Student Feature - The Challenges of Democracy and Democratization in Europe

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STUDENTS OF GOETHE UNIVERSITY FRANKFURT, JUL 29 2014

Writing blog posts gives students the opportunity to construct scientific-based arguments in plain English and synthetic form, present their views to a broader audience, as well as develop quick discussions on hot topics. Dr Sergiu Gherghina from Goethe University Frankfurt asked his students of *Challenges of Democracy and Democratization in Europe* to submit blog posts instead of mid-term academic essays in the hope that their works will represent valuable starting points for more detailed analysis. Here, E-International Relations presents some of the posts, which we hope will encourage other academics to adopt more innovative assessment methods.

The European Union: A Rapacious Beast?

By Saskia Pehlemann

Radical right wing and anti-European parties, especially in Austria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Poland and the UK, gained large support in the May 2014 European elections. Although the conservative European People's Party under Jean-Claude Juncker managed to record the highest percentage of all votes, it leads to the controversial question as to why European citizens feel they should give negative votes to impair stronger parties that vigorously commit to and support the Union.

Altogether the right wing and Euroskeptic parties increased their support to approximately 19% of the vote. Above all others, in France and the UK their achievements created political quivers. The French Front National under Marine Le Pen for the first time reached almost 25% of the national vote while the Euro-antagonistic UKIP triumphed with about 27%. Even Denmark's right populists of the Dansk Folkeparti took the lead with 26.6%, and Hungary's Jobbik reached 14.7% while the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreich concluded the elections with a notable 19.7%. Leaving even these behind, with 32.4%, the highest performance on the right belonged to the Polish Law and Justice party.

Since the election Le Pen's Front National focused on constituting a faction including parties from other Member States that uphold similar ideologies. The first targets were Geert Wilder's Dutch Freedom Party, which obtained 13.2% in the Netherlands, as well as the Austrian FPÖ or the Italian Lega Nord (6.2%). However, the small group of nationalist party leaders failed to gain enough allies to qualify as a single parliamentary group in the new European parliament denying them speaking time, committee positions and precious funding.

Surely reasons for this swing to the right may be country specific with particular sources of discontent among citizens, especially because it was not merely the right extremists who gained such notable support. Many left wing and socialist parties succeeded in acquiring a remarkably high number of votes, especially in Germany and Romania. The French president's small governing balance, for example, might be one reason for many French citizens to leave the center and give their votes to extremist parties, while in Greece one could see the cause in the ongoing financial crisis.

Another possible reason can be the fact that in many EU-countries the mainstream parties, mostly liberals and social

democrats, have either deviated from their principles and ideals or they have become too similar for voters to make a difference. Under these circumstances it is difficult for people to identify with their beliefs and ideologies. For example, in Germany voters can hardly differentiate between the center-left (SPD) and center-right parties (CDU) and find it increasingly complicated to express preferences for either. Hence they basically seek to provoke mainstream parties by becoming protest voters. In the UK this remains an issue where the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party have difficulties pointing out how far they want to go in letting the Union take control over national decision making.

So far, European democracy has not convinced voters that a monetary union of geographically close nations could spread a greater feeling of solidarity and connectedness among European citizens than socialism or nationalism. Considering the results of far right and left parties in the recent elections, one may argue that history seems to repeat itself. For example, in the events of the 1917 October revolution in Russia or post-World War I Germany, either socialism or fascism overthrew monarchic systems. The similarities are there now, too, although this time people do not try to free themselves from an oppressing monarch but from an organization that they once appreciated for its common monetary and customs agreements.

While the first elections of the European Parliament in 1979 had a high voter turnout, participation among European citizens in all Member States has since decreased steadily. This leaves room for anti-European factions to grow stronger in influencing citizens in how they see and feel about 'Mother Europe', irrespective of their own national governments' deficiencies in adapting to the economic standard set up by the Union. They increasingly see the European Union, with its 28 members, as a non-transparent, billions-of-dollars-gulping bureaucratic beast that antagonizes its members with constant and unnecessary regulations that grows from their surrender of national sovereignty. It remains to be seen the extent to which the actions of the newly elected European Parliament, and soon new European Commission, in the following five years in office will alter this perspective.

