

REDUCING THE EU DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT: A CONDITION FOR SUCCESSFUL CONTINUATION OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Tomáš Žipaj¹

ABSTRACT

The European integration process has recently shown many signs of significant stagnation. Over the past 15 years, there have been no significant changes or reforms in terms of the European Union (EU) primary law. The democratic deficit has been considered as a major challenge, as it is affecting the spreading of negative opinion about the EU and its relevance among the inhabitants of the member states. This article deals with the issue of the EU democratic deficit, arguing that reducing of this democratic deficit can be one of crucial conditions for the successful continuation of the European integration process. To achieve the main aim, a combination of study analyses, public opinion data, and past or ongoing discussions related to this topic was used. The results indicate that such a high degree of democratic deficit within the boarder framework of the EU may play a key role in shaping the European integration process. It contributes to the rise of anti-EU tendencies, a decline in trust towards the EU and its institutions, as well as increased tension among all main integration actors. Therefore, the supranational level should undertake necessary steps and implement reforms aiming at reducing the EU democratic deficit.

Keywords: European Union, democratic deficit, European integration, supranational institutions, integration challenges

INTRODUCTION

The European Union represents a unique supranational organization, often cited as an example of the most successful regional integration. However, even this story of successful integration encountered several obstacles in recent times. Since the failure of the adoption of the EU Constitution and the subsequent

¹ Postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Social Studies, University of Ljubljana, tzipaj@outlook.sk.

ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU has been stuck at a deadlock. Stagnation and lack of will to implement most necessary reforms, appear to be among the causes of the weakening of integration development.

One of the problems associated with the current stagnation and the formation of negative opinion about the EU, is the existence of a considerably high degree of democratic deficit. This democratic deficit significantly weakens public support for the EU and its institutions. Moreover, the sense of belonging to the 'European family' is also eroded, as activities at the supranational level often seem distant and disconnected from the needs of member state inhabitants. The EU is also facing challenges with potential future enlargement, which could lead to even more significant deepening of the democratic deficit.

The primary aim of this article is to examine the democratic deficit within the European Union, assessing its impact on the integration process, and to present some potential reforms that could help bridge the gap between EU institutions and its citizens. This article employs a qualitative approach, analyzing both primary and secondary sources, as well public opinion data such as Eurobarometer surveys, along with past or ongoing discussions related to this topic. This combination of analysis and consolidation of the mentioned elements serves to evaluate the existence and implications of the EU democratic deficit and possible ways of its reducing.

This article is based on the scientific assumption that reducing the democratic deficit within the EU should lead to greater public trust and enhanced support for European integration. To explore this scientific assumption, it is necessary to address the following questions:

1. *Is the high degree of democratic deficit one of key elements influencing the future trajectory of European integration?*
2. *What reforms can reduce the democratic deficit to enhance public trust and better support for the European integration process?*

The first chapter defines the term 'democratic deficit' and how this phenomenon manifests within the framework of European integration. The

second section explores the risks associated with the existence of high degree of democratic deficit in the EU, particularly its connection to the level of public trust and rise of anti-EU tendencies. The final part presents possible solutions and recommendations for reducing the EU democratic deficit, focusing on those that are realistic under current conditions.

1 DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION

In the framework of political science, the term 'democratic deficit' refers to the situations, where political institutions or organizations exhibit undemocratic features in their functioning (Rittberger, 2024). Furthermore, the term can be also applied in cases, where there is insufficient development of basic democratic principles. Similarly, it can be used to describe the democratic functioning of institutions when they are compared with fundamental democratic values, such as transparency, responsibility, and decision-making processes (Letki, 2024). In its latest interpretation, the democratic deficit is associated with the degree of influence that the domestic population is able to holds in shaping of political direction. This include the possibilities of effective citizen participation, the extent to which are their demands reflected, also the level of trust towards the institutional environment (Warren, 2009, pp. 17-40).

A 'modern' interpretation of democratic deficits stems from five main criteria, which serve as a guideline for analyzing the level of democratic deficit within various polities:

1. to what extend people understand themselves as authors of the laws passed by their representatives;
2. to what extend are people able to exercise public control of public institutions;
3. to what extend are voices of all people equal – in democratic environment the principle one person-one voice is used;
4. to what extend are addressed the needs of people which voices were 'overruled' and not have their representatives in government;

5. to what extent is able the polity enacts binding acts for all its inhabitants and have power to enforce their compliance (Lord, 2018, pp. 316-340).

