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The State of the European Democracy

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Well in the spirit of Montesquieu it might be useful today to ponder upon the nature of contemporary form of the European Union and its democracy. Indeed, would has he lived today, we can be sure he would have tackled the issue of relations between the European states and the their Union. This is what today defines the very core of European democracy.

At the very beginning we may need to state the obvious – there is no European democracy in a simple, traditional way of understanding democracy, as there is no simple European demos. Or, if it exists, it may prove too narrow, too elitist and too weak to carry the whole of the EU on its shoulders. Still, the European Union is not undemocratic, as is it much too often claimed, and its decisions are legitimized.

So far, the way the European issues were dealt with on the continent (post-1952 only) was the following. The European states got together to solve their burning problems, being it steel and coal, defence, agriculture, energy or common currency. Some of those problems were effectively solved, some others not (defence), or only much later and still partially (energy). Provided the participating states managed to agree, they most often delegated some (competition policy, trade, etc.) of their competences to designated agencies (the European Commission) to deliver the details and help them implement the agreements. This trial and error model proved highly effective.

Yet, in the mean time, especially from around the times of the Maastricht treaty, fundamental relations between states in Europe slowly started to change. The concept of European citizenship was introduced, the Euro was born. The Schengen concept greatly facilitated travels for our fellow citizens and internal EU borders faded in our minds as delineating security. People started to benefit from their rights to free movements and unconstrained investing across Europe. Here, the most recent EU enlargement also contributed with a number of Europeans seeking their life opportunities across the EU as well. The “Erasmus generation” was born with ever growing number of young students exploring their lives in other countries. In all, this brought tremendous economic growth, but also a bit of insecurity for our national citizens. It slowly also brought additional layers of politicization of European dialogues. There are foreigners invited to the Hague to discuss the fortunes of European democracy these days. We all, Europeans, for good and for bad, are getting more and more interested in the situation of Greek administration, Hungarian constitution, Bulgarian’s Roma, first Irish now Cypriot banks, Spanish regional debts, wages in Germany, length of work time in France, Dutch attitudes to the Polish workers, Italian comics, etc. We all are getting politicized in European sense.

On the institutional side, the economic and financial crisis of today has forced the European Union to seek for creative solutions to new problems. Although not foreseen by the treaties, bailouts for member states were needed and consequently arranged in form of mutual borrowings, the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). The European Central

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Bank went as far as to offer the outright monetary transactions, a promise to buy the governments' bonds from secondary market, which was an instrument that actually pacified the financial markets as for now. All instruments of support for ailing European states were coupled with incentives and obligations for short term savings and longer term reforms. This in a sense natural approach was also taken over in the fiscal compact in form of yet another treaty based mechanism. 'No support without reforms' seems to be the modern slogan of international governance, reached back to Europe.

Here we witness the basic most challenging effect of current times for democracy. Our citizens' feeling of policy making naturally refers us back to our nation-states. Still, when those fail, as was amply proven around the world in modern times, and currently hits back Europe, the states in need turn for international support and seek it on our – citizens' – behalf. They do so in Europe not only occasionally for sake of one-off bail out, but also permanently for the future. We are accustomed to this way of nation-state operation in Europe, as all the previous treaties were of that kind. Still, they were an elitist affair. Until the Maastricht treaty, and not any longer. Today, our states' treaties are also our own, citizens' affair. The problem is that for us, the citizens, the international affairs are not our internal, domestic affairs. Even our European experience was not enough for changing that perception. We still look at the European sphere as a part of international one, even if it acts with a direct effect on our lives. We, the Europeans, have not crossed this perception Rubicon, if ever we would be able to do so.

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