The EU must produce policies which represent the interests of European people, or face failure

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Democratic representation has never been so misrepresented as in the current European climate, and this new collection argues that if the EU wants to regain the support of its citizens, more avenues for democratic representation are necessary. Reviewed by **Madalina Dobrescu.**

The Challenge of Political Representation in the European Union. Sandra Kröger and Dawid Friedrich. Palgrave Macmillan. November 2011.
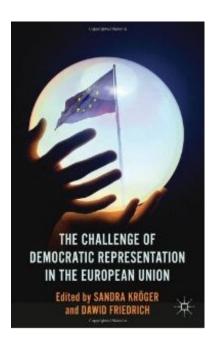
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Two eventful decades might have passed since the first arduous debates on the European Union's democratic legitimacy began in earnest, and yet the topic has never inflamed spirits as much as today. Today is, by all politically and economically sensible accounts, a make or break moment in the democratic development of the EU. The euro crisis seems to have had the effect of a bright spotlight on the 'democratic deficit' of the Union: it not only acknowledged its existence but highlighted and even augmented its flaws in a deeply unflattering manner. Across Europe, popular expressions of discontent at austerity measures point to a disjuncture between citizens and elites, while the practical imposition of austerity policies through the Fiscal Compact bypasses democratic requirements. Democratic representation has never been so misrepresented as in the current European climate.

The publication of *The Challenge of Democratic Representation in the European Union* thus comes as an opportune initiative to address perhaps the single most critical issue that will shape the future of the EU: its ability to produce policies which represent the interests of European people. Taking the view that governance does not respond to democratic representation challenges, neither does it quell the need for a representative government, the book is adamant in arguing that "the EU is in need of more democratic representation if it wants to regain the support of its citizens." The book's greatest strength is that it grounds its approach in a thorough understanding of the diversification processes which characterise the transition from national to post-national Europe: a geographical diversification which becomes evident with the emergence of transnational and supra-national arenas; a diversification of actors beyond parliaments to include less institutionalised actors such as interest groups, Civil Society Organisations, social movements, etc; a diversification of issues dealt with at the EU level (i.e. poverty, gender equality, global warming); and, finally, a diversification of competences among bodies such as the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions which are not equally accountable as bodies subject to electoral oversight. By covering a variety of actors and policy issues, the book provides an insightful analysis of the current state of democratic representation at EU level.

Interestingly (and regrettably), the authors find that, despite improvements introduced by the Lisbon

Treaty, the EU remains as vulnerable to 'democratic deficit' critiques as in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty (1992). The reforms that have been introduced in order to strengthen the legislative branch and make the executive more accountable have not successfully translated into enhanced democratic representation and have at times backfired. Thus, one of the main criticisms, as articulated in the context of the so-called 'standard version' of the 'democratic deficit' debate, is that the organisation of the EU's political system results in the strengthening of executive power and the weakening of national parliaments. As Tapio Raunio points out in Chapter 10, an attempt to correct this situation has resulted in national parliaments focusing more on controlling executives rather than representing their constituency, thus relegating the electoral dimension of representation to the sidelines in favour of government accountability. Moreover, while interparliamentary cooperation does take place both among national parliaments and between them and the European Parliament, this has not evolved into a platform for the representation of the interests of a transnational constituency; national and European parliamentarians remain to a large extent bound to their national constituencies (Chapter 3).

Another claim illustrative of the 'democratic deficit' debate is that European elections are not truly 'European', but rather 'second-order national contests' (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). This is confirmed by the research conducted by Emmanuel Sigalas and Johannes Pollak (Chapter 2) on the European Party Federations (EPFs) which concludes that the EPFs were unable to coalesce around a pan-European election program in the election campaign of the European Parliament (EP), because national parties preferred to adopt party manifestos that addressed their national constituencies. Thirdly, the 'democratic deficit' detractors emphasise that, even with a strengthened EP and genuine European elections, the EU would still need to deal with its perceived 'distance' from voters: electoral control of EU institutions is marginal and there is a psychological unfamiliarity with the Union's institutional structure. Echoing this observation, Chapter 8 shows how European citizens take as points of reference their national identities and politics even when discussing EU-related issues. In their analysis of discussions on the Internet about the 2009 EP election campaign, Asimina Michailidou and Hans-Jörg Trenz interestingly find that the majority of those expressing opinions felt the EU was not in a position to represent them legitimately. Finally, a 'democratic deficit' at EU level produces a so-called 'policy drift' from the preferences of the majority of citizens. This not only allows governments to promote policies which don't enjoy domestic support at EU level, but provides an effective channel for private interests to influence EU decision-making. Håkan Johansson (Chapter 5), Meike Rodekamp (Chapter 6), Erik Jentges (Chapter 9) and Heiko Pleines (Chapter 14) look at the role of Civil Society Organisations as representative actors and discover that more often than not they fail in providing balanced representation and instead represent particularistic interests.

The Challenge of Democratic Representation in the European Union makes a compelling argument for the erosion of traditional representative politics at EU level. While this can be easily explained through the diversification processes that lie at the basis of the European Union's political project, it is less clear whether the EU has the ability to inspire different forms of democratic representation. The closing paragraph of the book encapsulates the fundamental dilemma that this conclusion raises: will the EU move towards "a post-representative space (…) in which democracy is realized *ex post*, through mechanisms of accountability" and can political equality be achieved under these circumstances?

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Madalina Dobrescu is a Phd candidate at the European Institute. Her thesis will cover the European Union's role in conflict resolution in Eastern Europe. Madalina's research interests include conflict and peace dynamics, state-building and peace processes in Eastern Europe, the European Union's external relations, and Europeanisation processes. Read more reviews by Madalina.

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