

Democracy Deficits and Democratic Dilemmas within the European Union

Tensions in the European Union

The present paper is the conclusion of the three-part series dealing with various aspects of the European Union's institutional political crisis. In our first paper¹ we said that the lack of a strong EU identity may leave integration in a vulnerable position. In our second paper² we focused on the question of how, also related to the lack of EU identity, the fallout of the EU's economic/political crisis has managed to undermine solidarity among member states more than ever before and exacerbated conflicts between the 'center' and the 'periphery' in particular. In the current and third paper we attempt to examine the difficulties facing the EU as it tries to give content to and enforce its professed principles of the rule of law and democracy in the Union and individual member states alike.

Article 2 of the European Union Treaty states these principles very clearly:

*"The Union is founded on the **values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights**, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail."*³

Below we shall essentially look at three dimensions of the contradictions between these democratic principles and a democracy-deficient mode of operation:

1) The Union's institutional system: tensions between the Union's declared democratic principles and democracy-deficient mode of operation. The European Union regularly faces the criticism that its institutional system does not live up to its own democratic criteria in all respects. And these criticisms are made time and time again even as the Union has taken a number of steps (e.g. expanding the role of the European Parliament) to remedy these deficiencies at the institutional level.

2) Public opinion in the EU: a growing conflict between the democratic values professed by EU citizens and the worsening of the EU's apparently anti-democratic practices. While the citizens of the European Union are committed to democratic values, they view the European Union as less democratic than in the past. Since the start of the crisis, increasingly the electorate perceives the Union as a large and bureaucratic machinery.

¹ National and/or European identity? Issues of self-definition and their effect on the future of integration. Political Capital Institute-Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, April 2013.

² Is the EU about to fall apart? The effect of the crisis on Euroscepticism and conflicts among members states. Political Capital Institute-Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2013.

³ CONSOLIDATED VERSION OF THE TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION AND ON THE OPERATION OF THE EU.
http://europa.eu/pol/pdf/qc3209190huc_002.pdf

3) The Union as a political community: the conflict between the Union's "ideology" and political principles on the one hand and its bureaucratic, "apolitical" and technocratic mode of operation on the other. While the Union faces an increasing number of challenges coming from resurgent Eurosceptic and anti-EU movements in member states, it finds it difficult to win political debates and enforce its declared values in political conflicts. While its founding documents contain a clear value system, the European Union has not been able to develop a common identity, and it lacks an "ideology" as a point of reference in political conflicts. The political scientist, Ivan Krastev's sharp statements concerning the Union offer an increasingly apt description of the current political situation⁴: in Europe apolitical policy-making is pursued at the Union level, while at the member state level politics is made free of policy. In other words, in many cases genuine policy decisions are made in the Union, while member states are becoming playgrounds for symbolic political conflicts. However, this mismatch creates a shaky and fragile model. If the European Union is to protect stated democratic principles from the threat of anti-EU movements, it must stand firm behind its commitments in political and symbolic disputes as well. Without that, in the struggle between "technocracy" and "populism"⁵ the latter may easily claim victory.

Does the Union suffer from a democracy-deficit?

