THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

Searching for a way to reduce the "democratic deficit" in the European Union is also a quest for answer to the question of what is to be the ultimate political shape of the European Union (*finalité politique*). However, the actions undertaken must be prudent and should be based on the classic "Monnet method", i.e. on the evolutionary development, avoiding revolutionary change. As the Union itself, democracy in the EU must be "multi--leveled". It has to include elements of both the direct engagement of citizens and active role of elected institutions: the European Parliament and the national parliaments of the Member States. The art of compromise will be to find the right place for all participants of this "game for Europe".

Key words: democracy, democratic deficit, the European Union

Introduction

Scientists, as well as politicians, have analyzed democracy and its possible lack for very long time. The complaint about democratic deficit was faced particularly common towards the European Union (and earlier the Communities). The European Union itself has dealt with it as well[2], emphasizing the importance of this problem. Especially stormy discussions took place during "Convention on the Future of Europe"[3]. It should be taken into

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[2] E.g. it is worth to recall preamble to the Single European Act, in which it was emphasized that the contracting parties wish to "jointly promote democracy / ... /"; see. wider T. Zweifel, *Who is without sin cast the first stone: the EU`s democratic deficit in comparison,* "Journal of European Public Policy," October 2002 vol. 9, no. 5, p. 812.

[3] See: J. Wouters, *Exit the convention, come the IGC. Some reflections on the conven-*

account that in the case of the European Union, seeking a way to reduce the "democratic deficit", understood as an attempt to "discovery" of its own model of democracy, is also a quest for answer to the question of what is to be the ultimate political shape of the EU[4]. So it is also searching for a way to legitimize the Union and its institutions.

However, we hear constantly about the deficit (and sometimes even about the crisis) of democracy in modern states. Potential sources of this crisis are disclosed from all sides, its importance is underlined, and finally the fall of democracy is proclaimed.

Democracy and its possible deficit occurring in nation-states goes outside the theme of this article. Although it is worth to consider if it is possible to easily transfer existing concepts used in description of countries on the level of international organizations. And whether an international organization can fulfil the criteria to be considered democratic? The doctrine is divided. Some scholars, such as for example Robert Dahl, are in favour of the traditional approach and argue that international organizations by its very nature cannot be democratic[5]. However, it would appear to be difficult to accept, especially if we take into account a very significant increase in the importance of international organizations during the last few decades. It is hard to imagine a world without the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WHO) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). At the same time, especially in Western civilization, we are so convinced of the particular importance of democracy. So if we recognize democracy as a value, we want this element which is important for us to be a part of organizations that play such an crucial role in our lives.

The concept and sources of democracy and its deficit

The term "deficit" is defined usually as a shortage, a lack of something. So the "democratic deficit" means the occurrence of such a level of solutions specific to democracy, which will be lower than solutions considered as a model. This attempt to characterize the concept is very simplified, as well as the very concept of democracy is difficult to define. There is no

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tion as a method for Constitutional change in the EU, "Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law" 2003 vol. 10, p. 225.

[4] It will also be a discovery of the renowned *finalité politique* of the European Union.

[5] Cf. Dahl, R., *International Organizations Can Be Democratic? A Skeptic's View*, [in] *Democracy's Edges*, ed. I. Shapiro, C. Hacker-Cordon, Cambridge, 1999, p. 19 ff.

single, accepted and acceptable definition[6] and there is even no consensus what the term may mean in philosophy of politics[7]. Simultaneously, to further complicate attempts of interpretation, it turns out that "in ordinary as well as philosophical language, the term *democracy* could be used to describe a certain ideal as well as the actual system which diverges much from it."[8] It is not surprising, that Bernard Crick said that today democracy means "all things bright and beautiful", and can specify the ideal of civic democracy, as well as representative institutions, and even a way of life.[9] Giovanni Sartori summed up sarcastically the discussion saying that "up to the forties (of 20th century) people knew what democracy was and either they liked it or rejected it. Since then we all have proclaimed that we like democracy, but we do not know (understand, agree), what it exactly is. What is characteristically, we live in the era of confusion in democracy[10]. And the very term "democracy" has become only the name of civilization in which we live[11].

