EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 07.09.2023 | Yanis Varoufakis

Europe's fading democracy

In recent years, three developments have all but destroyed the idea of the EU as an effective force for good within and beyond Europe

The quiet days of August are a good time to contemplate the year ahead. Peering at my 2024 calendar, the European Parliament elections loom largest. Sadly, they fail to inspire me the way they did five years ago.

In 2019, I stood for the European Parliament in Germany while a German colleague stood in Greece. DiEM25, our pan-European movement, wanted to make the point that European democracy will remain a sham unless it becomes fully transnational. In 2024, such gestures are not even symbolically meaningful.

My weariness, as I face next June's European elections, is not due to any loss of interest in European politics or to recent political defeats, of which I have had my fair share. What wearies me is the difficulty of even imagining democracy's seeds taking root in the European Union in my lifetime.

The EU's democratic deficit

European loyalists will lambast me for saying this. How dare I describe the EU as a democracy-free zone when it is run by a Council comprising elected prime ministers and presidents, a Commission appointed by elected national governments, and a Parliament elected directly by Europe's peoples and vested with the power to dismiss the appointed Commission?

The hallmark of any democracy in deeply unequal societies is institutions designed to prevent the reduction of all human interaction to power relations. To keep despotism at bay, the executive's discretionary power must be minimised by a sovereign polity with the means to minimise it.

The EU's member states furnish these means to their polities. However, limited its choices might be, a country's citizens retain the authority to

hold its elected bodies accountable for their decisions (within the country's exogenous constraints). Alas, this is impossible at the EU level.

When our leaders return home following an EU Council meeting, they immediately shed responsibility for unpopular decisions, blaming their Council colleagues instead: 'It was the best I could negotiate,' they say with a shrug.

Crucial policies that a majority of Council members reject often pass easily, and there is no polity that can pass judgment on the Council itself, hold it accountable and, ultimately, dismiss it as a body.

EU functionaries, advisers, lobbyists and European Central Bank officials know this. They have learned to expect member-state representatives to toe the line and tell their national parliaments that, while they disagreed with the Council's decisions, they were too 'responsible' and committed to European 'solidarity' to resist.

And therein lies the EU's democratic deficit. Crucial policies that a majority of Council members reject often pass easily, and there is no polity that can pass judgment on the Council itself, hold it accountable and, ultimately, dismiss it *as a body*. When the Council reaches some half-decent agreement (like the one between the Spanish and Dutch prime ministers, Pedro Sánchez and Mark Rutte, to reform the EU's fiscal compact), national elections, which never focus on EU-level decisions, can cause them to vanish into thin air.

Moreover, the formal power of the European Parliament (which still lacks the authority to initiate legislation) to fire the Commission *in toto* is about as useful as equipping the Greek navy with a nuclear bomb to counter Turkey's threats to seize an islet close to its coast.

A rapid decline

None of this is new. But I am wearier today because three developments have all but destroyed the idea of the EU as an effective force for good within and beyond Europe.

For starters, we lost all hope that common debt might act as the Hamiltonian glue that would turn our European confederacy into something closer to a cohesive democratic federation. Yes, the pandemic led Germany, at last, to accept the issuance of common European debt. But, as I warned at the time, the political conditions under which the

funds flowed were a Eurosceptic's dream come true. The result? Rather than a first step toward the necessary fiscal union, NextGenerationEU (Europe's Pandemic Recovery Fund) ruled out a Hamiltonian conversion.

The EU has funded the erection of abominations that Trump can only envy.

Second, the war in Ukraine has killed off European aspirations of strategic autonomy from the United States, which, despite the official niceties following Donald Trump's defeat in 2020, continues to view the EU as an adversary to be contained. Whatever one believes a Ukraine-Russia peace agreement must contain, what is beyond dispute is the EU's irrelevance during the diplomatic process that leads to it.

Third, there is no longer any pretence that the EU is a purveyor of principled cosmopolitanism. Europeans disdained Trump's 'Build the Wall' campaign rallies, but the EU has proven more adept at building walls than Trump ever was. On Greece's border with Turkey, in Spain's Moroccan enclave, on the eastern borders of Hungary and Romania, in the Libyan desert and now in Tunisia, the EU has funded the erection of abominations that Trump can only envy. And not a word is being uttered about the unlawful behaviour of our coast guards, operating under the cover of a complicit Frontex (the EU's border control agency), which has indisputably contributed to thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean.

After the 2019 European elections, the liberal press expressed relief that Europe's ultra-right did not do as well as feared. But they forgot that, unlike the inter-war fascists, the new ultra-rightists do not need to win elections. Their great strength is that they gain power, win or lose, as conventional parties fall over one another to embrace xenophobia-lite, then authoritarianism-lite and eventually totalitarianism-lite. To put it differently, autocratic European leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán don't need to lift a finger to spread their chauvinist creed throughout the EU and Brussels.

I must convince myself that EU electoral politics is worth the trouble before I can convince anyone else.

These are not the musings of a Eurosceptic who thinks that European democracy is impossible because a European demos is impossible. It is the lamentation of a Europeanist who believes that a European demos is entirely possible but that the EU has moved in the opposite direction. We have watched Europe's rapid economic decline and its democratic (and

ethical) deficits develop in parallel.

Despite my misgivings, it's an easy decision for me to stand again in the European elections – this time in Greece with MeRA25 – precisely because my misgivings need to be aired during the campaign. The paradox is that I must convince myself that EU electoral politics is worth the trouble before I can convince anyone else.

© *Project Syndicate*



Yanis Varoufakis
Athens

Yanis Varoufakis, a former finance minister of Greece, is leader of the MeRA25 party and Professor of Economics at the University of Athens.