and legalizing political parties. This era saw the emergence of nationalism in Catalonia and terrorism in the Basque Country.

The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) marked the end of the democratic transition, undergoing transformation and adopting a more moderate foreign policy stance. Winning the 1982 general election, the PSOE-led government implemented reforms, impacting Spain's welfare system and modernizing infrastructure.

Addressing Spain's past, the Democratic Memory Act, which aims to fulfill the rights of victims of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, entered into force in 2022.[15] However, this law has weak points; for example, it doesn't provide economic compensation to victims and doesn't abolish the 1977 Amnesty Law, which shields perpetrators from prosecution. Additionally, Spain cannot reconcile with its colonial history, a crucial step for ongoing democratization. Embracing the multiplicity of diverse peoples, cultures, civilizations, and languages that have contributed to what is now referred to as Spain is essential.[16]

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PORTUGAL | THE PORTUGUESE REPUBLIC

Population 10,46 mi.[1]

The Government

Portugal is a semi-presidential republic guided by the principles and guidelines of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, approved in 1976. Geographically, it is divided between the continental territory, belonging to the Iberian eninsula, and the archipelagos of Madeira and Azores, autonomous regions.[2]

According to the Portuguese constitutional law, the legitimacy of the presidency is guaranteed by direct democratic participation through popular vote.[3] The president of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, represents the republic as Head of State and is currently serving his second consecutive term.

The Prime Minister is, therefore, representative as Head of Government, and appointed by the Portuguese presidency after consultation with the Assembly of the Republic. Portugal appointed António Costa to the position and, currently, he remains in the position on an interim basis since his recent resignation. Consequently, there are two possibilities for appointing a new Prime Minister: dissolution of the current Assembly and calling early elections, or appointment, by the president, of a transition Prime Minister.

According to Freedom House,[5] Portugal presents a positive value in relation to democratic freedoms, covering 39/40 for political rights and 57/60 for civil liberties[6] (as for 2023). The Democracy Matrix indicated that the Republic presented the 23rd position worldwide relative to the quality of democracies (as for 2020).

The Portuguese Republic was established in 1910 and, like other states in Europe, suffered the regional and global trends of the 20th century: it went through a period of military dictatorship (1926-1974) and redemocratization based on broad popular support and the granting of a new constitution. António Salazar's authoritarian government was the longest-lasting and most aggressive in political and socioeconomic terms, with conservative and populist characteristics.

From the 1970s onwards, aspects opposing the dictatorship came to the fore in the midst of the crisis in the Portuguese State and, on April 25, 1975, there was the Carnation Revolution (or the April Revolution), the result of internal dissatisfactions regarding the dictatorship and external regarding Portugal's colonialist practices.[7]

The influence of the European Union (EU) on the political development of Portugal is therefore one explanatory factor that should be addressed and to some extent can be viewed as a turning point, a new critical juncture that somehow reversed the effects of the one that had preceded it, namely the revolutionary transition to democracy and its socialist inspiration.[8]

Consequently, there was a process of democratization of the country,[9] including political and institutional measures in the continental and extra-continental territory: the approval of a new constitutional design, the autonomy of the Atlantic archipelagos of Madeira and Azores and the decolonization movement,[10] especially in African lands.

Recent Trends

The Socialist Party (of interim Prime Minister António Costa) has an absolute majority in the Assembly of the Republic, while the Social Democratic Party

obtained 28% of the votes and the extreme right Chega 7% in the 2022 elections.[11] With the resignation of the prime minister and the confirmation of the dissolution of the Assembly, Portugal is looking at a new election for the first half of 2024.[12]

Officially, António Costa will be dismissed in December. Experts estimate that Portugal will follow European Union trends and elect a less politically representative Assembly, demonstrating a weakening of democracy.[13] Portugal proved to be the country with the greatest contribution to the drop in democracy indicators in southern Europe, although with representatively high values, political representation and law enforcement declined.[14]

Women and LGBTQIA+ Rights

According to the Rainbow Europe Map and Index (2023),[15] Portugal has implemented 62% of LGBTI human rights legal standards included in the seven categories analyzed by ILGA-Europe, mainly fulfilling political commitments regarding spaces for civil society (as for 2022).

EU Membership: Democratic Impact

As specified by Sílvia Anciães (2004),[16] the Carnation Revolution and the democratic transition process molded the country's foreign policy; while the State's accession to the European Union and its mechanisms reshaped the identity of Portuguese regional and international insertion.

