

# EUROPEANISATION FROM BELOW

## DEMOCRACY AS A DRIVER OF INTEGRATION

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Can democracy be the project that leads to further European integration? Social scientist Donatella Della Porta provides a diagnosis of the current state of European democracy, and tells us whether today's pro-democracy movements have the potential to become the driving forces of a more united Europe.

**E**uropean democracy – together with European integration – is in a deep legitimacy crisis, as austerity policies and other developments have put extreme pressures on it. Decisions at the EU level have moved towards the least transparent institutions, such as the European Central Bank (ECB), and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN). Among the citizens of Europe there is resentment about the fact that in Europe today the emphasis is on regulatory ideas instead of democratic ideas, and the main goal of the EU seems to be the expansion of the freedoms of the market, rather than the improvement of the social wellbeing of its people. Looking at the EU's own statistics, such as the Eurobarometer, one could have seen the obvious warning signs well in advance, but the EU institutions have simply overlooked them.

A decade ago, two-thirds of European citizens said they trusted Europe. Now about two-thirds say they mistrust it. More and more people associate Europe with negative sentiments, and the mistrust for EU institutions has increased to the extreme in the European peripheries, especially in Southern Europe. The percentage of citizens in the southern Member States who have positive feelings about the EU is below ten percent today.

This text is an edited compilation of Professor Donatella Della Porta's answers to questions by the Green European Journal.

And the Left cannot simply dismiss this as a sign of populist right-wing refusal of Europe. Many of those who (even some years ago) were struggling for another Europe are now dissatisfied with what

the European Union has become. So today, people are more and more sceptical about the potential for democratic institutions to be built at the European level.

## **EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS HAVE NEVER BEEN PERFECT**

Democracy at the EU level has always been problematic. Even political scientists who are sympathetic to the EU and its processes have always said that there are challenges, which are difficult to address through the development of electorally accountable institutions. There have been some major deficits in the construction of the institutions of democracy, especially political parties and political elections.

For a long time, European elections tended to be second-order elections: people had little interest in European politics and tended to vote on national issues. And often national priorities were the ones that decided issues in the institutions themselves – even Members of the European Parliament tended to vote based on national loyalties rather than their affiliation to a party family. Moreover, the democratic dialectic between different positions has never really been developed in the European Parliament, as the dynamic was based on broad coalitions. Thus, there has been little capacity to create deliberative arenas. This is something that has frustrated a lot of

citizens, who have perceived their capacity to be heard at the EU level as extremely limited. In countries like Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, there has been increasing resentment as the EU institutions have shown no signs of solidarity with those more in need – not even the Social Democrats.

But what people have resented the most since the start of the economic crisis is probably the fact that the EU (in particular, through the Troika institutions) has produced lots of dictates to Member States, not supported by the people, and not supported by national parliaments themselves. In addition, the European Parliament, an institution that was supposed to acquire more power with the process of European integration, has, in reality, been deprived of its decision-making power. As main decisions have shifted towards the least visible and least accountable institutions and various new regulations created – which impose very specific policies of cuts in public services, privatisation and liberalisation – many citizens perceive this as meeting the interest of the few, and increasing the suffering of the many. Take, for example, the issue of Greece and the potential default, when decisions were made by the financial ministers of “Eurolandia,” following the (apparently unsuccessful) idea that the main and only aim has to be the defence of the free market at the expense of social protection. This is a very empty and unpopular form of politics.

## BEHIND THE CURTAINS

This brings us to the paradox of the EU. While the European Parliament is not doing enough, there is also the impression that more and more decisions are made at the EU level, but that these decisions are made behind closed doors. What really counts is the economic interest of the stronger Member States, while any idea of building solidarity is lost in the European debate.

While formally there is more power for the elected organs, in reality, the Fiscal Compact<sup>1</sup> and similar agreements developed during the financial crisis impose the dismantling of the very model of a social Europe that had served to legitimate European integration. Decisions are then taken away from elected bodies and displaced into the executive, into the markets, and into the least visible international organisations, like the ECB and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They have played a huge role in making people think that there is no electoral relevance whatsoever, because, contrary to what the voters wanted, the Troika started to dictate how much national governments can spend on social protection at home.

The proponents of illiberal democracy – Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, or Marine Le Pen (who is not yet in government,

but might soon be) – are all profiting from this visible decline of institutions of electoral accountability. Essentially, their open attack on democracy is a response to a previous attack on European democracy; an attack that was carried out by the European institutions themselves.

## SOCIAL RIGHTS LEGITIMISE DEMOCRACY

Democracy has, in the past, been made up of many different institutions: for example, the institutions of electoral accountability, but also the institutions of participation, such as political parties or trade unions. And these institutions were complemented by the so-called public sphere (as theorised by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas), which made it possible to discuss political issues not just inside the above mentioned institutions, but also among the people, as well as social movements in different size and form. Given the steady decline of traditional parties and trade unions, the civil society organisations active in the public sphere have become very relevant institutions of democracy in our times.

