Steven Blockmans and Sophia Russack (eds.): Representative Democracy in the EU: Recovering Legitimacy

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The European Union (EU) is in a crisis. Democratic freedoms in Europe have not been faced with such a level of strain since the end of the Cold War. Authoritarian forces have been gaining a significant amount of support and political power in the last ten years, both globally and in the Union's member states. The number of attacks on freedom of press and media, and the silencing and murders of journalists in Europe are shockingly unprecedented. At the same time, the European debt crisis and the refugee crisis have drawn new lines of division across the continent; the concrete impact of these shifts was first felt in the Brexit referendum in 2016 and continues to see expanding legislative repercussions, most recently in Poland and Hungary. Given the post-national character of the recent crises, *Representative Democracy in the EU: Recovering Legitimacy* (2019) seeks to analyse *"how representative [...] national parliaments [are] in their decision-making on EU matters"* (P. 5). In the following review I first present all the obligatory information surrounding the book. Because the book is quite broad, I then present its main arguments and content only in an abstract manner. I offer a summary critique of the book from a sociological perspective on EU studies and discuss its contribution to the larger academic debate.

The volume was edited by Steven Blockmans and Sophia Russack, both researchers at the *Centre for European Policy Studies* (CEPS), a think tank specializing in European Union affairs. Published in 2019, it is a collaboration with 20 other think tanks from the *European Policy Institutes Network* (EPIN) and co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The 36 contributors are all experts on EU affairs and the countries they focus on, with the majority of them conducting research in their respective countries. This localisation of analysis represents one of the book's main strengths in terms of factual information, but also contributes to its synthetical limitations (which I discuss in more detail later).

As part of the *Towards a Citizens' Union* (2CU) project, it constitutes the second book in a three-book series. The first volume concluded that citizens' interest in direct democracy has increased as a result of past crises. The book under review focuses on the state of political structures in the EU, specifically on the national parliaments of the member states and their degree of 'Europeanization', the relationship between them and EU-level bodies, and the state of democracy at the EU level. Drawing on the findings of the first two books, the third volume proposes how to counter populism and

enhance democracy with the underlying assumption that democracy can be improved by balancing direct and representative democratic processes.

The point of departure for the book is the notion that the European Union cannot react in a fast and efficient manner to recent crises (such as the Euro Crisis and the migration crisis); citizens feel inadequately represented and have low trust in EU institutions, enabling the rise of populism in wide parts of the Union. Steven Blockmans thus argues that representative democracy currently faces *"a crisis of both efficiency and legitimacy"* (P. 2). Framed by an introductory and a concluding chapter by Stephen Blockmans, the book consists of three thematic parts. Part I is dedicated to "Transversal Aspects and Thematic Issues", starting with Dídac Gutiérrez-Peris and Héctor Sánchez Margalef, who identify challenges, limitations and opportunities for representative democracy today (CHAPTER 2). They conclude that national governments are currently struggling to address local consequences (such as the rise of illiberalism and loss of faith in democracy) of global processes (e.g. geopolitical struggles or post-national issues). In Chapter 3 Daniel Smilov and Antoinette Primatarova challenge how effectively Voting Aid Applications (VAAs) manage to address low voter turnout in EU elections. They find that VAAs are unable to mobilise non-voters and thus fail to address the low voter turnout in EU elections, but rather make information about European politics more accessible to citizens – albeit, they note, the information provided tends to be somewhat abstract and misleading.

In Part II of the book, Sophia Russack brings the analysis to the "EU level." While the European Parliament (EP) has expanded its influence, responsibilities and scope of action, this development has not been reciprocated in the EP elections, which experienced unprecedentedly low voter turnouts in 2014. She argues that the reason many EU citizens feel confused by EU institutions and consequently don't vote is that the European Parliament and national parliaments are built from *"different constitutional 'DNA'"* (P. 52). Russack sees especially the Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidate) system, *"a national institutional practice that has been applied to the EU level in the expectation of similar positive effects, while ignoring the different setting of the EU"* (P. 57), as exemplary for her argument.

The chapter provides the transition into Part III of the book, the 14 individual Country Reports representing 13 out of the 27 EU member states and the United Kingdom. One of the book's strengths is the variety

of the country reports, as they deal with countries from all European regions, and provide a concise overview of the regional differences in the EU. The authors point out how beneath the surface not everything works as well as generally perceived, like Denmark's parliamentary EU scrutiny or Italy's 'perfect bicameral system'. They also shed light on focal points of past and contemporary crises, like Greece and Poland, and epicentres of both Euroscepticism (Czech Republic) and further Europeanisation (Latvia).

This part of the book argues that the Europeanisation of national debates is an uneven process, both EU-wide and within the parliaments themselves (as the upper houses are generally more active in EU matters); EU matters are politicised only to a low degree and the relationship between the national level, the EU and the voter is often unclear and in some cases even non-transparent for citizens. Instruments of the parliaments to influence EU policies largely exist but are either not used to their full potential or misused entirely. Furthermore, the structure of the EU itself favours the European Council and governmental positions over the parliaments and thus often undermines parliamentary efforts. To exemplify, I would like to just point to two of these reports, which represent both 'the new' and 'the old' EU, namely the Czech Republic and Denmark.