Regional Identities

Recently, the Legislative Assembly of the Azores accused the Executive of violating the principle of autonomy — guaranteed to the Madeira and Azores archipelagos — by requesting the modification of the Law of the Sea, aiming to change the management of the region's waters.[17]

Democratic and Colonial Memory

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) requested, in the first half of the year, that the Portuguese government should evaluate an official retraction about its colonial past and invest in policies and legislation that aim to act on colonial legacies.[18]

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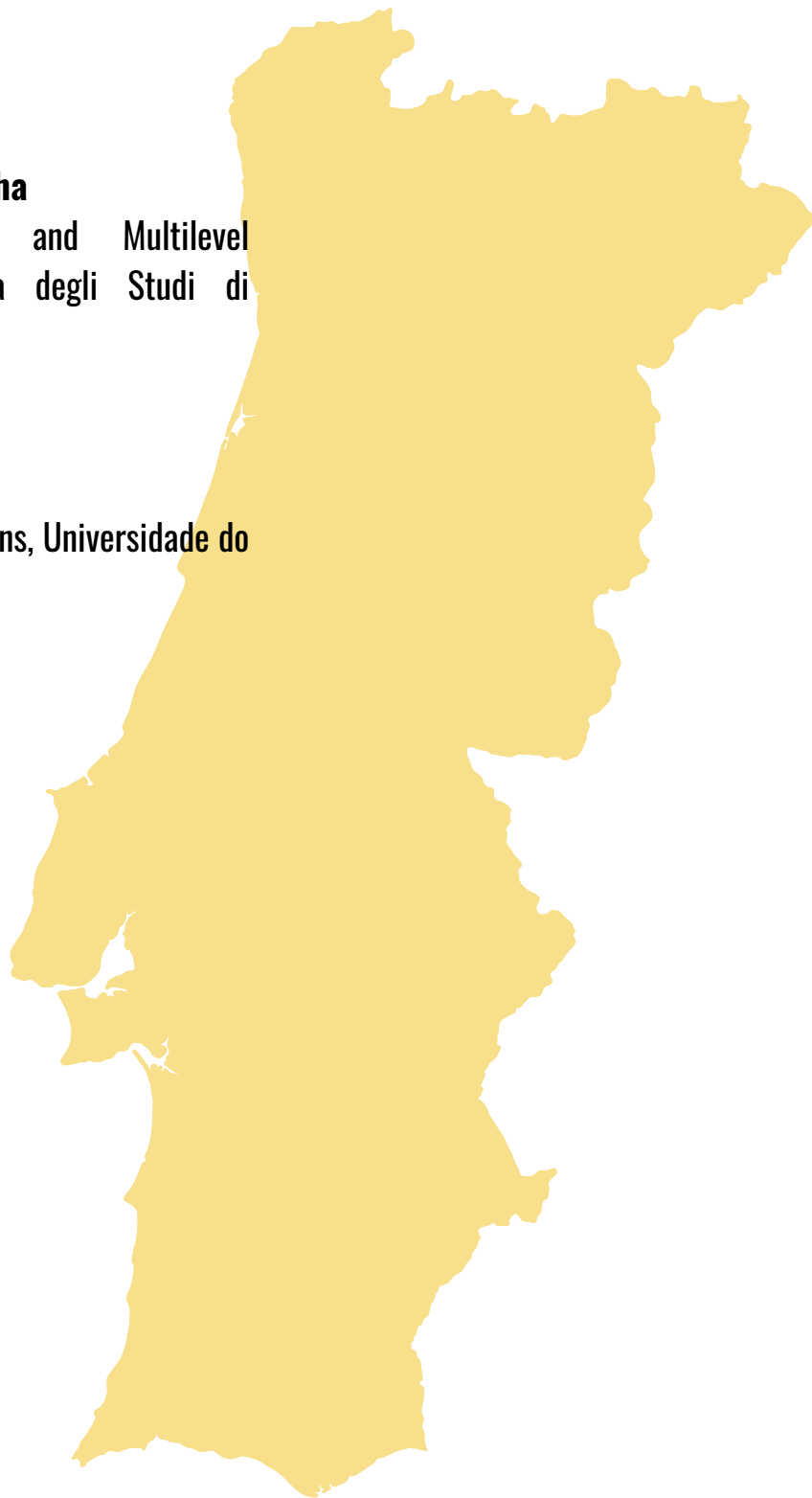
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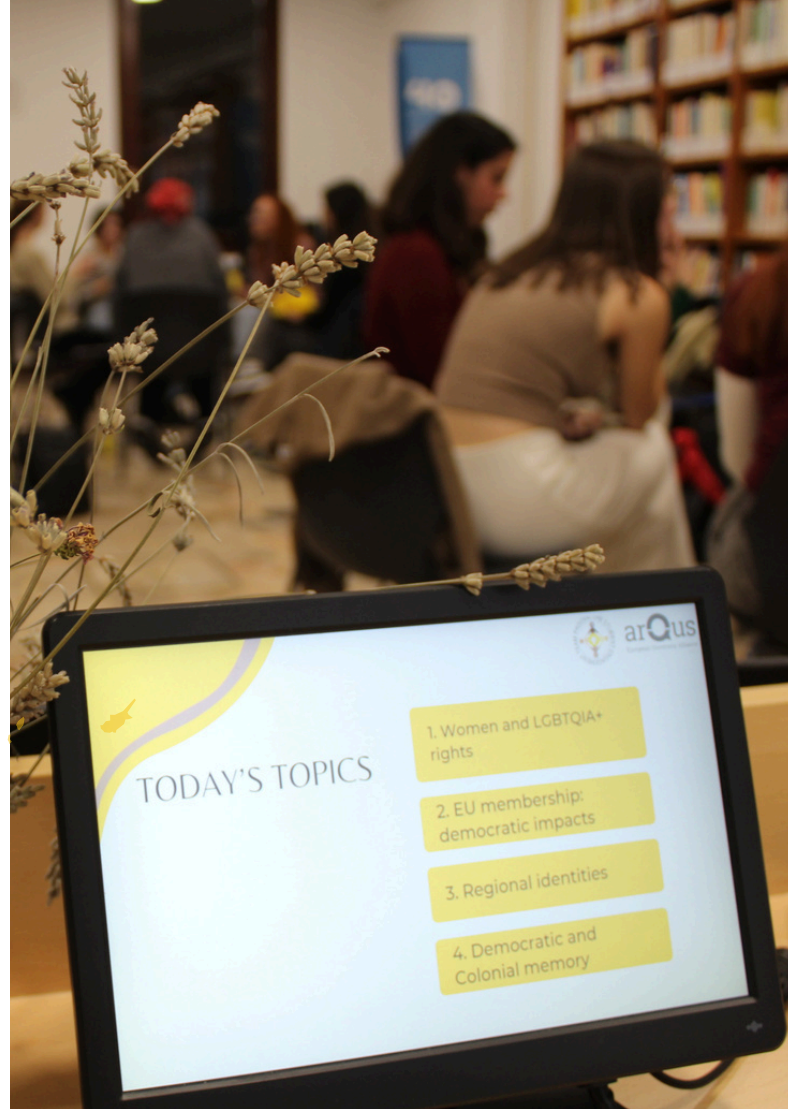
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DISCUSSIONS
Padova, Granada, Braga