The occurrence of the democratic deficit is frequently discussed in association with the EU integration area. However, when we are talking about the democratic deficit and its connection with the EU, it is necessary to contextualize it beyond the traditional political definitions. In the discourse about the democratic deficit, the EU cannot be considered as an undemocratic entity that operates against the basic democratic principles. The fundamental elements of the EU functioning are based on the promotion of basic democratic values, the existence of the rule of law, as well as the observance of human rights (Aims and Values...). Within the context of the European integration, the democratic deficit has its basis in the complicated relationship between the supranational level and the level of the member states.

The discourse surrounding European Union governance often centers on the tension between concepts of intergovernmentalism and institutionalism. Intergovernmentalism emphasizes the role of sovereign member state as the primary actor in the integration process, advocating for a higher level of national autonomy. In contrast, institutionalism promotes stronger supranational bodies and highlights the need for cohesive, more centralized decision-making to enhance efficiency and foster unity of the EU (Diez, Wiener, 2018, p. 32). The ongoing debate between these two paradigms shapes policy discussions, influencing the balance of power within the EU and determining addressing of complex issues. This tension significantly impacts the democratic deficit, as intergovernmentalism can lead to perceptions of limited transparency and public involvement, while institutionalism may be viewed as overreaching and disconnected from national interests of member states (Brack, Coman, Crepsy, 2019).

In the context of the EU, the democratic deficit can be understood among three main lines. The first line is based on the lack of transparency in decision-

making processes and rather complicated institutional arrangement. Complex decision-making mechanisms introduce opacity into political processes, which is perceived negatively by the general public (Ondarza, 2023). This issue also arises from the differences in the institutional structure, as it does not copy the classical distribution of power at the state level. The different institutional network causes some troubles with the identification of political responsibility, for specific measures among residents of member states (Kelbel, Navarro, Neihouser, 2020). Consequently, this situation results in a lack of interest in European affairs, as many citizens struggle to navigate within models of European governance.

The second line of existence of high democratic deficit within the EU, is based on the perception that despite the citizens of the member states can directly participate in the composition of the EU Parliament, its position in the institutional framework remains weak. The functioning of the Parliament is largely dependent on other EU institutional parts, especially the Commission and the Council of the EU. Within the 'legislative' or 'power' triangle, the Parliament holds the weakest position among participating institutions, resulting in a lack of autonomy (Kelbel, Navarro, Neihouser, 2020). The increase of the democratic deficit also stems from the fact, that the MEPs are elected to political groups (factions), rather as representing their 'home' member state (Members, bodies and activities...).

The third line characterizing the democratic deficit of the EU, is related to public perceptions that the EU, as an organization, is not defending the interests of its member states. In this model, citizens view the EU as an organization detached from reality, not reflecting the needs of its members (Peak, 2023). The origin of the myth about the of the 'Brussels bubble' exacerbates the democratic deficit, persisting since the establishment of the EU. Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing sense among the residents of the member states that their opinions regarding the direction of European policies are not adequately reflected. This myth stems from the theory that all important decisions are made

only within one power center, located in Brussels (Hooghe, Marks, 2001). In this context, the supranational level is perceived as disconnected from the intergovernmental one, lacking deeper cooperation.

2 CHALLENGES AND RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

The existence of a high degree of democratic deficit brings with it several challenges and risks, which subsequently impact the functioning of the EU. The complexity of the decision-making mechanisms and the lack of transparency of the institutional structure contribute to growing sense of mistrust towards the EU and its institutions. The lowest degree of democratic deficit is observed at the municipality level. This is caused by the fact that representatives at the local level are perceived to be closer to inhabitants and often decide on matters related to everyday life. Conversely, the higher the representative level, the greater the democratic deficit is. The increase of the democratic deficit is evident at the level of regions and at the national level, due to larger representative units being involved. This is the reason why there is such a significant sense of democratic deficit at the EU level, as many citizens of the member states consider the EU structures to be too detached (Hooghe, Marks, 2001).

The EU institutional framework is perceived by the citizens of the member states as something beyond their control, which automatically creates a sense of mistrust. Surveys conducted by the Eurobarometer have captured a trend of a significant decrease in trust in EU institutions since 2007, and what is more important, this trend persists. In the current period, the overall trust in EU institutions has been below 50%, which greatly hinders the building of a positive image of the EU among the residents of the member states (Standard Eurobarometer 97..., 2022).

