



In cooperation with
Webster University Vienna



European Ideas Discussion Workshop, 4 December 2012, at Webster University Vienna

with participants from Serbia, the US, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Bulgaria, Austria, the UK & Russia

Experts invited: Dr. Samuel Schubert, Dr. Johannes Pollak, Dr. Peter Grand

Moderator: Dr. Johannes Pollak

Assistant (minutes): Philippe Ternes

European Ideas Workshop Leaders at Webster University: Stephen Rains, Yuri Fenopetov

Main initial sub-questions of participants

Participation in the EU decision making process

- participation of civil society
- lack of interest by the citizens, salience of EU competencies
- missing link between the people and their institutions
- European Parliament elections, decreasing participation
- Transparency in the EU decision-making process
- Accountability of EU decision-makers and institutions

Identity, demos

- the creation of a greater European identity
- Can we achieve one single European demos?

Role of leaders & national governments

- Democracy means empowering the people
- The role of national governments
- In how far can our nation states be considered democratic?

Political organisation

- Federalism may offer a solution for overcoming historic, geographical, cultural cleavages
- The existence of a variety of democratic systems in the EU

Assessing the quality of democracy

What kind of democracy are we talking about? We are talking about public control and quality.

The selection of political elites is a crucial factor in the assessment of the quality of democracy.

How do we determine a democratic deficit? What do we have to take into account? In how far is voter-turnout a valuable indication for assessing the degree of democracy? People are not aware of the power of the European Parliament, otherwise the turnout would increase.

3 ways to assess the quality of democracy:

1. the Kantian test of self-legislation: to what degree are the administration, the implementation, and the execution controlled?
2. Criterion of John Stuart Mill: Parliaments shouldn't decide, they should control the government. There should be "public bavardage", face-to-face meetings as a stage for exchange.
3. The Bohman test of institutional design.

Should a democratic system also be judged by its degree of efficiency? Where does democratic legitimacy come from?

The salience question: are the representative institutions dealing with the important issues?

Democratic processes also entail control and accountability of representatives and institutions.

A democratic system needs to protect the rights of individuals and minorities. How can this be combined with the principle of equal treatment?

Is it possible of fruitful to assess the level of democracy in a situation of crisis?

Two possible answers:

1. No, because governments generally lack democracy during a crisis
exceptional times call for exceptional measures. However, this is an extremely dangerous assumption.
The greater the crisis, the smaller is usually the number of people making the decision. For democracy deepen, the greater the number of people involved, the better it is.
2. Yes, because every crisis is a chance for a new beginning. As people start losing trust and become more active themselves, governance can improve and democracy can grow.

Challenges to EU democracy

European countries largely differ in terms of their democratic systems: in some European countries there is no possibility for plebiscite for example

Democratic quality cannot catch up with the speed of EU integration.

The potential of people's involvement may be overestimated. People may have constitutional rights, but they may not ensure a proper functioning of democracy. Therefore institutions are trying to compensate for the absence of a European demos.

The average citizen may be unable to cope with the complexity of EU decision-making.

For democracy to grow, do we need to give more power to national parliaments or more power to the people? What can we do with the existing instruments that we have right now?

The EU decision-making process is characterized by a double democratic deficit:

- Member states transfer power to Council, who exercises executive and legislative power at the same time.
- National Parliaments are losing power while their competences do not end up at the European Parliament.

This has two consequences: either the European Parliament needs to be strengthened or the power of national legislators needs to be increased so that they can control the ministers in the Council.

The open method of coordination allows for reports by governments to the European Commission while national Parliaments are left out.

Why is EU integration necessary or important?

We need to answer the question of whether the citizens of Europe benefit from greater enlargement and consolidation

What do we want to see the EU become? We need to have a final stage in mind.

EU governance is necessary because national states are sometimes helpless when they have to deal with interdependent issues exceeding the national level.

Federalism may be an answer to our current EU challenges. The European Union already shows very strong characteristics of a federal system.

Are there always losers in a democratic process?

What is necessary for democracy to grow?

- **The question of identity**

The concept of identity depends a lot on the historical background and the relation between specific European states. In the American constitutional process, the feeling of American identity was a

necessity. Democracy: whatever extent or form it takes, a little bit of a shared basis is needed for it to exist.

There is no reason to forge an identity, this would be political coercion. Who creates the European identity? The people.

Identity usually becomes relevant when a certain group of people is contrasted to another one or in the case of threat. Similarly, a common enemy may evoke the feeling of identity. For the feeling of identity to grow, is it necessary to have a shared aversion against a common enemy?

In this sense, identity can become an instrument of political competition. Is it useful to assess the European identity with regards to a possible accession of Turkey?

There are different levels of identity. Multiple identities are possible. Multilevel governance in the style of the EU requires multi-level identity. How much collective identity is needed for Europe? Commonly agreed upon European values may be of utmost importance.

Shall we look for a European identity comparing Europe with other countries outside or shall we look inside Europe to forge a European identity?

- **Transparency and access to information and communication**

Citizens' participation depends a lot on how the political information they have access to is presented.

Communication between European bodies and the people is not really working.

The necessary institutions for democracy to grow do exist, but the communication between them and the citizens and people does not function sufficiently.

Many Citizens show a lack of knowledge about EU institutions.

- **The role of the elite**

Shouldn't a real democratic system encourage the people to get involved?

The elite will change because the people call for it.

Should political representatives still be divided into parties?

Two diverging answers given:

1. Yes, this is the only way for all of them to feel that their opinion has been taken into account
2. No, the political party system belongs to the past and does not contribute to efficient and representative decision-making.

Representatives and institutions need to give the people the feeling and evidence that their voice is important.

In order to improve democratic practice on the national level, we would need a change in the heads of the MPs: they would need to take their mandate seriously.

- **The role of the citizens**

Citizens would need to care much more about the political decision-making on the EU level. When do they care? If they feel that it directly affects them. For example, the job question is of high importance to most people.

Is the EU only dealing with technical issues citizens are not interested in? No, we have had major discussions on issues such as GMO, the telecommunication directives, the ACTA agreement, the Laval case.

(<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/definitions/lavalcase.htm>)

In how far is empowerment of the people a solution? What would this entail in the European context?

- empowerment of the EP
- empowerment of the national level
- direct democracy

When talking about “the people”, we need to be aware that “the people” is “us”.

- **The question of responsibility; coherence between the national and the European level**

Who should mainly inform about what type of EU issues, the national media or the European media?

National governments neglect their role in telling the people how the EU mechanism works.

The EU issues its Official Journal and there is an EU Ombudsman

(<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/de/home.faces>). Are these measures sufficient to communicate with the citizens?

The EU is often blamed by national governments. However, in the case of job creation, national governments have the responsibility.

In the case of national sovereign debt, we are facing the problems of who is responsible and who has the competence to take measures.

Possible questions for future discussions:

- The European Citizens’ Initiative
- The notion of identity: does it need to be exclusive? Can it and should it be separated into more specific parts (such as values for example)?
- We may think of democracy as a process instead of an existing situation.
- The relevance of political parties