TODAY'S TOPICS

1. Women and LGBTQIA+ rights

2. EU membership: democratic impacts

3. Regional identities

4. Democratic and Colonial memory

WOMEN'S AND LGBTQIA+ RIGHTS
Italy, Spain, Portugal

The discourse surrounding women's and LGBTQIA+ rights is characterized by a lack of clarity, conflicting opinions, difficulties in understanding, and even opposition from officials, authorities, and other members of the public who have the power to shape this dialogue. This is a major topic at the Human Rights Café that brought together perspectives from Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish universities. Students shared their opinions on combating prejudice based on gender identity and sexual orientation, emphasizing that this requires a more complex strategy and an intersectional approach.

Feminicide was one of the central topics of discussion, along with gender-based violence and the influence of patriarchal institutions on society. For example, during a conversation in Braga, an Italian student noticed that nothing had been done, even though Giorgia Meloni became the first woman to become prime minister. Moreover, there has been a negative trend: activists advocating for LGBTQIA+ and women's rights are concerned about regulations that act against society. The program of Giorgia Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia, stands against marriage equality, non-heterosexual couples adopting children, and surrogate motherhood. According to U.S. political analyst Alain Fridman in an interview with Euronews, one particularly dangerous aspect is the restriction of civil rights for women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and non-white immigrants.[1]

Feminicide cases were a major topic of debate throughout the meetings in Braga and Granada, particularly those involving well-known Italian incidents. One of the most famous was the murder of Giulia Cecchettin, a student at the University of Padova, in November 2023. The continuing problem of gender-based violence in Italy was revealed as a result of the public outrage and protests that this case caused throughout the country.[2]

Another crucial factor that arose in all three meetings was the necessity of sexual education in European nations. Southern Europe's current educational system does not offer a focused approach to sex education. In particular, emotional education should be used in addition to biological components. It is specifically crucial to focus on male pupils, to destigmatize the experience of all ranges of feelings instead of directing everything in a rage.

At the café in Padova, a student gave an excellent example of Norway's sex education programs. Age-appropriate information is included in Norwegian schools, also integrating media resources. Additionally, the government is devoted to such a strategy and is working with international organizations like UNFPA, focusing on underrepresented populations including young LGBTQI+ people and refugees.[3] Norway strives to de-stigmatize concerns regarding sexuality and has an open approach to discussing sex. The attendees also shared their thoughts on Italy's antiquated educational system, which excludes sex education. The Catholic Church, which has a significant influence on Italian society, has tight ties to the Italian government. The growth of sex education is hampered by conservative viewpoints that consider sexuality as something filthy or something to be ashamed of. In response to this situation, a petition calling for mandatory sex, emotional, and gender equality education classes in Rome's high schools was launched,

garnering over 35,000 signatures.[4]