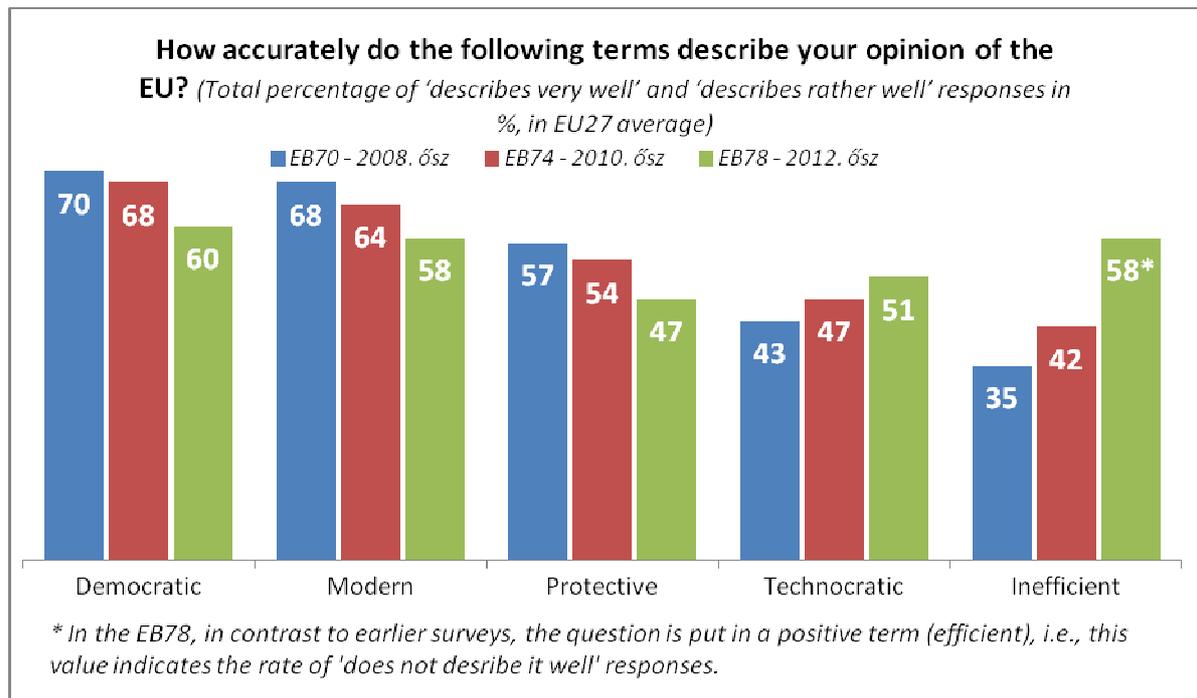
- The European Union is a unique construct that cannot be directly measured by criteria applied to the democratic systems of specific nation states. It is also clearly evident that the EU is in trouble and doubts its own legitimacy, for instance when it has to order a member state to adhere to fundamental democratic norms.
- It is also evident, however, that from a procedural point the EU cannot be described as a thoroughly anti-democratic organization and, in fact, in many respects it faithfully follows the institutional logic of today's representative democracies and it is also false to claim that its politicians do not bear responsibility.
- The main problem lies in citizens' perception: indeed, European citizens consider it extremely distant and are unable to identify with Union policy. At that point the democratic nature of the institutional system also becomes irrelevant. Currently this is one of the largest challenges facing the EU as a political community.

⁴ Krastev, Ivan (2003): In *Mistrust We Trust: Can Democracy Survive When the president rescinded the lack of strong even identity management vision will the second focus of the question of how We Don't Trust Our Leaders?* Ted Books.

⁵ Leonard, Mark (2012): four scenarios for the reinvention of Europe. http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR43_REINVENTION_OF_EUROPE_ESSAY_AW1.pdf