QA6a.11 How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?
The European Union (%)

		Tend to trust		Tend not to trust		Don't know
		Sum.2022	Diff. Sum.2022 - Win.21/22	Sum.2022	Diff. Sum.2022 - Win.21/22	Sum.2022
EU27		49	2	43	-7	8
EURO AREA		46	7	45	0	9
NON-EURO AREA		57	5	36	-4	7

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 97 - Summer 2022, p. 73

The presence of a high degree of the EU democratic deficit is also closely linked to the rise of the anti-EU tendencies, such as Euroscepticism, populism and right-wing extremism. The Eurosceptic movement questions or opposes the process of European integration and other basic elements of the EU, its policies, basic principles, or institutions. Euroscepticism is mostly driven by concerns about national sovereignty, democratic accountability, cultural identity, and the perceived centralization of power within EU institutions (Torreblanca, 2013).

Currently, we are witnessing a significant rise of political representatives with Euroskeptical tendencies across all member states. In 2008, the preferences of Eurosceptic parties in national parliaments were around 13%. In 2022, preferences of Eurosceptic parties had risen to 22%. It is not just an increase of favor of the soft type of Euroscepticism, characterized by criticism of the EU, but the representatives of this line are in favor of continued membership. The most critical seems to be the rise of hard Euroscepticism, as proponents of this line are actively advocating for withdrawal from the EU and its complete disintegration (The development trap..., 2023). The presence of a high degree of democratic

deficit benefits representatives of the Eurosceptic trend. Through their rhetoric, they often question the legitimacy and credibility of the EU, arguing that the EU does not serve its citizens, lacks democracy, and prioritizes its own interests, without allowing meaningful influence to change this situation. They also emphasize the undemocratic nature of the EU by pointing out the fact that citizens do not have any kind of control, and the supranational level is detached from 'ordinary life' (Brack, Startin, 2015, pp. 239-249).

Alongside the increase in Euroscepticism, we are also witnessing the rise of populism and right-wing extremism. Political parties with anti-EU tendencies often use external threats as a central part of their rhetoric to reinforce their positions and garner public support. These threats often include the topic of migration. By highlighting this kind of issue, such parties blame the EU as being unable or unwilling to adequately protect national interests and sovereignty. This strategy aims to amplify public fears and skepticism about the EU's capacity to ensure stability, cultural identity, and security. In doing so, anti-EU parties often emphasize themes of nationalism, advocating for tighter national control over policy areas that they argue the EU has mismanaged (Hynčica, Maškarinec, Novotny, 2016, p. 216). In cases like that, the democratic deficit is used as a justification for these claims, suggesting that the lack of direct citizen control contributes to poor policy responses and incapacity to deal with these issues.

Politicians with Eurosceptic, populist, and radical tendencies are more frequently gaining executive functions, which often hinders the necessary development of the EU. At the level of the European Council and the Council of the EU, there is growing lack capacity for action, as the adoption of decisions takes a relatively long time. This situation creates tension at the supranational level and limit the ability to act effectively and flexibly (Rohrschneider, Whitefield, 2016). The increasing heterogeneity of attitudes across the spectrum of member states complicates the intergovernmental negotiations, which puts the entire integration process into a 'trap'. This issues mainly affect the areas that require decision-making through unanimity or consensus. The primary reason

for this is that the dissenting opinion of even one member state representative is enough to block the adoption of the most important decisions (Žipaj, 2021, pp. 198-206). On the other hand, decisions made through the QMV are often presented by these representatives as undemocratic. If their member state has not provided an approval, these decisions tend to be presented as undemocratic, forced, and against the interests of their member state (Žipaj, 2023, pp. 55-64).

The internal instability stemming from the existence of a high degree of democratic deficit, is also affecting the external position of the EU, as the chain of democratic legitimacy is weakened. Mistrust towards the EU and its institutions, along with the rise of anti-EU tendencies, such as Euroscepticism, populism, and right-wing extremism, fosters increase of mistrust among integration actors. The perception of processes as undemocratic, imposed, and not reflecting the requirements of the participating actors, leads to an increased sense of mistrust between fundamental elements of European integration. This mistrust not only contributes to the weakening of the integration processes internally, but also to weakening of the EU external influence (Latici, 2021). Consequently, not only is the future continuation of integration processes at risk, but also the EU geopolitical position, as the EU is significantly losing its ground compared to other powerful state actors.