The final issue that all three cafés agreed on was the need for more legislation to adequately safeguard LGBTQIA+ and women's groups. Laws related to abortion should be addressed first, followed by changes to education, social and political realities, and viewpoint systems. It was brought up during the event in Granada that laws referring to education are just as crucial as laws connected to protection. Students in Braga voiced the belief that laws that specifically target women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and other minorities are essential since these groups still experience discrimination. Generalized policies cannot be implemented until everyone is treated equally. Students took some significant notes as they explored further into each nation. First of all, same-sex marriage is still illegal in some nations, including Italy. Same-sex civil unions are now recognized as of 2016, yet this recognition comes with restrictions on spouses' rights, including the inability to adopt children from such unions.[5] A Greek student also proposed a debate on conversion treatments. The goal of this therapy is to alter the patient's sexual orientation, usually against the patient's choice, using psychotherapy, religious, or unpleasant tactics. Greece was well-known for this process, which was mostly influenced by the Greek Orthodox Church. There is evidence that the process is still going on even after it was officially banned in 2022.[6] The most vulnerable population consists of minors who cannot make independent decisions due to their families. Other noteworthy elements that have been brought up include the lack of existing laws to deal with violent language and material on social media, especially when it comes to people like female politicians and activists.

Speaking of divergent viewpoints throughout the meetings, it is important to note that during the discussion in Granada, a participant argued that societal change should come first rather than always keeping the focus on legal changes, while in Padova, the emphasis has primarily been on how laws (such as those prohibiting conversion therapy) can have a substantial impact on individual liberties and culture. There is a conflict between the ideas that societal change must come first and that legislative reform may encourage cultural change. Meanwhile, the Granada analysis highlights the Dutch perspective, where sex education is more open and progressive, the findings from Braga and Padova indicate that effective sex education is lacking in Italy, as was already mentioned before. This suggests that opinions on the function and implementation of sex education vary across nations. It is important to note the differences in the findings from the three meetings. Participants in Granada emphasized cultural changes including calling out friends for engaging in such actions – a less covered topic in the other cities – as well as microaggressions and the media's role in normalizing violence against women. In contrast, the focus in Braga was on political leadership. It especially criticized the Italian government, as well as Portuguese far-right politicians, for not supporting women's rights. Last but not least, the debate in Padova included the aforementioned comprehensive examination of the Catholic Church's impact on Italian laws, especially those related to abortion, sex work, and education.

In conclusion, the discussions on women's and LGBTQIA+ rights in the three Human Rights Cafés reveal the complexity and divergence of opinions across Southern European countries. **17**

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REGIONAL IDENTITIES
Italy, Spain, Portugal

Out of the three countries that we examined in our discussions, Italy is the one where regional identities are the most important in national politics and Italian society. The main reason for this relevance is the late unification of the country compared to many other European countries - the unification process of Italy began with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The annexation of Venetia in 1866 and papal Rome in 1870 marked the final unification of Italy and hence the end of the Risorgimento.[1] Since then, 20 geographical regions have been formed in the country with respective capital cities.

However, the systematization of regionalism at the governmental level in Italy only dates back to the 1970s. The Italian regions were endowed with real authority and officially instituted by general elections during the 1970s, according to a twofold status: the majority of the Regions have an ordinary autonomy ("ordinary regions"), whilst Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicilia and Sardegna are differentiated, autonomous regions[2] ("special regions"). This region-based system of the country has facilitated the revealing of unique traditions, history, and languages (often referred to as dialects) despite national unification. This system has a strong and vivid influence on Italian society; it's common for Italians to identify themselves with their regions when asked where they are from. For example, "I am from Toscana (sono Toscanə), from Puglia (sono Pugliese), etc. Concerning national identity, it's still a bit complicated for Italian society due to the significant ties with the local traditions

and culture of each region. However, it should be remarked that some factors during Italian history enhanced Italian nationalism after unification, e.g., World War II.

On the other hand, regionalism has an important impact on the regional identities in Spain as well. Spain has two tiers of regional government: 50 provincias, which date back to 1833, and 17 Comunidades Autónomas (19 ACs since 1995 when the autonomous cities of Melilla and Ceuta were considered as such) dating back to the transition to democracy [3] and the 1978 Spanish Constitution. This division demonstrates the diversity within the country with the recognicion of co-official languages alongside Spanish.

Portugal appears to be the least diversified and the most centralized country out of the three. Portugal basically has only two layers of government (except the two autonomous regions of Madeira and Azores) of which the 308 municipalities form the core of the local government.[4]

During the 3 Human Rights Cafés in Padova, Granada, and Braga, the discussion about regional identities had different focuses. In Padova, the subtopics varied depending on each country. Portugal was the least discussed country regarding regional identity since regional identities aren't the country's main concern due to the strong homogeneity and centralization. Spain and Italy garnered lengthier and deeper discussions due to the concrete recognition of the regional identities within the communities and governments. In Spain's discussions, the legal background was tackled by highlighting the recognition and representation of regional identities at the constitutional level despite the

presence of special regimes for some autonomous areas, the legal referendum in the 90s, the fragmentation of parliament, and the terrorist group ETA during the dictatorship era. The latter point, the terrorist group ETA (Basque Country and Freedom or Basque Homeland and Liberty), must be explained in greater detail as the other two countries do not have such an example.