The origins of the phenomenon called democracy dates back to ancient Greek *poleis*[12]. It was in one of them, in Athens, where the concept of democracy was born. Since then it has been inseparable linked with the achievements of the Greek philosophers[13]. The symbol of ancient Athenian democracy became a congregation (*ekklesia*), which gathered a community of Athens (*demos*) capable of taking decisions about future of their *polis*. Mogens Herman Hansen emphasizes that the concept of *demos* has become almost synonymous with the term *ekklesia*, and resolutions adopted by the Assemblies began with a solemn statement *edokse toi demoi*

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[6] Even Thomas Mann, at the beginning of the last century, said that if two people are talking about democracy, it should be regarded as likely in advance that they think about something different, see: T. Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, Berlin 1918, p. 270.

[7] Cf. A. Gulman, *Demokracja* [in:] *Przewodnik po współczesnej filozofii politycznej,* ed. R.E. Goodin, P. Pettit, Warsaw 1998, p. 530 ff.

[8] R. A. Dahl, *Demokracja i jej krytycy*, Krakow 1995, p. 13.

[9] Cf. B. Crick, *Democracy. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2002, p. 8.

[10] G. Sartori, *Teoria demokracji*, Warsaw 1994, p. 16.

[11] *Ibidem*.

[12] It should be noted, however, that this view is recently questioned as being too euro-centric and not taking into account the achievements of other cultures; see. eg. SK Sharma, *Ancient Indian Democracy – Studies, Research and Some Modern Myths*, "Indian Journal of Politics", Vol. XXXIX, No. 3/2005, p. 155 ff. (Http://www.ijps.net/images/Ancient%20 Indian%20Democracy.pdf, access 08/01/2015).

[13] The very activities of Pericles in Athens left a permanent imprint on the systems of countries; see. wider D. Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, New York in 1998, *passim*.

(people decided)[14]. Institutions similar to the *ekklesia* functioned not only in other Greek *poleis* (example is the Spartan apella[15]), but also in ancient Rome. But none of assemblies convened there reached an equal position like Athenian *ekklesia*.

However, these ancient assemblies have a very limited impact on contemporary understanding of democracy. It can be considered even that Greek democracy is the only historic episode which in practice was not taken into account during the formation of the modern democratic institutions. They were in fact formed, first of all, during the process of reduction of medieval king's powers (especially the right to impose taxes) by use of the consultation procedures (and later co-decision) with representatives of the dominating classes in the country.

Step by step, this group of individuals included a wider and wider sections of society, whereas the scope of political and economic matters in which the monarch could not decide alone was increasing.[16]

Probably for this reason, today's democracy is so different from the Greek source. Modern democracy is representative, based on the ability to articulate the pluralism of opinions. Policy is defined as taking action aimed at identifying the positions, taking into account the interests of various social groups. The result of compromises concluded may also contain the participation in the exercise of power, proportionate to the importance and effectiveness of the group.[17]

To summarize these views we can say that the democracy can be considered as the institutional system, in which the sovereign (the people, the nation) has the ability to create and control of public authority[18]. However, the system must be legally defined and based on defined axiological values such as freedom, equality, respect for human rights as well as pluralist and competitive political system. It is also important that use of democratic procedures and institutions is the way to legitimize (validate) the entity holding the power. This definition of democracy is accepted by the Europeans

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[14] Cf. M. H. Hansen, *Demokracja ateńska w czasach Demostenesa. Struktura, zasady, ideologia,* Warsaw 1999, p. 136.

[15] Cf. N.G.L Hammond, *The Lycurgean Reform at Sparta*, „Journal of Hellenic Studies" 1950, Vol. 70, p. 45.

[16] Cf. J. P. Dougherty, *The Fragility of Democracy*, "Modern Age", Spring 2006, p. 120 (http://www.mmisi.org/ma/48_02/dougherty.pdf; access 1.08.2015).

[17] Cf. e.g. B. Crick, *W obronie polityki*, Warsaw 2004, *passim*.

[18] Cf. also the definition proposed by Simon Hix: "We can talk about democracy only when you make a choice between rival policies and where there is a real chance to make changes in the government"; S. Hix, *System polityczny Unii Europejskiej*, Warsaw 2010, p. 218.

and these expectations are expressed also towards institutions such as the European Union. Therefore it is worth to consider whether this is possible?