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Nationalism – For better or for Worse?

By Rebecca Ohanes

On 10 August new presidential elections will take place in Turkey. The incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is officially nominated to run for another term. Opinion surveys show that he will most likely be reelected, despite his undemocratic endeavors, which include, among other things, a corruption scandal and restrictions on social media. This contradicts the nation's goal to join the EU, insofar as it shows an aspiration towards democracy while still clinging to an undemocratic ruler. Does Erdogan's nationalist agenda and its public resonance act as a restrictive force for the development of democracy?

Erdogan is known for and has been criticized for several undemocratic decisions over the past years. The best known was the ban on Twitter and YouTube to prevent the circulation of sound recordings that could link him to corrupt activities. Also, there were excessive police activities against civilians during the Gezi park demonstrations and the recurring issue of the truth about the Armenian Genocide and discrimination against the Armenian minority in Turkey. In light of these issues, Turkey is an aspiring democracy that lacks fundamental democratic elements such as freedom of press or of speech. Yet the Erdogan administration has still managed to prevail.

For years now, Turkey has been striving to enter the EU, a struggle that has led to more democracy and to a more extensive protection of the human rights. Yet, the accession never occurred since many EU Member States were against it – based on the above-mentioned flaws – arguing that there is still work to be done in Turkey. The result of this assessment is frustration and lack of understanding from the Turkish government and citizens. Following these developments, Erdogan reflects and encourages this notion of victimization and went as far as claiming that he does not have any interest in joining the EU. In a recent visit in Germany he asked the Turks living there not to be assimilated and implied that Turkish citizens were being discriminated against. While a part of the Turkish diaspora protested against Erdogan, the majority seemed to agree with him. So the question remains: how is it possible for a

nation to still support a government that tends to withhold information from the public and to infringe their human rights?

Nationalism is a possible and valid answer to this question. It – being the unification of nation and state – endows people with a collective identity. People feeling loyal to their country will invest a certain amount of effort to try to maintain order. From this perspective, nationalism replaces democracy, based on the simple fact that due to the collective identity of the citizens those citizens need a state that represents them. And democracy is the tool that helps them express their opinions through media or, in a more robust sense, through protests; and, more importantly, legitimize the state through elections.

In the case of Turkey, there is a strong identification of the nation with the state, with Turkish nationalism being an important element that might explain this kind of (for some irrational) tendencies. In particular, the fear of losing their cultural identity is what drives the Turkish diaspora to refuse their integration in the host country. People who have left their country for better career opportunities and a more prosperous life tend to feel a certain kind of obligation to compensate the abandonment of their country; this kind of obligation translates itself into a strong sense of loyalty towards their nation.

It is from this sense of duty that nationalism derives its paralyzing effect on incomplete democracies: the political actions and decisions of the state are generally perceived as legitimate by the population, given that their presumed primary purpose is to protect the nation's collective identity or rather its image. Meanwhile the state's attempts – may they be of undemocratic nature or not – to regulate and discipline the nation in order to maintain the status quo and avoid digressions are accepted without further ado.

To return to the example of Turkey, Erdogan legitimizes an arbitrary and to a certain extent undemocratic state regulation by invoking the nation's sense of collective identity. In having the people believe that his undemocratic decisions are for their common good, he makes them overlook or rather accept the collateral damage he creates. For example stopping the Gezi protests by force is to this day perceived by some as something that had to be done, in order to reestablish order in the country. People might not necessarily condone violence, but they are made to believe that there was no other option. At the same time, it should be stressed that nationalism per se is not undemocratic. It is a concept to preserve a collective identity and with that the basic factors such as the history, culture, and language that it is based upon. Instead, it is the abuse of nationalism, as indicated in the Turkish case, that produces negative consequences for democracy.

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The alternative vote on the ballot – a solution for the negative effects of electoral thresholds?

By Cara Schmitz

Electoral thresholds have been an issue of debate for many years. Their benefits and downsides are widely known. When the 2013 German general elections have seen 15% of the votes lost due to the 5% threshold, this topic re-emerged on the public agenda. The key question is how to avoid the negative effects of thresholds and how to make it more consistent with representative democracy? The German Constitutional Court decided this year that a 3% threshold for the European Parliament elections was illegal. The judges justified their decision by stating that a threshold harms the equal opportunities different parties have to have according to German Law. It was argued that the European Parliament, in contrast to the German Parliament, does not need stable composition of parliamentary groups.