ETA was established in 1959 during the dictatorship regime of Franco with the aim of Basque self-determination. During its decades-long campaign for an independent Basque country, ETA killed a total of 853 people and injured hundreds more.[5]

Besides legal scope, two other aspects were discussed: the economy and language. The economy was indicated as another factor for the self-governance and independence movements within the country. The biggest problems regarding language occur in public places and educational institutions, even though other languages and identities are already recognized by the Constitution. Lastly, the lost momentum of the independence movements during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain was mentioned. But after the pandemic, the movements started to accelerate again. This acceleration also affects the agenda of the political parties and voting system (should they support independence within their agenda or not?).

For Italy, it was emphasized that even though the sense of unity has been present since unification in the late 19th century, there is a strong sense of regional identification and recognition. The inequalities between the regions and the North-South cleavage were an important part of the discussion as Italy

is one of the youngest nation-states in Europe. Examples of slurs used to indicate people from the South and people from the North have been provided. Other than that, political and economic issues between the two parts were recognized.

Different from Spain's and Portugal's regionalism discussion, dialects were identified as an aspect of the regional identities in Italy. Firstly, clarification between a language and a dialect was needed. Then there are two problems affecting dialects: the absence of legitimization of dialects to strengthen unity in the country; and many dialects that existed in the past beginning to disappear. The group indicated that in the Northern Italy, there are language differences, such as German being spoken in Alto Adige/Südtirol, French being spoken in Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste and Sloveian being spoken in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Although dialects are still a main part of many Italian regional identities, some young people from the South try to mask their natural accents to sound more neutral in order not to face discrimination.

Furthermore, the legal and political dimensions were discussed. For instance, constitutional special statuses in some regions, as in Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, and past fragmentation issues in the Veneto region were indicated for Italy. In politics, the uneasiness of the current voting system was mentioned as a main factor for many Italian people's disinterest in voting. Since voter turnout is considerably low;

each region presents a different agenda in political debates. Thus, the perception of an opposing influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the decentralization of Italy versus Spain, in that decentralization increased in Italian politics, but the opposite occurred in Spain. As previously observed, the pandemic decreased independence movements and decentralization in Spain.

Below are the key summary points derived from Padova:

- Regional identities are relevant in Spain and Italy, but much less in Portugal.
- The question of how human rights and regional identities can be related should be considered for increased democratic regionalism.
- For more functional and improved regionalism, the following key elements should be considered:
    - recognition of the differences;
    - the importance of diversity and recognition of similarities;
    - different approaches rather than drawing a line between separate realities;
    - importance of diversity for the economy (ex: in tourism);
    - communication to promote and preserve democracy through bottom-up politics;
    - importance of regional opinions in a democratic context;
    - protection of minorities in a political frame;
    - decentralization, not disassembly of local minorities;
    - redistribution of power and financial resources.

In Granada, regionalism was discussed within Italy and Spain, but not Portugal. Like in Padova, the era of pre-unification was highlighted for Italy and Spain. The differing timelines of the monarchy in those countries were emphasized more than the region-based division of those countries. Spain still recognizes its monarchy with Felipe VI as their king since 2014. Participants then brainstormed about new regional borders within the EU context, i.e. what if an EU federation would be established and how would the regional borders of this federation be formed? The meeting in Granada concluded with the need for both top-down and bottom-up actions for more functional regionalism.

In Braga, the group also focused on Italy and Spain for the regionalism and regional identity discussion. Since Portugal has always been a united nation state, it's more difficult for any of the regions to push for independence. They stated that the regions in Italy and Spain have their own rules and some regions want more autonomy, while some even want to create their own state mostly due to economic inequalities. In fact, some of these regions are wealthier than the national average. Addtitionally, the group discussed the general awareness about identity differences and discrimination based on these differences. Sometimes bringing awareness to regional differences can result in exclusion and fatigue from being the recipient of prejudice. As a remedy, the preservation of the regions, languages, and cultures through generational knowledge transfer was suggested as a necessary solution. Being aware of and sharing about the realities of other regions other than our own were proposed as fun and interesting ways of learning.

To sum up, regionalism and regional identity are vivid topics in Italy and Spain, but not in Portugal due to its socio-political centralization. On the other hand, the governments and political parties in Italy and Spain should prioritize the presence of regional identities in their agenda to reduce inequalities and improve the democratization process.

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EU MEMBERSHIP: DEMOCRATIC IMPACT
Italy, Spain, Portugal

The relationship between European Union membership and its democratic impact remains a topic of critical importance in shaping the future of the Union and its member states. This chapter explores the multifaceted dynamics of this relationship as discussed during the Human Rights Café events held in Padova, Granada, and Braga. These dialogues brought together diverse perspectives on issues such as European identity, the tension between sovereignty and EU integration, migration, and political participation.

By examining how the EU influences the democratic principles and engagement of its citizens, the discussions delved into key challenges, including the rise of nationalist movements, the socio-economic effects of migration, and the evolving nature of civic participation. They also highlighted the importance of fostering intra-European and Mediterranean cooperation to address these challenges and reinforce the Union's democratic framework.