Through the public spheres, citizens have participated by controlling those in power, and social movements have been very relevant in developing new concepts of democracy. They

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/european-council/pdf/Treaty-on-Stability-Coordination-and-Governance-TSCG/>

were, for instance, the ones to introduce the idea of social rights, such as the right to welfare (in order to complement individual rights like property, or political rights, such as the right to vote). Social rights have legitimised democracy among the people, as they have managed to provide citizens with protection.

And movements have also introduced arenas of additional democratic life. The labour movements have, for instance, often put pressure on governments, not only for democracy in the parliaments, but also for democracy in the workers' councils. The same has been done by student movements to improve participation in universities, whilst users of public services have been demanding more participation in decision-making.

## BEING PART OF POLITICS

In terms of participation, many social movements have indeed been successful in empowering people by giving them a feeling of being part of politics. Moreover, they have developed the idea that it is not only a matter of including many people in participatory mechanisms, but it is also important to create spaces in which the so-called deliberative dimensions of democracy can take place. This

means spaces, free of power relations, where high quality communication produces new collective identities and solidarities.

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This development of alternative conceptions of democracy goes against the over-simplification of the conception of democracy at the institutional level, where democracy was all about delegation and majoritarian decision-making. These move-

ments gave instead importance to a democratic way of producing ideas and not just decisions. This passed through the introduction of consensual decision-making: the idea that you can make spaces for normal, non-politicised people to participate in politics. This is fundamentally different from the elitist and minimalistic visions of democracy that are also visible in today's representative institutions.

The elites say, 'we need experts, we need professionals' – while the movements say, 'we need the citizens, because they are also experts and they can contribute their own knowledge to single out problems and solutions'.

The empowerment of people has been the greatest effect of social movements, such as the global justice movement or the anti-austerity protests, in Europe and beyond. And this

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is a feature that movements can still provide in Europe. In Spain and Greece, you can see that people started to trust politics again. They now see it as something that belongs to them, and through which they have the right to participate in the decisions that have an effect on their lives.

### CREATING BROADER SOLIDARITIES

Spain's Indignados and other movements have managed to produce lots of new alternative institutions, such as citizens' assemblies, self-managed cooperatives, and other types of solidarity initiatives. These organisations and movements are aiming at building new forms of societies, associations, social movements, alternative unions, etc. Through their work it became obvious that if we want democracy to be an inclusive integrating force it should not only be about delegation, but also about participation. Moreover, it should not just be about majority voting but also about the creation of spaces through which ordinary citizens can participate in politics. Because these are the kinds of experiences that can have an empowering effect, and can bring people closer together.

This was very visible with the example of movements against austerity all over Europe, where citizens from different social groups, generations, gender and religions participated. This kind of democratic process brings some hope for Europe.

This follows up, to a certain extent, on the idea of a European democracy built from below that had developed within the so-called European Social Forums (ESF) in the early 2000s, which brought together social movements, unions, NGOs and other interested parties. They have developed very sophisticated ideas about possible democratic alternatives at the European level, and through this, Europe was legitimated as the right level to address these issues. The proposals for "another Europe", a democratic Europe of solidarity, implied the creation of spaces of encounters among citizens to elaborate ideas about social and environmental policies, but also foreign policy for a Europe of peace.

Democracy at the European level can indeed develop only if citizenship rights, such as civic, political and social rights, are recognised rather than considered as subordinated to a so-called logic of the market. It requires that the political character of decisions at EU level is not hidden behind an obsolete image of a “benevolent” Europe; this character should rather be explicitly acknowledged, and the possibility for citizens to participate in the decision making at EU level increased.

At the moment, however, developments in the EU have disappointed those who hoped for a democratisation process. The anti-austerity movements that have developed in many countries against austerity policies, steered by EU institutions, still have difficulties in coordinating and creating broader solidarities at the EU level. Some attempts in this direction, such as the European Days of Struggle, or the Blockupy campaign – which targeted the ECB – still remained much narrower in scope and reach than the European Social Forums (ESF). The very idea that Europe is the right level at which to build solidarity is challenged, especially among the new generation, who tend to find the idea of Europe as overlapping with the EU far too narrow.

This does not mean that there aren't any issues that could restart a process of Europeanisation from below. Nowadays I see, in fact, some possibilities for such a process to

redevelop. One possibility is related to the movements that show solidarity in relation to the refugee crisis, which is very clearly seen as a European problem, where it is very clear that solidarity cannot be expressed only at the national level, and a solution has to come through an EU level democratic process. And there is also the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), against which the opposition is very strong all over Europe, with a large majority of citizens criticising it for its potential effects on social and environmental rights, and the very protection of the people over the market. The question is only if the younger generations can be convinced that the idea of Europe can also be an inclusive conception, not just the exclusive one that it is perceived as being right now.



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