The German jurist Hans Herbert von Arnim contributed to the debate about thresholds by suggesting an alternative vote for German general elections. According to him, voters would have a first and a second choice for the party on their ballot. The second vote is only counted in case the party, which was supposed to be voted first, did not get enough votes to be elected into parliament. Von Arnim does not think that abolishing electoral thresholds is a realistic possibility and thus finds the alternative vote a suitable option. Even though a system like this has never been used in

Germany, it is not a new idea. An Alternative Vote, also called single transferrable vote, is already used in elections in Australia, India, the UK or New Zealand.

Does the Alternative Vote diminish the negative effects of electoral thresholds? A logical consequence of thresholds is that voters may not vote for the party that fits their interests best, since they anticipate that this party might not make it into parliament. Instead they will vote for a bigger party that will surely make it into parliament.

The Alternative Vote would probably prevent strategic voting, but it cannot really eliminate the basic problem that thresholds have; namely that they keep small parties out of parliament and thus keep them from representing their agenda. The Alternative Vote does not address the source of the problem, but rather scratches its surface.

Another difficulty of the Alternative Vote arises when persons want to vote with their second vote for a party with little chances to gain parliamentary seats. Even with the Alternative Vote, the vote may not make a difference since both parties for which a citizen casted a vote might not make it into parliament. Instead of using an alternative vote it would be more reasonable to allow voters rank their preferences (e.g. 1,2,3,4 etc. next to the parties on the ballot instead of letting them tick two boxes). This system is called Instant-Runoff-Voting and is used in several countries, like Australia, India, USA or Ireland.

Under these circumstances, the Alternative Vote does not seem to be a suitable solution for the negative effects of thresholds. A way to eliminate the downsides of thresholds would be to completely abolish them, but since they also have positive effects this is not the way to go.

The important positive effects of thresholds are for example that they keep the number of parties, which are represented in the parliament, small. This helps to build strong governments and thus enables the government to take fast decisions. It also keeps radical splinter parties out of the parliament and leads to a more homogenous political constellation within the parliament. In Germany it is often argued that the 5% threshold in national elections is necessary to avoid fragmentation in the parliament, because such fragmentation had made it impossible for other parties to prevent the national socialists to come into power. The Weimar Republic consequently ended, because it did not have a militant democracy due to the fragmentation caused by too many parties with ideological differences in the parliament. This important historical fact is a strong argument for Germany to keep a certain threshold in the national elections.

In sum, the Alternative Vote does not solve the disadvantages of electoral thresholds, but it surely helps to minimize them. This discussion should be held in German Parliament and it would be appropriate to adopt the concept in German elections in order to minimize the downsides of electoral thresholds.

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Transnistria – unfulfilled dreams about a Reunification with Russia

By Julian Weide

After the Russian support for the separatist movements of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Transnistria, a break-away state that *de jure* still belongs to Moldova, but *de facto* is sovereign, hopes for a reunificationn with Russia. The unrecognised state finds itself in a deadlock for by now nearly 25 years. It is supported by Russia, but because of disputes with Moldova is still not recognised by any United Nations member state and Western authorities missed their latest chance to support a further democratisation.

Transnistria is located mostly on the left bank of the river Dniester. In the North-East it borders with Southern Ukraine and in the South-West with Moldova, which considers the break-away state as a part of its own territory. The population of Transnistria is estimated to be about 500,000 people. Its total area is 4163 km^2, not even half the size of the island of Cyprus.

The will of Transnistria to rather be a part of Russia than Moldova, or "even worse" – Romania, is based on their shared history and ethnic tensions. Ever since the settlement of the formerly scarcely populated historical region of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire, Transnistria has been populated by a multitude of ethnicities. This, in connection with its location, made it go through regularly shifting rule in the 20th and 21st century.