"I'm European" is the statement that initiated a conversation about identity and its correlation with history education in Granada. In all political regimes, the identity of citizens and the nation as a whole is one of the main themes the political leadership has to address. The autocratic and totalitarian regimes that emerged in Europe in the 1900s demonstrated the importance of constructing a strong, militaristic, and nationalistic identity among citizens to sustain these regimes. Like autocratic regimes, democratic systems also need a specific identity to endure. Democratic nations need citizens who consider

democracy "the only game in town" and trust the institutions and principles that constitute it. The participants in Braga highlighted the issue of most European citizens not feeling "European". Instead, their identity is often more closely linked to their city or region rather than to the European Union or the continent as a whole. A Politico EU article elaborates on this topic, stating, "We have no obvious benchmark, unequivocal blueprint or specific definition of what it means to be European. However, such a definition may be key to completing the puzzle of nations, identities, cultures, and sentiments that is questioning its very construct."[1]

For many, the absence of a European identity translates into indifference about the future of the EU or, even more concerning, a negative perception of its institutions - sometimes seen as adversaries. To address this, European institutions are turning to one of history's primary means of identity formation - education. The European Dimension in History Teaching (EDiHT) initiative of the European Commission aims to "create and develop a sense of European identity among students", throughout history education in particular, equipping them with "the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive European community."[2]

The European Union faces pressing issues that, while related to the main question, pose a more critical threat than the question of a shared European identity. The Union is confronted with immediate threats that stem from the rise of nationalist, sovereignist far-right movements and parties within its borders - a key topic largely discussed in Padova. This conflict, increasingly evident between the far-right and EU institutions, revolves around one of the fundamental

aspects of territorial political power: sovereignty. As introduced by a participant in Granada, the European Union progressively gained exclusive authority on certain matters (to the detriment of national governments' sovereignty) to avoid crises and foster cooperation between European States.

Political scientist, Dave Sinardet, highlights two possible strategies that the radical right could adopt to influence the EU's future: "On the one hand, they could hollow out European politics from within. On the other hand, these far-right leaders may begin to understand that they also need the European Union to be able to fulfill a series of promises they made to their national electorate, especially in terms of security and immigration."[3] Historically, the center-left and center-right have managed to form coalitions that excluded radical parties, thus preventing the far-right from holding influential positions in the European Parliament.[4] However, this balance could shift in future elections.

Closely linked to issues of sovereignty and the rising consensus of far-right movements, migration has become an increasingly prominent topic in European public debates over the last decades. During the three discussions, migration was addressed from different perspectives, reflecting the multifaceted challenges it poses to the European Union.
In Padova, the focus was on immigration management and its economic implications. The economic conditions of the Turkish community in Germany were cited as an example of how low-paying jobs often assigned to immigrants can hinder social inclusion and strain national economies. As noted by a participant, the growing mistrust in the EU stems in part from ineffective policy responses by its institutions.

Miguel Otero-Iglesias echoes this view in an op-ed, arguing, "One of the principal factors fueling the panic against immigration in [...] Europe is the perception that the authorities have lost control."[5]

The session in Braga expanded on these issues by focusing on the logistical challenges of immigration from Africa, including identifying minors and ensuring fair distribution of people across EU member states. This issue disproportionately affects countries like Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, where the combination of financial constraints and geographical size exacerbates the complexity of managing migration flows effectively.

In Granada, the question of migration was instead addressed considering mainly intra-EU migration, particularly the movement from Southern Europeans to Northern countries. A Greek participant mentioned the common belief amongst young citizens from Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece; that achieving career success often requires moving to Northern Europe. This phenomenon, especially concerning highly skilled professionals educated in Southern countries, is confirmed by the European Commission's Directorate-General for EU Regional and Urban Policy. Regarding brain drain, their website states, "regions with lower-than-average economic growth are suffering most [from this phenomenon], such as rural areas in Southern and Eastern Europe."[6]

These diverse perspectives underscore how migration, whether external or internal, poses challenges that require nuanced and targeted policies. Effective governance in these areas is critical to building trust in the Union and addressing the underlying socio-economic inequalities driving these

trends.

Following the discussion about migration, which highlighted the socio-economic dynamics and challenges within and beyond EU borders, it is crucial to affirm that these factors closely intersect with political participation and the perception of the European Union, largely discussed in Padova. Political participation is one of the fundamental pillars of democracy, shaping not only the level of citizen engagement in decision-making processes but also their perception of the EU's role and legitimacy. However, in recent years, civic participation has exhibited contrasting dynamics, marked by a growing interest in initiatives like the Erasmus program and a previously declining turnout in European elections—a trend that now appears to be reversing. These phenomena reflect the complex relationship between citizens and the EU, as highlighted by a participant in Padova who stated that "We have to distinguish between institutional [electoral, note of the author] participation and non-conventional participation," and that "people don't vote but a lot of them participate in volunteering associations and political movements." The Special Eurobarometer 101.5 on EU Post-Electoral

Survey 2024 highlighted how citizens from Portugal, Spain, and Italy (Figure 1), considered sequentially, have a perception of whether their voice counts progressively lower than the European average. When comparing this data with the 2024 EU election turnout, however, we can see that the order is reversed, with Italy having the highest electoral turnout, followed by Spain and Portugal.[7]

A participant in Padova found a probable cause for this phenomenon, affirming that "People need to be involved more than one time every 5 years or so." and highlighting how this would explain the high participation in civic associations. The participant added, "(People) can't find a way to participate more in the political process, that's why they join civic associations."