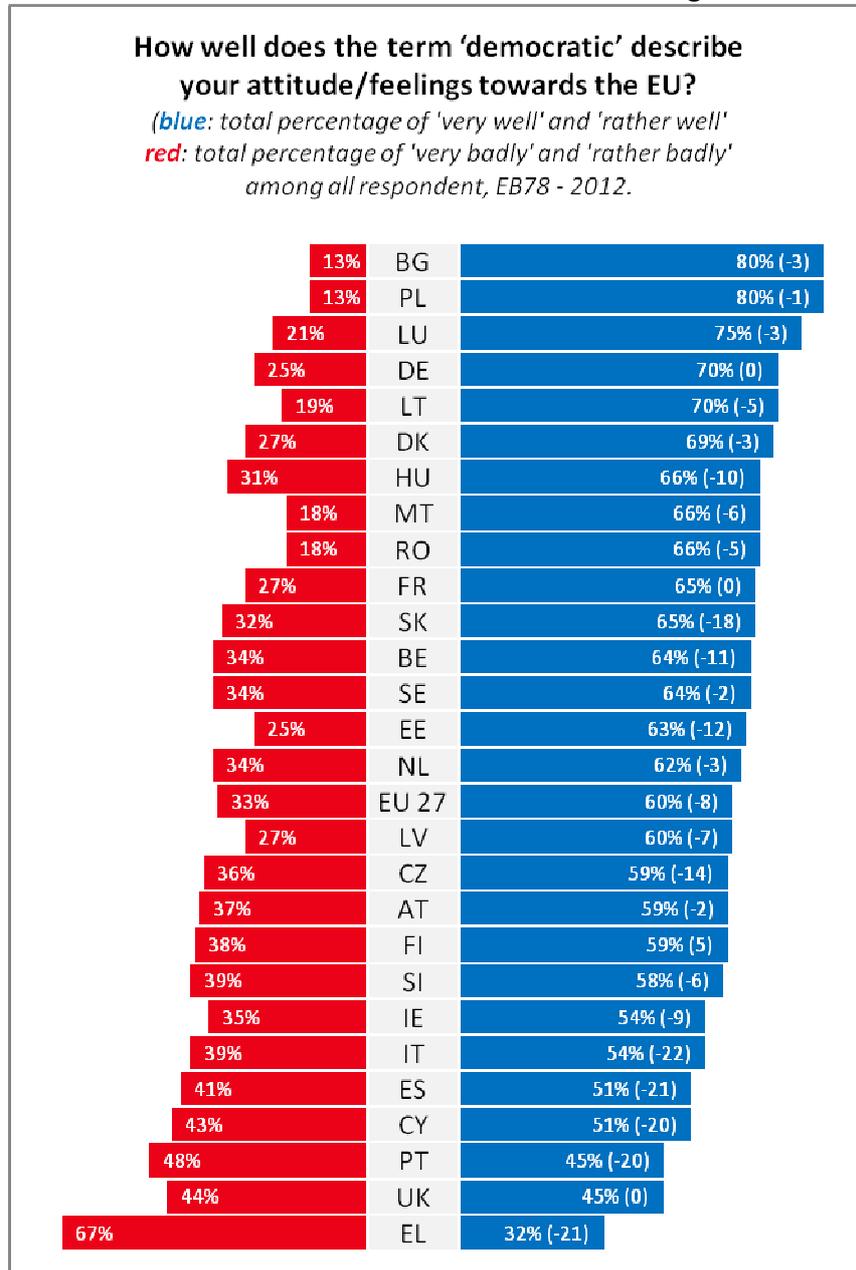
Democracy-deficit perceived by citizens

- According to recent surveys, democratic values remain important for EU citizens. However, the crisis has led to significant changes in the opinion of European Union citizens: since autumn 2008 many citizens believe the community has become less democratic, modern and protective, while its technocratic image is becoming stronger and its operational efficiency is seen to decline. However, it is important that the majority of EU citizens continue to associate the term 'democratic' to the Union. Despite a significant decline in Hungary, Hungarians continue to have a more favorable opinion of the democratic nature of the EU than the community's "average citizen": two-thirds of the Hungarians consider the EU to be a fundamentally democratic institution (as opposed to a 60% Union average).
- Based on surveys conducted in 2008 and 2012, EU citizens continue to describe the union primarily in terms of 'democratic', 'modern' and 'technocratic'. Close to 50% of the respondents feel that the EU is 'protective', although the majority would not characterize it as 'efficient'. In the past few years there has been a clear downward trend moving from positive to negative opinions.



- In an important finding, of all positive attributes the majority associated 'democracy' with the Union in all three surveys (in the fall of 2012 60% of all Europeans) while one-third expressed the opposite opinion. At the same time, the EU's democratic image has been badly eroded in the past few years: in the fall of 2010 68% and two years earlier 70% agreed that the term 'democratic' is a good description for the EU. A decline has been measured in almost all member states. Between 2010-2012 the

number of those in agreement increased only in Finland, while in other countries it either stagnated or declined: in five cases by at least 20 (!) percentage points, particularly in countries hardest hit by the crisis (Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Cyprus). A similarly steep decline was registered also in Slovakia (-18) and the Czech Republic (-14). Despite a 10% decline in Hungary, most Hungarians still have a better opinion of the EU's democratic credentials than the 'average EU citizen'.