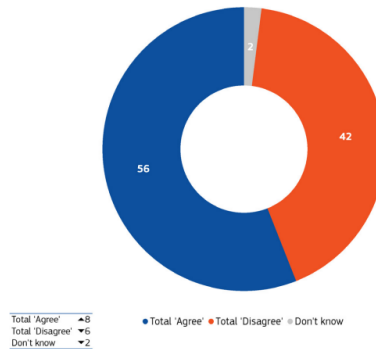
3 POSSIBILITIES OF REDUCING THE EU DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

If we want to discuss the possibilities of reducing the democratic deficit, it is necessary to consider various possibilities for achieving this goal. Of course, this discussion must be grounded in realistic foundations, aligning in line with the intentions of potential changes without disturbing the fundamental principles of the EU functioning. Likewise, our focus should primarily be on options that are already under discussion, with the possibility of achieving 'more democratic' functioning of the EU.

The first, and probably the most favored option for reducing the democratic deficit within the EU, involves potential extension of the powers of the EU

Parliament. This proposition is based on the presented thesis that, despite being the only directly elected supranational institution, the institutional position of the Parliament is weaker compared to other institutional bodies. Notably, the Parliament lacks the power of legislative initiative, also remains highly dependent on the decisions made by the Commission and the Council of the EU. This lack of institutional autonomy results in situations where, although EU citizens can choose the composition of the Parliament, MEPs have very limited over European affairs. Strengthening the Parliament's institutional position would contribute to reducing the democratic deficit, by fostering a greater sense of influence in shaping the direction of the EU (Csernaton, Latic, 2020). Another argument supporting this proposition, is the fact that the EU Parliament has long been regarded as the most reliable EU institution, according to the polls. Higher trust in the Parliament arises from the perception among the EU citizens that Parliament is the only institution over which they might have direct influence. Over time, the Parliament has not emerged as the most trusted institution just within the EU, but the European Parliament constantly enjoyed a higher degree of trust compared to the national parliaments of the member states (EU Post-electoral survey...).

D72.1 To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:
-My voice counts in the EU (EU27) (%)



Source: EU Post-electoral survey 2024, p. 57

In the special edition of the Eurobarometer called 'Post-electoral survey', conducted after the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, more than half of respondents agree that their voice in the EU counts. This finding could serve as another argument for strengthening the position of the European Parliament, as citizens of member states could gain a stronger sense that their needs could be reflected through a directly shaped international body.

Strengthening the competence framework of the European Parliament was also among the recommendations resulting from 'The Conference of the Future of Europe'. The conference's conclusions stated that enhancing the position of the European Parliament would promote overall democratization as well as the bond between the EU and its citizens (Plottka, Müller, 2020). Reforms aimed at strengthening the institutional position of Parliament could include granting it legislative initiative or expand the areas where MEP's could have full co-decision powers, what may be seen as more realistic option (Parliament 2024..., 2024). Another potential reform could involve strengthening Parliament's role when it comes to procedures dedicated to revision of the fundamental Treaties. There are also calls to give the MEP's greater competences within fiscal policy, as the European Parliament, being a directly elected supranational body, should have direct influence over distribution of Union resources (Gozi, 2021). Naturally, making shifts within the competency framework of EU Parliament requires a change to the EU primary law. Therefore, in any potential revision of the founding Treaties, it will be necessary to consider this possibility and to enhance the position of Parliament.

In the context of increasing direct influence on the direction of the EU, which is also associated with the potential reduction of the democratic deficit, there have been discussions regarding the direct election of the members of the European Commission, or at least its president. These discussions supported the idea that citizens of the member states should have the opportunity to directly elect a commissioner for their member state. This approach would enable the citizens to influence not only the composition of the Parliament but also to shape

the composition of the executive branch, in the form of the Commission (Decker, Sonnicksen, 2011, pp. 168-191). The idea of a direct election of the President of the Commission moved closer to reality with the discussion about the concept of the 'Spitzenkandidates'. Specifically on this topic, a survey was conducted in 2022 across eight member states (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Germany, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy), regarding whether the President of the Commission should be directly elected. According to the survey, up to 64% of participants expressed support for the possibility of directly electing the 'head' of the European Commission (Gijs, 2022).