Looking more closely at the data from Portugal, Spain, and Italy, it is clear that optimism about the future of the EU in the three countries is in any case above the average of the 27 States (Figure 2) but a relevant difference emerges when compared to each other.[8]

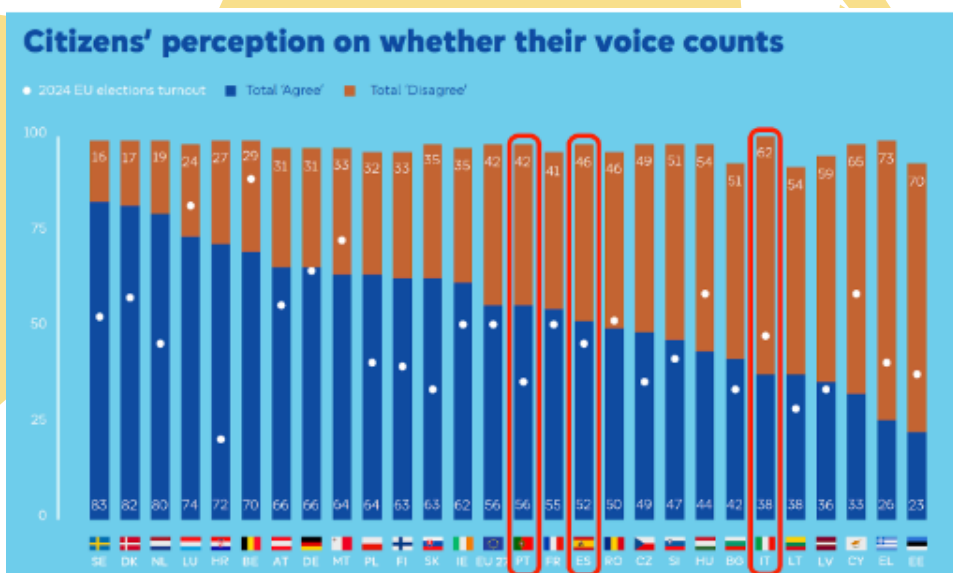The relationship between EU membership and political participation highlights a

Citizens' perception on whether their voice counts

Q1 Please tell me if you are very optimistic rather optimistic rather pessimistic or very pessimistic regarding the future of the EU
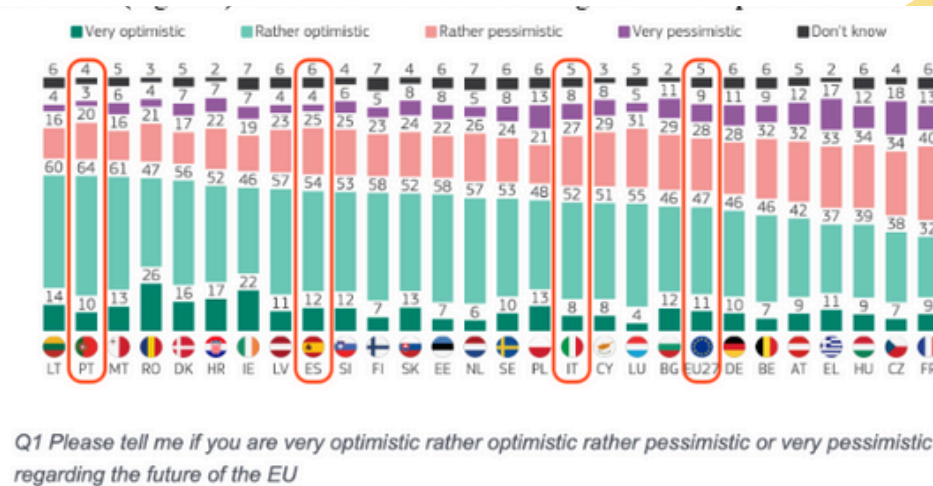
1 complex dynamic, marked by growing interest in non-conventional forms of participation and an ambivalent perception of the Union's democratic impact. This underscores the importance of strengthening civic engagement channels, making them more accessible and frequent, to reinforce citizens' sense of belonging and trust in European institutions.