Also for this reason the percentage of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians in Transnistria is higher than in the rest of Moldova. Thus intimidated by the Moldovan nationalist movement Transnistria already in 1990 had declared its independence, however, it has neither been acknowledged by the still existing Soviet Union, nor the Moldovan government.

Until today these ethnic tensions are reflected by the languages spoken, written and taught in Transnistria. During the dissolution of the Soviet Union Moldovan nationalists planned to establish Moldovan written with Latin script as the only official language of Moldova. Today Moldova and Transnistria both recognise Moldovan, Ukrainian and Russian as official languages, but in contrast to Moldova, in Transnistria Russian is regarded as the lingua franca.

Furthermore, in Transnistria only Moldovan written with Cyrillic letters is regarded to be an official language of the country. Written with Latin script it is regarded to be Romanian. The Transnistrian government even banned Romanian from the country's schools and those ones that insisted on using the Latin alphabet in favour of the Cyrillic were closed. Transnistrian pupils who want to learn Moldovan using Latin script have to attend schools in regions across the border that are under Moldovan control. So while at first Transnistria sought to obtain linguistic and cultural self-determination and diversity they restricted it later on.

Even the denomination of the region can be seen as an indicator for ethnic conflicts of the region. Western authorities and media tend to call it Transnistria, which derives from Moldovan. The self-designation "Pridnestrovie" used by the breakaway state on the other hand derives from Russian. In this post I decided to stick to the term Transnistria because it is commonly used in Western Europe.

Beneath cultural and linguistic disputes between ethnic groups, military issues also play an important role in the conflict. When in 1992 ongoing quarrels lead to the "War of Transnistria" Russia alleged to stay neutral like it did in the conflict over the Crimean peninsula and Eastern Ukraine. Nevertheless the Russian military unofficially supported Transnistria against Moldova.

The war ended after four months with a ceasefire agreement that is held until today. Russian troops stayed in Transnistria and the "Joint Control Commission" of Moldova, Transnistria and Russia established a demilitarised zone around the border between Moldova and the internationally unrecognised state of Transnistria. The conflict remains frozen but unsolved.

Comparable to the Russian Black Sea Fleet that stayed in the Crimean city of Sevastopol also when Russia still acknowledged it to be Ukrainian, one of the largest Russian ammunition depots in Europe is situated in Cobasna, a small commune in Transnistria. Therefore a possible Russian interest in Transnistria may also be military. After the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula NATO General Philip Breedlove even worried about Russian troops running through Ukraine to Transnistria next.

Additionally Transnistria is also politically and financially supported by Russia. Moldova is one of the poorest countries of Europe. Therefore with Russian financial support people in Transnistria have better incomes. On the other hand Moldova prevents Transnistria from establishing any diplomatic or economic relations with recognised countries and therefore Transnistria stays dependent on Russian support.

In defiance of its isolation Transnistria or the "Pridnestrovien Moldavian Republic (Pridnestrovie)" defines itself as a "sovereign, independent, democratic, legal and secular state". The European Parliament in contrast describes Transnistria as a "hub for organised crime, smuggling and human trafficking" and banned its President Yevgeny Shevchuk from entering the European Union.

Shevchuk followed Igor Smirnov in 2011 as the second president of Transnistria. Kálmán Mizsei, until 2011 officially negotiating for the EU to solve the "Transnistria conflict", pointed to the chance these presidential elections in Transnistria represented to the solution of the dispute. Seen as a reformer, Shevchuk may have made Transnistria more independent from Russia if he had got sufficient support from the European Union and neighbouring countries.

For political reasons the involved parties missed this chance to foster democratisation in the region and although he has not been the favourite of the Kremlin, Shevchuk today calls for a "civilised divorce" from Moldova and a further political approach towards Russia. Russia lately officially refused Shevchuk's request for annexing, but still conducts military exercises in Transnistria.

In conclusion insufficient support from the West to solve disputes with Moldova keeps Transnistria in a political and economic deadlock. Therefore, people in Transnistria may even hope to be the next to be annexed by Russia.

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Divergent Discourse: Can the German democratic discoursekeep up with its integration tasks?