Phenomenon the democratic deficit in the European Union

The European Union is very specific. It is an institution created on the basis of the European Communities, but now it goes beyond the typical characteristics of an international organization. The Union is not a state, neither an unitary one, nor a federation[19], although the degree of integration that occurs within the Union has overstepped long time ago what would be considered as a union of states jointly perform some functions. The doctrine emphasizes, therefore, that the EU could be put "somewhere between a confederation and federation,"[20] or as an organization of sovereign states with federal potential.[21]

The European Union is therefore something hardly to define[22], a political system[23] *sui generis*. Characteristics of different political entities can be identify in its functioning: that of a state (a common legal system, actions of the Union as a whole on some issues, like trade), that of international organizations (international order, voluntary membership, decision-making processes within the framework of a developed system of consultation) as well as elements inherent to supranationalism understood as a form of

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[19] But the federal model has long been presented as a solution most appropriate for the EU (see. Eg. F. Kinsky *Föderalismus Ein Weg der Europakrise*, Bonn in 1986, *passim*).

[20] P. Böhringer, *Die Europäische Union. Eine Staatenverbindung ganz eigener Art. Acht fundamentale Wesenszüge,* [in:] *Europäische Union: Wesen, Struktur, Dynamik. Zwölf Beiträge zu einem vertieften Verständnis der europäischen Integration mit Synopsen, Materialien und Kommentaren zur Situation nach Abschluss der Regierungskonferenz 1996/97,* ed. P. Böhringer, W. Jacob, Zürich 1997, p. 50.

[21] Cf. D. Lasok, J.W. Bridge, *Law and Institutions of the European Union,* London 1994, p. 22, *passim*.

[22] It should be stressed that classical definitions are noticeable inadequate. Thus, eg. Ronald Watts distinguishes 10 types of federal political systems. He classifies the EU as one of them (hybrid); cf. R. Watts, *Comparing Federal System in the 1990`s,* Ontario 1996, p. 6 *passim*.

[23] Whereas the classic understanding of the political system assumed its close connection with the state (as eg. G. Almond Comparing *Politycal Systems,* "Journal of Politics, Vol. 18 (2), p. 395), today this has been negated (see eg. P. Birnbaum, P. Badie, The Sociology of the State University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983, p. 135 et seq.). Simon Hix thus emphasizes that the Union is able to function as a fully formed political system without complete transformation of the country's territorial organization; cf. S. Hix, *System polityczny Unii Europejskiej*, Warsaw 2010, p. 32.

cooperation which creates a new level of supranational power. This kind of power is autonomous, it is above the state and has some elements of coercion independent of measures taken by member states[24]. John McCormick stresses that "the only conclusion approved by everybody is that in political language there are no words that could express the nature of the EU, and that it is the only one of its kind" and adds – "there is no consensus as to what the Union is because it is constantly changing."[25] This ambiguity of the European Union – unfortunately – makes it difficult to use unambiguously definitional schemes applied to the countries and organizations.

Reflections about the place of democratic institutions in the functioning of then Communities were taken as early as in 1972 in the so-called Vedel Report[26]. This report began classical approach to the phenomenon of the democratic deficit in the structures of uniting Europe.[27] It can be represented as a consequence of conflict between the European institutions (supranational) and institutions of Member States, noted for a long time in the functioning of the EC/EU. Together with the deepening integration process, this conflict seems to grow, because the area where this centres of power can compete is increasing. This phenomenon becomes particularly important taking into account that accession to the EU leads to a fundamental consequences for the functioning of the public authorities of Member States. Particularly important changes have took place in functioning of the national parliament. The doctrine estimates that the parliament of a Member State loses approx. 2/3 of its existing legislative powers.[28] That stems unequivocally from the regulations existing in the Union. In matters regulated by regulations of the Community authorities issuing laws is possible only in exceptional circumstances, and in cases regulated by a directive role of the parliament is concretization of the Community law. It should be noted that the European Communities developed as an organization of intergovern-

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[24] Cf. J. McCormick, *Zrozumieć Unię Europejską*, Warsaw 2010, p. 24-25 and 38.

[25] J. McCormick, *Zrozumieć Unię...*, p. 51. The author also points out that the Union is indeed nearing its final shape, but it is unknown. What's more – we do not know also when we will achieve this shape, and even when we achieve it, we will not know about it. We'll find out about it many years later; *ibidem*, p. 51.

