

# Questions

## CIDOB



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## DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

### The expressions of a European disease

**Jordi Vaquer**, Senior Research Fellow Associate, CIDOB, interviewed by Oleguer Sarsanedas

**The European Union (EU) is widely praised as the economic political structure that has allowed Europeans to conjure the ghosts of the past: to grow and to prosper economically, and to overcome a historical tendency to engage in war against each other and beyond. In 2012 the EU was awarded the Peace Nobel Prize precisely for its historical role as a peace force. Jose Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, called it a “justified recognition” of a unique project that works for the benefit of its citizens and the world, and tweeted that the prize had been awarded to all 500 million EU citizens.**

**But many in Greece (and elsewhere) greeted the surprise award with astonishment. Panos Skourletis, spokesman for Syriza, the main opposition party, said: “This decision harms the institution of the Nobel peace award. I just cannot understand what the reasoning would be behind it. In many parts of Europe, but especially in Greece, we are experiencing what really is a war situation on a daily basis, albeit a war that has not been formally declared. There is nothing peaceful about it.” British Eurosceptics, on the other hand, allegedly remarked (according to *The Guardian*) that “this goes to show the Norwegians really do have a sense of humour”.**

**Today, very few would deny that Europe is the epicenter not only of an unprecedented economic crisis, but of an equally unprecedented political crisis. Some analysts view this conjunction as a resounding call for reviewing received concepts and proceeding towards greater integration, improving mechanisms of economic stabilization and stimulation, enhancing political representativeness and regenerating the conditions for citizens’ participation. Others bluntly speak of a serious disease that pervades Europe’s political fabric. Jordi Vaquer describes its scale in no uncertain terms: this is a multi-layered crisis affecting several (if not all) levels of government in Europe.**

## **Is it a crisis of democracy as we know it?**

In a democratic system, legitimacy rests on two pillars: first, the way in which decisions are made and, second, the results of these decisions. The crisis feeling that spreads throughout Europe today stems from the fact that the decisions made are not up to citizens' expectations nor do they objectively contribute to solving the problems of Europe. The ultimate responsibility for this state of affairs lies squarely in the EU member states, and is only partly attributable to the so-called "democratic deficit" of the Union's structures. This democratic deficit has become part of the Brussels landscape, even though the current crisis has made it even more apparent. For long the Brussels establishment has relied on results, in the absence of a decision-making directly responsible to citizens, to confer legitimacy to EU institutions. The news is all of this has changed. Furthermore the "democratic deficit" affects not only European institutions, but also national democracies. Actually, as several analysts point out, current problems in Europe have to do with the inability of national and EU democracies to arbitrate amongst interests in a fair manner, as proven by simple, straight-forward facts: governments are being soft on the powerful and harsh on the weak (as shown by the different treatment of debt and bankruptcy for families, punished with evictions, and for banks, which are bailed out) and unable to regulate all-powerful markets (as revealed by the 2012 interest-rate-fixing Libor scandal in the City of London).

## **Would the "Americanizing" of the European elites be a factor here?**

There is a popular perception of the USA, in many parts of Europe, as a land of wild, unregulated capitalism –a view that ignores the strong regulation and anti-trust tradition, dating back to the 1930s (its demise is precisely at the root of the current economic troubles). Actually, what seems to be happening is a twin phenomenon: the Latin-Americanization of the US and the Russification of Europe. Both trap you in a vicious circle: you need money to wield power, and you use power to make money –this is the Russian model and, traditionally (although not so much nowadays), the Latin-American model too. In US Congressional races, for instance, over 90% of successful candidates outspent their rivals –not quite buying your seat, but uncomfortably close. What has happened in both the US and the EU is that the tight controls over big capital and large corporations which had been in place since the Great Depression and World War II were lifted by the de-regulation measures of the Clinton/Bush years. That de-regulation did then make it to Europe –embraced with particular enthusiasm in the UK–, and created the necessary conditions for the present crisis situation. Both Europe and the US are going through similar processes –although, admittedly, the US is ahead. At the onset of the economic crisis in Europe, it was customary to blame it on the US/UK financial sector, but later we have seen that unhealthy relations between politics and banking in places like Spain or Ireland caused as many troubles. The same applies for France and Germany, where large corporations are being defended by the government as if their own interest was the national interest.

## **Or the European interest...**

Or the interest of citizens, which is what should count. Each country shows different expressions of the same disease: politics at the service of private or partial, rather than general, interest. But this is not an American disease we have been infected with. It is a matter of political weakness: weak governments facing strong economic powers. The transfer of wealth from labour to capital has been undertaken in Germany and most EU member states, and so has the privatization of the public sector (the case in point being Berlusconi's Italy): today, very few European governments can resist the onslaught of economic powers.