As with the European Parliament, potential changes within the Commission that have been suggested cannot be implemented without amending primary EU law. Matters concerning the composition of the Commission are outlined in Article 17 of TEU. Currently, the European Council proposes the candidate for the President of the European Commission. This provision would have to be changed if the head of the Commission possibly will be elected directly by the citizens of the member states. The same article would also have to be amended to allow directly elect the commissioners, as they are currently appointed by the political leadership at the level of the member states (Consolidated version of..., 2016).

Enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of subsidiarity presents another opportunity, how to contribute to the reduction of the democratic deficit. The principle of subsidiarity aims to ensure that decisions should be made at the closest possible level to the citizens of member states. Subsidiarity is also intended to ensure better control of measures taken at the EU level, specifically by the national, regional, or local authorities. Subsidiarity should also guarantee the principle of proportionality, which should ensure that the EU undertakes measures only if they are necessary to achieve its objectives (Principle of Subsidiarity...). In this area, more intensive debates began in 2017, when the working group for subsidiarity and proportionality proposed two fundamental measures:

1. to identify specific areas that could be re-delegated to the level of member states;
2. to identify ways for better involvement of regional and local authorities, as a part of the creation and implementation of EU policies.

The transfer of certain areas back to the member states and the greater involvement of regional structures could significantly contribute to the reduction of the democratic deficit (Task force on...). However, since then, there have been no significant shifts in the reconceptualization of competences, nor significant involvement of regions in the creation of EU policies. This lack of progress contributes once again to the current stagnation of the whole integration process.

The long-term quest for a compromise between supporters of institutionalism and proponents of intergovernmentalism is also closely related to the principle of subsidiarity. Institutionalists advocate for a stronger position of the supranational level, while intergovernmentalists demand a stronger position of the nation-state within the integration process. One proposed solution is the more precise realization of 'soft' interactions between both levels. It is the harmonization of needs of both fundamental levels of integration that could lead to the support of interests, satisfying both sides to a similar extent (Žipaj, 2023, p. 128).

The last realistic contribution to the reduction of the democratic deficit appears to be the improvement of education for citizens of the member states. Through education, it is important to clarify the importance of the EU, explain its functioning, also highlight accomplishments that have been achieved as a part of this successful project. Particularly, the attention should be directed towards the member states that joined the EU in the 21st century. It is important to focus on educating the middle and older generations, who may not fully realize the benefits of the EU (Meet us...). As part of efforts to improve the communication between the EU and citizens of the member states, *Europe Direct (ED)* centers are being established across all member states. Currently, there are

approximately 420 of ED contact points in operation. However, a big issue is that they are not distributed proportionally across the member states (Europe Direct Centres...). Additionally, if we divide the number of ED by the number of EU citizens, there is less than one contact point per million citizens. Expanding the network of ED contact points could also contribute to a better understanding of the EU and increase the trust in its functioning and supranational institutions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that the level of democratic deficit may play a crucial role in shaping the future direction of European integration. The existence of such a significant democratic deficit within the EU is causing problems related to the sense of belonging to the 'European family'. A high degree of democratic deficit is also causing that many citizens don't realize the benefits of this successful project of regional integration. Mistrust and negative attitudes toward the EU also significantly contribute to the rise of anti-EU tendencies, such as Euroscepticism, populism, and right-wing extremism.

Reducing of the EU democratic deficit seem to be very important element for the development of the integration process, as it could contribute to:

- Increasing trust towards supranational level and EU institutions – this can be achieved through better education about decision-making processes and higher engagement of citizens in shaping the integration process.
- Decreasing of anti-EU tendencies – decline of Euroscepticism, populism, right-wing extremism could occur, as EU citizens feel that demands and requirement of member states are being reflected by the supranational level.
- Increasing participation in elections to the European Parliament – by transferring more powers to the EU Parliament, election turnout could be higher, as citizens will have a greater sense of influence over EU matters.

- Strengthening the chain of democratic legitimacy – by increase of trust among all integration actors, tension can be reduced, and the compromises about reaching a common position can be achieved more easily.

Therefore, reducing of the democratic deficit can be considered as one of the essential requirements for further development of European integration processes. Without possible reducing of the EU democratic deficit, it will be very difficult for the EU to overcome the challenges it faces, which will once again lead to significant stagnation in the development of integration process. This unique kind of democratic deficit, which has emerged only in the context of the EU, seems to be responsible for creating barriers that hinder the supranational level from fully developing its potential. Representatives of both main integration levels should take this into consideration and try to reach a common position. The outcomes of these interactions should aim to reduce democratic deficit and promote sense of trust between EU and its citizens across entire integration area.

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