[26] http://www.cvce.eu/viewer/-/content/a4f5b134-99b9-41b3-9715-41769dfea12a/en; 15.08.2011.

[27] Cf. P. Moreau Defarges, *Le déficit démocratique*, Defense nationale 2000, No 12, p. 135. About the complexity of this phenomenom see also P. Craig, *The Nature of the Community: Integration, Democracy and Legitimacy*, [in:] *The Evolution of the EU Law*, ed. P. Craig, G. de Burca, Oxford 1999, p. 23 ff.

[28] See J. Barcz, *Parlament a Unia Europejska. Analiza prawna na przykładzie doświadczeń Austrii (wraz z podstawowymi dokumentami),* Warsaw 1999, p. 11.

mental cooperation, and as a consequence structures of national administration relatively easily dominated national parliaments. What's more, administrations of Member States very quickly formed cooperation mechanisms between the European and national bureaucracy. It might be added that the subsequent integration processes strengthened the strong euro-bureaucracy whose powers grew because of transnational links.

According to this theory, the "democratic deficit" (a concept proposed by David Marquand, an MEP for the UK Labour Party[29]) can be compensated by applying the mechanisms specific for parliamentary democracy. So in the case of the EU, it would be increasing the powers of the European Parliament. Discussion that he initiated led to a significant increase of the role of the EP. However, despite the action taken, expected increase of identifying people with the EU did not happen and the scale of opinion about the democratic deficit have not decrease.[30]

Over the years the criticism concerning the actions taken has raised. Assumption that only the European Parliament can be a carrier of democratic legitimacy was considered especially negatively. The view was raised that the legitimacy of such a specific creation as the European Union should be regarded from a wider perspective which goes beyond the strict characteristics of the state. In this trend two distinctive positions can be identify.

The first model, referring to the concept of R. Dahl, negates the possibility of transposing classical democratic solutions which are the domain of nation states into an international organization. One of supporters of this theory is Andrew Moravcsik who emphasizes that worry about the democratic deficit in the EU is unnecessary because governments of the Member States are sufficient legitimizing factor.[31] The arguments presented by A. Moravcsik are a consequence of his theory developed by the liberal *intergovernmentalism*. They based on the assumption that the governments of Member States guided the EU, and the Commission acts as their specific agent. The most important decisions are taken in the course of intergovernmental negotiations, and they can not bring unforeseen consequences for the country. There is no gap between the preferences of governments, and the final shape EU policy. So the EU cannot be describe as undemocratic.

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[29] D. Marquand, *Parliament for Europe*, London 1979.

[30] Many authors emphasize, however, that the reasons of "democratic deficit" are deeper, and so its elimination can not be reduced to the strengthening of the European Parliament only; see. eg. D. Grimm [in] T. Ellwein, D. Grimm, JJ Hesse, GF Schuppert, *Jahrbuch Staats- u. Verwaltungswissenschaft*, band 6 (1992-1993), Baden-Baden 1993, pp. 13-14 .

[31] Cf. A. Moravcsik, *In Defence of the „Democratic Deficit": Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union*, „Journal of Common Market Studies" 2002, vol. 40, no. 4, p.603 ff.

Supporters of the second stand refer to diversity of the Union. They emphasize that it is a mechanism of multiple integrated levels of governance, which consists of both the EU institutions and Member States with their bodies (multi-level political system).

Followers of this approach emphasize, however, that in continuous negotiations and compromises undertaken at the EU level, and at the same time in connection with the strengthening of the regional level, the importance of Member States weakens. Joseph H. H. Weiler stresses here the negative consequences of a process he calls "reverse regionalism".[32] This phenomenon is the ability to represent regional interests without nation states and it ultimately results in estrangement of ongoing issues from citizens as well as weakening the prestige of the state. In addition, the Union encroaching on areas previously reserved for the state or local communities or citizens intensified belief in the "omnipotence" of the EU institutions (regardless of whether it was justified or not).[33] These effects are also considered the primary source of emerging democratic deficit.