## But is this the only erosion factor?

The discrediting of the functioning of democratic institutions entails a devaluation of democratic values –values such as no discrimination, equality, the fundamental rights. So, at a time when the choice of a country’s basic economic management models has been sharply reduced, these values come to be perceived as the values of a given group –not of every citizen. This is particularly true of East European countries where, as Slawomir Sierakowski puts it: “The choice presented to voters is not between Right and Left, but between Right and *Wrong*” (i.e. between the Euro-Atlantic, business-friendly and liberal consensus, and reactionary, excluding, ultraconservative options). Ivan Krastev completes this perspective: “Before, the citizen was the boss; now, he is the human-resources manager” (meaning: the citizen cannot choose the policies, only who carries them through). Surprisingly, disaffection is hitting Northern Europe too, where small countries with long-standing democratic systems are witnessing the surge of xenophobic/populist parties. Values such as coexistence and solidarity, in short, have come to be associated with a system that does not perform and deliver to everyone’s satisfaction –so that defenders of an open society end up being seen as representatives of only a few, namely “them”. Populism extols the values of “the people” and sets them against the elites’. This is happening today throughout Europe –in the East, but also in France (where *laïcité*/secularism, for instance, is distorted into an excluding concept). This antidemocratic drift has many expressions: some, it should be noted, are positive (in the sense that they have the capacity to regenerate or substitute the system), while others carry a dangerous load (political violence, extremism, demagoguery).

## What are these expressions?

First, a sharp drop in confidence in institutions. In many countries, parliament and political parties are right at the bottom of the citizen-confidence ranking, whereas unelected institutions (the police, the army, the crown) make it to the top. Second, voter radicalization: it produces unprecedented election results –in France, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, Hungary. Third, social mobilization: it is now a defining feature in many cities and regions, in particular in Southern Europe (a positive element to the extent that it works, in fact, as an antidote for political disaffection: it helps citizens reconnect with the political process). Fourth, disengagement through sheer alienation of a growing percentage of citizens who do not participate in mobilizations, give up affiliation to trade unions and parties and become apathetic or cynical.

## Let’s talk about Greece

Yes. Greece is the place where the European crises intersect with the highest intensity. Greece endures problems that also exist elsewhere in Europe (the economic crisis, plus the EU institutional crisis, plus the democratic legitimacy crisis), but tops it with a fourth crisis that affects Greece in particular: the refugee crisis. The EU has managed to stem the flow of irregular migration through its Southern borders in Spain, Malta and Italy and repatriate to North Africa those who want to get in. But, as a result, most people-smuggling routes now converge in Greece: with its hundreds of islands, Greek borders are extremely difficult to control; and Greece’s neighbor, Turkey, does not accept repatriations of migrants. Today, up to nine out of ten illegal entries into the EU are through Greece. An added setback is that Greece belongs to the Schengen area, but does not have direct land borders with any other Schengen country. So, refugees are piling up in Greece (travel by plane or boat out of the country is easy to control), and this means that the government, particularly unequipped due to a historical lack of a reception policy

in Greece and beset by the consequences of the harsh Troika-designed austerity measures, is quite unable to cope. All the European crises, plus the curse of geography: this is Greece today. Admittedly, we should not minimize the responsibility of Greece's previous and current governments, but there is no other country in Europe where the EU management of the crisis is so grim, the legitimacy crisis so deep, and the migratory pressure so high. What needs to be understood is that Greece is not collapsing from its own ills, but from the impact of extremely strong pressures. Some talk about the weakness of Greek civil society, but if the most consolidated democracy in Europe were to be submitted to such a hellish pace of change, what would the reaction of its civil society be? Europe is just not conscious enough of the intensity of the pressures and the fast deterioration of the situation in Greece.

### **Is Spain going the Greek way?**

At the onset of the Euro crisis, it was wrong to compare the two: the modernizing processes undertaken in both countries after their respective dictatorships were widely different –and Spain did do its *homework*, as orthodox economists would put it, to a much greater extent than Greece. However, Greece and Spain are now much closer (and so, by the way, are Ireland and Portugal) due to the blind neoliberal policies that have prescribed the same policy concoction for different realities. The realities are thus converging –but this does not mean that the destinies of both countries are necessarily the same. There are four main differences between Greece and Spain. First, Greece has been (tough luck) an experiment, the guinea pig of extreme austerity and punishing and exemplary policies; there has been some learning from errors on the part of the experimenters, so that each new bailout is less ominous than the previous one. Second, the speculative attacks on both Greece and Spain are attacks on the Euro –so, to the extent that the Eurozone consolidates itself and decisions are made (on banking integration, for instance), speculation will decrease. Third, a large part of the adjustments in Spain, unlike in Greece, were undertaken prior to entering the danger zone. Fourth, base conditions in Spain are quite different from Greece's, not only because Spain is a much larger, better equipped economy, but because Spain has no added difficulties such as the migratory pressure. All this does not mean that Spain will not end up having huge costs: unemployment is already unacceptably high, and millions are experiencing severe hardship, the challenge will be to avoid a break-up of social co-existence. But both Greece and Spain are also examples of resilience, of civil societies that will not just sit and complain, but actively rebel against their current plight. This is their main strength and the reason to be optimistic about Europe, in the long run.