

Ferenc Miszlivetz
The Future of Europe: Democracy, Civil Society and
Enlargement

Laurence Whitehead in a recently published article, links the complex and blurred issue of Eastern enlargement of the EU to what he calls „democracy promotion”.*

As is usually in the case of European enlargement, reality moves ahead of theory and the social sciences: one can agree with Whitehead that the Helsinki Summit of Dec. 1999, which concluded to start accession negotiations with ten East Central European countries for both the EU enlargement and to the processes of democratization in East Central Europe embraces a high-risk component. His main argument vis a vis conventional wisdom of integration and democracy theories is that “the EU’s strategy of democracy promotion through enlargement puts external processes in command; brings into question the authority of such key national institutions as the parliament and raises the risk of conflict between those willing to conform to external conditionalities, and those who can – or will – not.”**

Is Eastern enlargement to be seen as an honest effort from Brussels of democracy promotion or has more profound causes such economic interests, political and security constraints etc? This question is a controversial. Nothing can be more true, however, than the assertion that the historic experiment of Eastern enlargement is a complex, uncertain process, most

* The Enlargement of the European Union: A 'Risky' Form of Democracy Promotion. Central European Political Science Review, Volume 1. Nr.1, September 2000

** op.cit. p 17

likely surrounded by unintended results which “could easily carry high costs to the EU as a whole....”***

The problem with democracy in the present globalizing, postnational epoch of Europe is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify an exclusive unit of analysis; in other words, a physically and geographically defined “demos” or constituency. Analysts and theoreticians, after recognizing that the nation state has lost its exclusive status as the frame of society and democracy and consequently seem to be an exclusive unit of analysis, often fall back to the nation state paradigm. They are unable to identify any other unit of certainty and are discouraged by the chaotic complexities of the trans- and sub-national world. Even trans-nationally collected statistical data are based on national surveys and are reflections of a cognitive map of the passing period of the nation-state.

There is consequently no consensus among scholars concerning the nature of the European Union and its trans- and supranational institutions. Many believe that those institution as well as the very process of European integration is no more than an aggrevation and permanently redefined balance of national interests. They have good and solid arguments but they don't tell us the whole story.

*** ibid

There are good reasons to criticize wishful thinking about an emerging pan-European demos or a strengthening European identity. One can agree with Whitehead that in order to be represented, the demos needs to be enumerated*, but it is more questionable whether the task of representation can be carried out only and exclusively by the nation-state in the future. The European nation-state is a rich amalgamation and finally synthesis of deuce, complex and inter-woven historical processes, whose constituting elements and institutional heritage go back to the ancient Greek and Roman times and the first and most mighty grassroots movement of social criticism, Christianity. But it is also a construction, a model which became universal because it was universalized and often super-imposed by its most prominent and strongest proponents. This universal model of the modern European nation-state, with its most salient characteristics of absolute sovereignty, has been dominant and almost exclusive for centuries. It has been able to survive its major contradictions and increasingly catastrophic wars waged under the banners of its constituting ideology, nationalism, since it has served the interests of the major players in the epoch of industrial capitalism, providing the most efficient units and structures of production, distribution and efficiency maximalization. Indeed, this would not have been possible without a strong set of values, beliefs and collective identification. Some of them, as mentioned earlier, were natural, “organic” products of European history. Some of them, but not all of them. As recent secessions and frictions of the post-Jalta decade clearly show, identities, traditions and values, claimed to be homogeneous and unified by individual nation-states,

* op.cit. p 31

do not exist in their idealized, ideologized or ideal forms. Not only the multi-ethnic states of the former Soviet bloc – the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia – have been dissolving in the vacuum left behind after the collapse of the bipolar world system, it is the nation-state, of Great Britain, Spain, Italy and Belgium which show signs of disintegration and friction and within which formidable regional, national or ethnic secessionist movements and sentiments took momentum and became intensified in the last decade.

Relying on the nation-state as the only credible framework of democracy and civil society would be an attempt to stop historic change and transformation. It would mean neglecting robust (and real) social, cultural, political and economic processes at work while trying to preserve something which already went through an essential metamorphosis. This metamorphosis does not mean that the nation-state as such is going to disappear or that it has lost all of its functions and meanings and as a consequence does not count anymore. There are allegations and exaggerations of defenders and believers of the nation-state who try to ignore counter-arguments by exaggerating them or making them ridiculous. The nation-state does exist and will continue to do so for a long time. It will be able to implement policies, cut or raise taxes, promote or undermine democracy, etc. As in the past, it will be able to do many good and bad things. But during the turbulent decades of the 20th century, especially from the outbreak of the WW II it has lost, partly by giving up, its absolute sovereignty and by giving up absolute sovereignty it has lost its ability to reproduce the belief in its exclusivity and almightiness and unanimity. The image of a world clearly divided and

circumscribed by nation-states – at least where Europe is concerned – has been fading away for decades and today this process has reached the critical level of irreversibility.