With the passage of time, a catalogue of areas that affect the formation of "democratic deficit" created by JHH Weiler[34] has been expanding and now includes:

 – Increase the scope of the executive power, and consequently less control by national parliaments;[35]
 – Still too weak position of the EP as the only body chosen in general election;[36]
 – Lack of real "European elections". Election campaign to the European Parliament in Member States rarely contains European affairs. The voting usually takes place in the context of the current internal politics;[37]
 – The fact that the EU is for the citizens of Member States too distant.

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[32] Cf. J.H.H. Weiler, *The State „über alles" Demos, Telos and the German Maastricht Decision,* http://centers.law.nyu.edu/jeanmonnet/papers/95/9506ind.html; access 16.08.2015.

[33] Cf. J. H. H. Weiler, *The Constitution of Europe „do the new clothes have an emperor?" and other essays on European integration*; Cambridge 1999, p. 265.

[34] Cf. J.H.H. Weiler, U.R. Halten, F. Mayer, *European Democracy and its Critique*, "West European Politics" 1995, vol. 18 (3), p. 4-39.

[35] Cf. eg. T. Raunio, *Always One Step Behind? National Legislatures and the European Union,* „Government and Opposition" 1999, vol. 34 (2), p. 180-202.

[36] Cf. eg. J. Lodge, *The European Parliament and the Autority-Democracy Crisis,* "Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science" 1994, vol. 531, p. 69-83.

[37] Cf. S. Hix, *Dimensions and Alignments In European Union Politics: Cognitive Constraints and Partisan Responses, "*European Journal of Political Research" 1999, vol. 35, p. 69-106.

People still do not understand the specifics of the EU and its organs (eg., the Commission is a creation indefinite and even unknown);[38]
– A kind of "political drift" of the Union. A characteristic feature of the Union is adopting the arrangements which are not recognized as the best, but only the most uncontroversial (dull).

We can therefore agree with H. H. Weiler, who concludes that there is a need to develop cooperation of the national and the EU level to ensure the democratization of European structures. In order that this cooperation does not intensify conflicts, it would be desirable also to make the division of powers which should ensure the utmost transparency of the decision making process. And to offset the deficit understood in this manner not only the role of the European Parliament but also of national parliaments should be strengthened. An attempt of such actions have been taken in the Treaty of Lisbon.

Conclusions

The discussion about the democratic deficit in the European Union seems to be therefore a substitute discussion to a large degree. Looking for an answer to the question of how to get the European Union closer to the "ordinary citizen" an attempt to determine the final shape of the Union was taken. It does not seem appropriate. By taking spectacular, but too hasty decisions that could determine the *finalité politique* of the Union, we can lead to the defeat of the largest and most successful European project.

The European Union is at a crucial moment. It tries to find its own identity and its own way. Even at such an advanced stage of integration we should refer to the classic "Monnet method" – the method founded on evolutionary development, avoiding the revolutionary changes that may be dysfunctional for the great European project.

Democracy is the value which is deeply rooted in the minds of Europeans. We are proud of it, even if we do not use its institutions. But we are not able to transpose the classical understanding of this concept on the EU ground. The strength, as well as the reason for the success of the Communities were the skilful combination of community and intergovernmental methods. The result is a complex, multilevel structure that could develop over the years with support both in integrated actions coordinated by supranational

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[38] Cf. P. Magnette, *Appointing and Censuring The European Commision: The Adaptation of Parlamentary Institutions to the Community Context,* „European Law Journal" 2001, vol. 7 (3), p. 292-310.

authorities as well as national states. Democracy in the EU must be, as the EU itself, "multi-levelled" and it must include elements of both the direct activity of citizens (the right of popular initiative, the right to petition, and especially the ability to conduct a pan-European debate, etc.), and active role of bodies chosen in general election, i.e. both the European Parliament and national parliaments of Member States. The whole art of compromise will be to find the right place for all participants of this "game for Europe".

We cannot expect, however, that the democratic deficit will disappear. And this is not only a consequence of the structure of the Union, but also, and perhaps above all, a natural result of constantly rising expectations and aspirations of citizens expressed toward institutions. With the progressive development of society, "yesterday's" level of satisfaction is already insufficient "today". Democracy is a process in a permanent making, not a conserved creation. If we want to cultivate it, we need to continue to develop it. We can not rest on our laurels, but we must constantly seek new answers to still asked questions.

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