- The changes have resulted in a situation where there are already some member states with a relative majority no longer considering the term 'democratic' as a good description of the EU. These are Greece ('does not describe it well': 67% / 'describes it well': 32%) and Portugal ('does not describe it well': 48% / 'describes it well': 45%), while the public opinion in Great Britain is evenly divided ('describes it well': 45% / 'does not describe it well': 44%).

- Declining voter turnout at EP elections is also a clear sign of the Union's perceived democratic deficit. In this light it is a misleading cliché to claim that in European parliament elections citizens are not voting about European issues; instead they pass judgment on the performance of the incumbent government. For if European voters were motivated to vote solely by their desire to criticize the government, turnout would not show a steady decline in all seven EP elections in the past thirty years. The relentless trend of shrinking participation in EP elections can no longer be attributed to the admission of new member states, for turnout is also sharply down in the majority of the nine countries that held the first EP election back in 1979.

Challenges facing member states

- The political 'strength' of the European Union is put to the test mainly when there is a suspicion that one or another member state cannot live up to the political aspirations it established for itself. However, experience so far shows that in these cases the Union's institutional and operational problems make the implementation of effective measures against these member states exponentially more difficult.
- While a platitude, based on experience to date it may even be true: when it comes to the development of democratic norms and institutional systems the Union can claim spectacular successes primarily in non-member states, while in countries already 'within the fold' it is much less effective.
 - In the case of Austria (at the 2000 inauguration of the Schüssel-cabinet that also included the Freedom Party) in the absence of a legal framework and experience in taking legal action, the member states implemented non-institutional political sanctions. Essentially, the only result of the sanctions was to whip up anti-European public sentiment in Austria.
 - Learning from its serious failure in Austria, in respect of Hungary Union organizations (the Commission in particular) made an effort to 'catch' the Hungarian government mainly by applying formal procedures and specific legislation, with questionable results so far.
- In summary it can be stated: since taking power, Viktor Orbán has been successful in selling the idea that Hungary is waging a war of independence against international capital and the European Union. This is a popular narrative meant for a right-wing electorate. At the same time, the government's increasing isolation in the international arena has yet to have a negative impact on its assessment and, in fact, it appears to have consolidated the commitment of governing-party supporters. Of course, for its spectacular political 'achievement' Fidesz can also thank a feeble domestic opposition. Aside from that one thing is certain: today there is the risk that the unique 'Hungarian case' will harden a Eurosceptic attitude among the Hungarian public to an unprecedented degree and a point of no return may be reached where the conflict between the government and the EU becomes unmanageable for both parties.
- In his 2004 paper András Körösi put it this way: *"Instead of an elitist union-building and a constitutional project, a broader-based democratization can take*

*place only through larger-scale political mobilization; only the latter can create a European demos. What are the modalities of such a pan-European political mobilization? One of the opportunities for such mobilization may be offered by an unexpected and major European political crisis/conflict; for instance a foreign-policy or an internal 'public-policy conflict' erupting not between states but at the Union level."*⁶ A large crisis on a European scale is already in place and the only question that remains to be answered is what the European Union plans to do about it. If the crisis management turns into an intractable conflict between member states, the chances for a positive outcome are all but nil. On the other hand, if European countries find a way to keep and manage the conflict and the crisis within the Union, integration could leave the current crisis behind stronger than ever.

Political Capital Institute, May 2013

⁶ Körösenyi András (2004): Demokráciadeficit, föderalizmus, szuverenitás Az Európai Unió politikaelméleti perspektívából. In. Politikatudományi Szemle 2004/3.
http://www.poltudszemle.hu/szamok/2004_3szam/2004_3_korosenyi.pdf