One of the great mistakes of the defenders of the past paradigm is a reliance on the dichotomy of the nation-state versus the European Union. Whitehead believes that whereas the nation-state “has been capable of drawing on deep reserves of shared belief and traditions, the hypothesized demos of a united Europe would only be united around a very > thin < set of values...” There are shared belief and traditions of nations, ethnic groups, religious communities, socially excluded or marginalized strata, societies belonging to historic regions etc. The geographical boundaries of these groupings or entities, however very rarely overlap with the boundaries of the existing nation-states. They can be found more often encapsulated within a particular nation-state, or many times in cases of regions and ethnic minorities or they exist across frontiers.

Indeed, the EU does not possess, frame or construct a particular demos. The processes of European integration combined with that of globalization and the transformation of the former Eastern bloc stirred up many of the sentiments, values, identities and interests swept under the carpet until '89 and have created new, similarly powerful ones since then. The creation and crystallization of sub-national and transnational movements, networks, regions or other groupings requires a new concept – or re-conceptualization – of democracy itself in the post-national area. By creating supranational

structures and institutions of and for decision-making, the EU has given a fundamental push for this development. If it is able to put a limit on the forces of disintegration, growing uncertainties and ambiguities which itself helped to set in motion, is an open question.

The lack of Democracy in the EU

Schmitter noticed not only the decline and crisis of nation-state democracies together with the growing contest of citizens, but the growing dissatisfaction with the lack of democracy at the EU-level as well:

“ ...individuals and groups within the EU have become aware of how much its regulations and directives are affecting their daily lives and that they consider their decisions to have been taken in a remote, secretive, unintelligible, and unaccountable fashion.... Europeans feel themselves, rightly or wrongly, at the mercy of a process of integration that they do not understand and certainly do not control – however much they may enjoy its material benefits.”*

This state of affairs is not what one can call a crisis of legitimacy – in Schmitter’s words one cannot talk about a ‘permissive consensus’. One can only agree with him that these trends are interrelated and together create a potentially dangerous “double bind” for a future Europe.**

Schmitter calls for democratic reforms, stressing their urgency. Eastern enlargement, as he points out according to the expectations formulated

earlier in this essay provides not only an excellent opportunity but even a high pressure for reforms. But who will act? Who is going to take the first, radical and courageous steps? The signals we get from recently published commission-reports and the rumours spreading from the Brussels-labyrinth often contradict official declarations of the Brussels-bureaucracy and are discouraging.* Repeating that the EU is ready to accept even 10 new members out of the 12 candidates and publishing reports about the unmanageable wage/income differences and underdeveloped education and health care systems of the same candidate suggests that accepting yes, in principle, and in practice we have to wait until you catch up. Or another version of “Two Europes” will be created within the new ... of the EU. Maybe the situation is not yet chaotic enough to bring out the necessary creativity from politicians, activists and decision-makers. Schmitter made an excellent point by stressing the exhaustion of the Jean Monnet method. In the case of Eastern enlargement, integrative institutions will not develop and function more efficiently on the ground of the Spillover effect between functionally related issue arenas. For that the challenge is far greater, real differences are far bigger and the unconscious socio-psychological elements of a historic East-West divide are more powerful. The Verhengen syndrome showed us there is a growing need from below for future democratization within the EU. And the agenda of eastern enlargement has certainly reinforced this

* p 116

** Ibid.

* See Anna Diamantopoulou's report from the social affairs department which claims that the low level of education and vocational skills in Central and Eastern Europe is hampering economic and social development. The inability of the countries of the region to create jobs and train workforces is endangering their prospects of closing the wagegap with existing memberstates, the Report says. „Insufficient or inappropriate investment in human resources development can mean that countries lack the skills needed to compete in newly opened

grassroots demand: citizens really want to have a say about fundamental decisions before its too.

Old and new spectre are haunting Europe: the spectre of democracy and that of the Eastern enlargement. Democracy has its old – ancient Greek fundamentals and all the historically evolved elements but it is characterized by an unprecedented momentum: It does not have geographical or physical boundaries. Or at least one cannot tell with certainty where they are Schmitter agrees with those who believe in constitutionalizing the EU. But he warns that this only can happen in small steps and gradually.

“Only by deliberately politicizing the issues involved at the level of Europe as a whole and by gradually building up expectations concerning a more definitive set of rules with regard to citizenship, representation, and decision making can one imagine a successful constitutionalization of the EU.”*

One can agree with Schmitter *in abstracts* but what about Eastern enlargement the other, new spectre? It is far from being abstract and as a concrete fundamental change in the near future it is threatening many among the citizens of the EU-today.

foreign and domestic markets.” (The quotation is from European Voice, 19-25 oct. 2000, from the article Stark warning to applicant states over skills gap, by John Skelly)

* p. 119

My firm conviction is that there is no real enlargement without radical further democratization of EU institutions and decisionmaking. And radical democratization is impossible without a stronger and more visible, transnational European civil society. Many conditions – mental, ideological, infrastructural, technical, professional, etc. – are given for such a rapid strengthening and crystallization of such a civil society. The question whether there will be enough political will, solidarity and courage in European societies to make the decisive steps and come out from their well-protected national shells cannot be answered today with certainty. What remains with us is the hope.