As the European Union continues to face challenges ranging from migration to the rise of nationalist movements, fostering deeper cooperation both within its member states and with neighbouring regions like North Africa emerges as a crucial pathway for addressing these issues. Such collaboration not only strengthens the EU's democratic framework but also enhances its ability to manage shared concerns through unified, innovative strategies. In Padova, the question of a Federation of Europe emerged as a way to strengthen the region in facing global issues, increase regional autonomies, and create a more empowered European Parliament that could contribute to more effective changes. In Granada, they underscored in particular the necessity for stronger cooperation between Mediterranean countries, which share common challenges and characteristics, proposing agriculture as a bonding topic. The discussion in Braga highlighted the crucial importance of broader cooperation with North African countries to legalize and control migration whilst providing adequate help to those affected by migration.

As demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperation is fundamental in improving countries' responses to crises on a regional and global level. Echoing the statement of a participant - solutions to these complex issues are more easily found and implemented if we all work together, cooperating to achieve common goals. Only through strengthened cooperation and shared purpose can the European Union continue to uphold its democratic ideals and effectively address the pressing challenges of our time.

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DEMOCRATIC AND COLONIAL MEMORY
Italy, Spain, Portugal

The discussion topic "Democratic and Colonial Memory" emphasized the political, cultural, and violent ties between Italy, Spain, and Portugal, and their respective former colonies. This chapter initially summarizes the group discussions from each event, then compares and contrasts the points elucidated by the group.

In Italy, the group reflected on the generational impacts of colonialism, resulting in the progressive erasure of local identities and cultures. In addition to that, members pointed out the role of education and language in the colonial process, arguing that they constitute a tool both for colonization (through the use of violence, and the normalization of settlers' actions) and for its dismantling (through educational criticism and creation of values that resist colonialism).

In Spain, participants emphasized two key points. The first concerns the use of language as an instrument of power and violence. In the case of Spain's colonies, a single and "real Spanish language" was determined. The other raises the issue of national holidays linked to colonialism, celebrating it as a relevant part of the cultural dignity of colonialist countries. Members expressed discomfort with such national holidays as national festivals, rather than as moments of reflection on the colonial pasts of European states.

In Portugal, participants focused on colonialism's impacts on colonized populations and its relation to cultural identities. They discussed the cultural narrative surrounding "good colonization," elucidating that many

civilians believe colonization was a positive or beneficial process. In addition, the group illustrated the absence of colonial memory policies in European countries at the educational level, especially regarding the memory of their own countries.

At the events in Spain and Italy, members discussed the relevance of imposing language as a way of controlling people. Participants from Italy emphasized, for example, linguistic and historical educational training, and defence of the narrative of "discoveries". Such narratives demonstrate an absent construction of colonial memory by colonialist countries and, an appropriation by radical and/or patriotic movements.

The group from Italy and Portugal addressed generational or permanent effects of colonialism, also described as colonialism in the work of Said.[1] Members of the event in Spain agree that coloniality is a major issue yet, citing the continuation of national holidays surrounding "discoveries" with a positive connotation, as mentioned previously. One Latin American student described his discomfort with such holidays as a time of celebration, rather than reflection on the historical moment.

The reflections bring up the issue of coloniality as a darker side of Western modernity and, consequently, of current European identities, as determined by Walter Mignolo.[2] Overcoming coloniality requires a process of historical repair and resignification of identities, between the "self" and the "other". Members from all universities agreed, finally, that educational activities and policies with civil society represent good practices for educating citizens and developing a collective memory based on human rights and historical respect.

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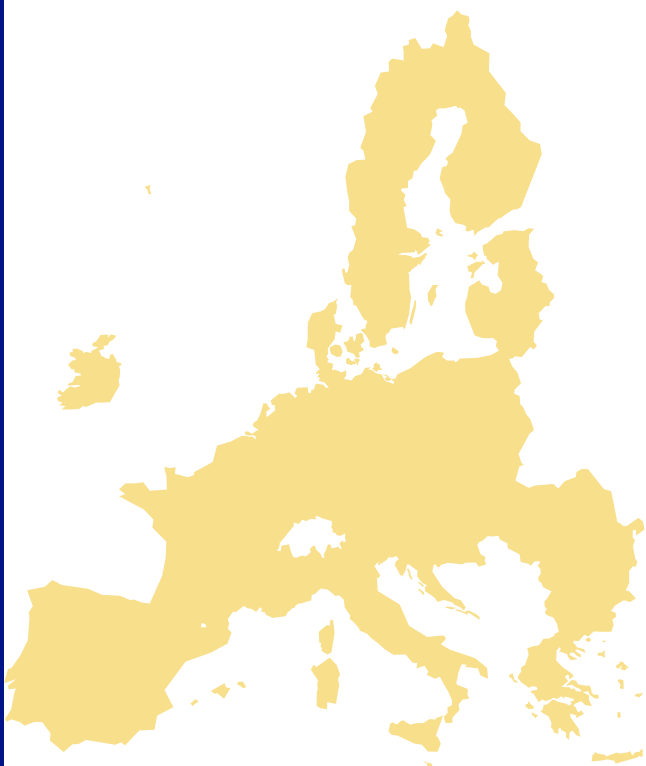
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