

THE EU BEYOND THE CRISIS: THE UNAVOIDABLE CHALLENGE OF LEGITIMACY

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The euro crisis has mobilized the masses and unleashed vitally important debates about changing the model of European integration, both economically and politically. Yet, as European governments deepen economic cooperation and the crisis appears to have calmed, European Union (EU) member states feel increasingly confident that fundamental political changes are not necessary. This is a dangerously short-sighted calculation. To build a truly democratic EU, citizens need to have a greater voice in decisionmaking.

Key Themes

- The current debate about integration largely recycles ideas that were put forward two decades ago. It does not acknowledge that with diverse social movements multiplying across Europe, the political dynamics have changed.
- Most suggested political reforms see the EU's democratic mandate to be legitimizing previous steps in institutional integration rather than debating European democracy's core tenets. This walls the democracy debate off from European citizens and is likely to undermine the EU's political stability in the longer term.
- A qualitative rethink of what constitutes democratic legitimacy in terms of European integration is overdue, but EU policies are generally heading away from initiatives that might foster such reflection.
- The EU's degree of formal, institutional centralization is not the primary factor that will determine democratic quality—the degree of open-ended civic engagement is.

Revitalizing European Democracy

Europe needs a culture of consent to underpin deeper integration. Tacit consent must lie behind the political compact Europeans make with the EU. The European project has gone too far to the other extreme, focusing on institutions rather than popular consensus. Institutional change must be the fruit of democratic debate.

Debate about integration should be more open-ended and accommodating of a wide range of views. Remolding democratic quality in the EU requires more vibrant civic debate and consideration of new forms of representation and accountability, even if that means offering critics more space.

The EU should nourish not devitalize representative processes. The stability of European integration depends on a mutually enhancing combination of representative and participative democracy.

The EU should encourage democratic experimentation and innovation. Debates about the future model of integration should tap into new ideas about democracy. Europe needs to determine how to channel grassroots civic efforts into effective, proactive democratic citizenship. The EU should move beyond existing, inadequate initiatives, such as the European Commission's New Narrative for Europe and the European Citizens' Initiative, to create a broader European public space.

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