In their chapter on the Czech Republic, Jan Kovář, Petr Kratochvíl and Zdeněk Sychra analyse the disconnect of Czech parliamentary democracy and the EU level. The authors give a concise overview of the two chambers of the Czech parliament, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, both of which have a committee dedicated to EU affairs. However, the Chamber's committee does not discuss its decisions with the entire plenary, and what is more problematic, membership in the committee is seen as a 'last resort' for parliamentarians as the Czech public is so Eurosceptic that dedication to EU matters does not bring electoral benefits. In the Senate, on the other hand, EU affairs are discussed more in depth and resolutions require a plenary vote to be adopted, but the Senate holds less power than the Chamber and is generally perceived as unnecessary. The authors conclude that this institutional setting undermines any efforts from politicians to get more involved in EU matters and as a result there is a clear divide and hierarchy between the national and the EU in Czech politics. They note that the disconnect between the national and the EU level *"not only causes problems in promoting Czech interests in the EU,*

it also has significant impact on the perception of European issues in the Czech Parliament, especially in the Chamber" (P. 125), essentially reinforcing the already prevalent Euroscepticism.

Maja Kluger Dionigi takes on the convention of Danish parliamentary practice as a *"textbook example of parliamentary control"* (P. 129) over EU matters. She argues that while it is true that Denmark's tradition of minority governments and its specific mandate-based system have given the parliament a strong hold over the government's EU stance, the Danish model is far from perfect. For one, the mandate system limits Danish EU politics to its specific committee in the parliament, possibly leading to a lack of expertise on specific matters. Moreover, the debates on EU issues are largely depoliticised as the government makes sure to gain support from the pro-EU parts of the parliament, thereby constituting a lack of plural opinions. The author concludes that in practice the national and the EU structures are not as compatible as in theory and this incompatibility undermines the parliament's chances to influence EU policies, resulting in a lot of early agreements and mandates given on incomplete information.

In the limited space of this review it is unfortunately not possible to engage with more of the country reports. Nonetheless, all of them are important and timely reads, whether one as a reader reads only selected chapters according to one's own interest or the book as a whole. While the chapters are similar enough to contain a common thread, the book escapes the tendency to become repetitive with some chapters breaking up the strict polity focus. Worth mentioning here is especially the country report on Poland, but also Chapter 2 on the current challenges of democracy and Chapter 3 on Voting Aid Applications. The wide range of authors offers quality insight and analysis, especially considering that they are not only experts on EU matters but can also draw on their own experience of living and researching in the selected countries. This serves especially to give countries in the 'peripheral' regions of Europe a voice and circumvents a common shortfalling seen in similar works that offer predominantly Western views on the rest of Europe. However, it should be said that the width of the book is a double-edged sword: because it so ambitiously presents half of the EU's members, the book cannot go into as much detail as desired, at times leaving the reader with a number of follow-up questions, and at other times making the reports somewhat indistinguishable from each other.

In the end Steven Blockmans concludes that there is a divide in Europe running not between the Northern and Southern, or the Eastern and Western countries, but rather *"between those systems in which citizens feel represented and those in which they do not"* (P. 359). Unfortunately, this is where the book falls short. It would need a more interpretive, overarching conclusion to tie all three parts, but especially the individual country reports together – what exactly are the recurring issues that national parliaments face when they have to make decisions on EU matters? One point, for example, would be the problem of time that some of the authors picked up on: decisions on EU-wide policies often have to be made on relatively short notice and thus cannot be discussed in detail in the parliaments, providing an obstacle in the democratic process. Another point would be how national discussions of EU matters are often framed in domestic terms, and it would have been interesting and beneficial if the authors had elaborated more on this argument, since it is a collective, but at the same time individual issue. 'Framing in domestic terms' inherently applies to a different context in the Czech Republic than it does in the UK or Austria.

The editors claim to *"focus[…]on polity rather than policy or populism"* (P. 6); however, they do not actually cover polity in its entirety. Instead they only discuss the technical aspects of polity, limiting the discussion to the question of political structures of the EU and electoral law. Approaching this topic from a sociological background, I do not agree that the current crisis is predominantly a crisis of the legitimacy and efficiency of representative democracy. I rather believe that it is a *"multi-level legitimacy crisis"* (VAN APELDOORN 2009). I think it could be rather misleading to isolate political structures from the political process as a whole as is done here, and I do not agree that the EU's crisis can be resolved simply through the implementation of more elements of direct democracy. Direct democracy is not an end unto itself but is accompanied by its own risks. These make it necessary to analyse its relationship with populism in the age of media democracy in greater depth.

By taking such an approach the book reflects the problems it fails to address. Namely it focusses on technical matters while disregarding substantial concerns (be they economic inequalities across the Union, or issues of national and collective identities or values, to name just a few such concerns), and the reactions to these shortcomings (populism). In that way it runs the risk of reproducing those problems. Structure and content go

hand in hand; they both constitute each other and at the same time determine politics as a process. With this in mind, it is questionable whether the problems identified in the country reports – namely the inefficiency of national governments in standing up to global forces, the discrepancy of national and EU structures, and the framing of EU debates in domestic terms – would be fixed by implementing more elements of direct democracy. In any case, I would say that this book is a valuable contribution to a larger interdisciplinary debate on the future of the EU and should be recognised as such by a professional audience.

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