By Oliver König

In Germany, as in many other European democracies, there has been a discussion about political frustration and indifference. This was accompanied by a vague feeling that public opinion is misrepresented by political decisions, or even not represented at all, for perhaps the last decade. This was particularly tied to diminishing participation in elections, especially federal ones, exempting last year's Bundestag elections. This post, and the question prefacing it, seeks to explore possible causes for indifference, and how the structure of the political discourse may be reinforcing it.Political discourse is here the sum of all discussions about political issues and methods.

First, it is necessary to actualize those components of the discourse one can participate in without being elected to: on the streets, in protests, in cafés and among their peers, but also in forums and comment sections on news websites, places where people without a particular task in politics besides voting gather, criticism of the "politicians" and their decisions is more often than not the talk of the day. Protests however, are the only among the above examples that "old" media tends to cover, besides polls and elections, and typically, it is assumed only these three – protests, surveys and elections – are useful to inform the political decision-makers about the will of the public.

There are also institutions attempting to ensure an acceptance of top down policies, which is, for controversial topics, mostly the parties, which interact with both the incumbent politicians from their midst and the public in, say, election campaigns, but also through their own news outlets. More recently, these are accompanied by the Twitter accounts of various politicians, which are mentioned much more regularly in the news media or their websites than any other participative media. The role those Twitter accounts play in the process is however relatively unclear and their capabilities could be described as underutilized or perhaps irrelevant to the public, at least in Germany itself.

Besides these, outside of the formal system, there are NGOs and interest groups that are not strictly bound to parties somewhat in the middle, which often organize the demonstrations or receive media coverage if their topic is in discussion.

Now, can the question posed in the beginning be answered? There are at least three avenues by which an issue may be brought to political attention.

First, there are the political parties – currently four in the federal parliament: the SPD and CDU carrying the government, with the Green and Left parties in opposition. Since new parties rarely manage to gain access to the federal parliament, parties based on specific issues, such as the Pirate Party for digital rights and the AfD against the Euro, often end up marginalized on the federal and state levels. Their positions are then taken up by the existing parties, which may not have the personnel or credibility to spare to discuss them adequately whether inside the party or in parliament. Finally, it takes time and effort to build an association of a party and a topic, and most of the effort is

spent on “profiling” in the traditional topics for the assumed clientele of a party. For example, the CDU is perceived to have a weak understanding of digital rights, so the Green and Left Parties more often release statements on the topic, since their clientele is less “established” in society, and varies more.

Second, the media could cover an issue, or at least make it known once discovered, as it has happened with the NSA espionage affair, for example. One would not specifically require new media to discuss new topics; however, news providers tend to acquire a political position over time if they are not tied to a political party in the first place. However, the political positions taken by media themselves often reflect the assumed political interests, and mostly cover the formal political discussions or points of notice such as demonstrations or expert and NGO commentary, which limits their breadth of coverage. Internet-based participative media receive very little attention from the traditional broadcast and publishing media, so bringing an issue to attention via the media usually requires some organizational backing.

Thirdly, interest groups in civil society that often organize the demonstrations I mentioned, and are sometimes linked to political parties at least by way of common interest. One example would be the strongly networked anti-nuclear movement in Germany, which includes NGOs such as BUND and BBU. This ties into party clienteles, as the anti-nuclear movement is particularly associated with the Green Party, which itself grew out of the environmental and related movements. Other parties are also associated with NGOs, such as the SPD with trade unions in general, which tie strongly into its 19th century founding. However, most of these movements and their party associations grew over a long time, so a new movement can hardly pick up in just a few years.

Hence, it is difficult for newly introduced issues, and even more so for expert groups, to reach the slow-moving places of power, which is perhaps not a surprising observation, but aggravates the tendency of the formal political system to filter issues. This places the common denominator so low that hardly any social group can identify with it, feeding the oft-criticized political indifference. The problem may also lie in the volume of issues – perhaps not a single issue has ever fully vanished from the political agenda, and while ministries can expand to cope, the parliament, as the representation of political discussion, can only sustain so many commissions.

This problem of impermeability is surely not limited to Germany or the current age, but it will not vanish without decisive steps to permanently solve it. Without such steps, the decision initiative will permanently shift to outside the political system, which would cost society much influence on its own political framework, since no other social system is specifically legitimized by the society as a whole.