

# For the European Republic



Stefan Collignon

The EU cannot be conceived of as a democracy in the traditional sense and its methods of making decisions to date has been ineffective and brought about a crisis of confidence. As the EU's powers have grown, this problem has become more acute. What is needed is a more transparent form of democracy, with European Citizens given a means of deciding between competing visions and policies.

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The European Union is established according to democratic principles. Democracy is a form of government in which the citizens act as the sovereign people with a mandate for an institution to pursue specific policies in their interest. This mandate is enforced through free, equal and general elections. Elections are free insofar as no coercion is exercised over voters; they are equal because each citizen has a single vote and general because every eligible voter can participate in the elections. Europe must be measured according to this standard.

### **The European Union is no democracy**

The European Union is no democracy. Rather in Montesquieu's terms it resembles a monarchy and the prince is replaced with a collective body of governmental heads of state from the individual member countries. Montesquieu defined monarchy as constituted by the fact that there is "the most natural, intermediate, and subordinate power" (Book II, Chapter 4, p. 16), which guarantees that the head of state is not a despotic ruler. We call this a constitutional monarchy. By contrast, "a republican government is that in which the body, or only a part of the people, is possessed of the supreme power" (Book II, Chapter 1, p. 8). If all citizens exercise this power collectively, the republic is a democracy. In the European Union, member states are the "the most natural, intermediate, and subordinate power(s)". But the citizens cannot appoint the European Council as the legislator in free, equal and general elections. They are powerless.

### **Be subordinate or leave**

The undemocratic nature of the EU is especially evident in the current Euro crisis. The European Council "compels" those countries experiencing difficulties to adopt a policy, which may have consequences for all citizens in the Euro zone, but those citizens involved are not eligible to vote on this. While elections take place in a national context, they are not 'general' because they are only ever held nationally. Who would call it a democracy if governments only ever acceded to their legal parliaments following by-elections? But this is exactly how the European Council functions. The Greeks may well say "No" to Merkel's austerity measures, but this sole instrument of democratic control does very little to change political will. To quote Berthold Brecht, "[...] Would it not be easier / for the government / to dissolve the people / and elect another?" Greece was always a pioneer of democratic innovation! In this case, democratic elections are reduced to a simple ultimatum: be subordinate or leave, be for or against the Euro. In this Union, however, there is no option to choose a different political strategy. There is no alternative to the strict path of austerity, or at least for a policy with a chance of greater success to get through the crises than those policies practised over the past three years. Democratic legitimacy would require all citizens concerned to have the opportunity to cast their vote.

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### European republic

The German Federal Constitutional Court has objected to the idea of a European democracy on the grounds that there is no “European people”. This is undoubtedly correct. Nevertheless, there are European citizens, that is, individuals who uphold the rules and regulations of the European Union and who are directly and indirectly affected by political decisions of the European institutions. In other words, even if they feel no sense of “European identity”, Europe’s citizens still have common interests deriving from the existence of the European Union and its institutions. The focus of this interest can be called a common cause, public goods or the “res publica”. I call the entirety of these public goods the European republic which is defined according to the extent of its influence. Every citizen in Europe is simultaneously a stakeholder for local, national and European public goods that must all be subject to their own specific form of government. Those who are affected by them, that is, the people using and therefore also funding such public goods must be entitled to decide collectively how they are to be governed. Jürgen Habermas has frequently suggested that citizens in a democracy are “the addressees of the law” and “simultaneously the authors of their rights.”



*What is meant by the term “European people”?*

### National parliaments cannot reinforce European democracy

This also means that national governments and parliaments cannot provide an adequate mandate for European policies because they only ever represent partial interests and not the interest of the people as a whole. The idea of strengthening democracy in Europe through the integration of national parliaments leads into a blind alley. This makes the business of government more difficult and offers no improvement, nor indeed a more attractive process. At the same time, the nation state is not obsolete, since it is still accountable for the vast spectrum of national public goods, in particular, for those areas relevant for everyday life such as social security, education, regional infrastructure and so on. However, the European republic is supplementary and complementary to the nation state and this

may also require national institutions to adapt to the European republic. Logically, this is the correct interpretation and application of the subsidiarity principle.

### **The “Monnet method” in crisis**

From the outset, the ambiguous nature of Europe’s political union influenced the process. On the one hand, the distant goal was a European federal state. On the other hand, the ideal was its actual realisation through practical steps of intergovernmentalism in conjunction with delegating competencies to the community institutions. This model, which is also called the “Monnet method”, is now in crisis. Precisely the success of European integration has always created an increasingly plentiful supply of public European goods, and at the same time attracted more and more “club members” like a magnet. The result is the increasing complexity – in geometric proportions – of the bureaucratic “coordination” of member state governments. In its early phase, integration was influenced by so-called “inclusive” public goods whose logic emerged from synergy effects, ‘win–win’ situations and community interests. This idyllic context changed as soon as there was community money. To adopt the economists’ phrase, money is the “hard budget constraint”. Hence, in numerous new political fields ‘either–or’ and ‘win–lose’ situations now prevail where one person’s gain is another person’s loss. In this new world, a strong government is required to assert the common interest defined by the majority of the voters. Since it is becoming increasingly difficult to generate

“output legitimacy” or “good” political results, governing at a European level must be supplemented by “input legitimacy” emerging from the debates about democratic alternatives.

### **Politics means conflict**

Consequently, the European republic is a political commonwealth. Politics means conflict – ideological conflict, too. It can only be appropriate for German Social Democrats to support Francois Hollande in his fight for an improved political agenda. Moreover, it cannot be wrong for German Christian Democrats to side with Nicolas Sarkozy. The problem is that German men and women and the French, Greeks, Italians and everybody else cannot collectively elect a government whose policies apply universally to them. However, we are definitely relapsing to a pre-democratic era when Die Welt newspaper describes Social Democrats as “traitors to the country” who are apparently stabbing Mrs “Merkel-Brüning” in the back.

### **An alternative political agenda for a renewal of Europe**

The traditional discourse of those federalists supporting a ‘United States of Europe’ has lost its power of attraction, among other things, because the federalists never took a stand for the right or left, and opted neither for a neo-liberal nor social Europe. Renewal can only emerge from a new polarisation of Europe where the parties put forward alternative programmes as well as candidates, and citizens as opposed to governments become the referees. The Europe of nations cannot do justice to the new tasks,

in particular, inside a monetary union. Divide et impera – according to this dictum, governing the different peoples may make it easier for the small leaders to rule, but this is not in the citizens' interest. As Willy Brandt so pertinently stated, "We must risk more democracy" because "Europe belongs to all of us!"

Vive la République européenne! ■

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