CENS 2017 PAPER SERIES

The state of democracy in contemporary Europe
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November, 2017
Every “really existing” democratic political regime operates within the boundaries of an internationally recognized territorial state. (If the European Union is a democratic regime this is by delegation from the 28 member states, which themselves would need to qualify as democracies). All such regimes are legal as well as political orders of (at least ostensibly) legitimate domination. This means that they can/must use the law against forms of resistance/rebellion specified in advance as subversive. Forceful regime preservation may not always be a purely hypothetical possibility, since in practice there were always losers as well as winners from the construction of a democratic regime, and since- even in a large region like Europe where democracy and interdependence are currently ubiquitous- the sovereignty and integrity of component states is never entirely beyond question. Catalonia provides the current example.

In fact, all the four crucial attributes of a democratic political regime listed above (territoriality, legitimacy, legality, and sovereignty) are historical constructs that were secured through political conflict, usually including episodes of violence that generated losers as well as winners. In a strong democracy with supportive neighbours over time no doubt these undemocratic antecedents can be largely overcome, perhaps even fully compensated, yet they often lie dormant rather than completely disappear. In times of difficulty or disorientation such latent grievances may well be reactivated (some would say reinvented). In the case of Europe a millennium of strife and oppression has only been overlaid by a still rather thin veneer of reconciliation and democratic consensus, and not all the 28 states in the system are equally at ease with the prevailing dispensations. Old wounds can easily be reopened, not only in the Balkans and the Baltic, but also within such leading states as Germany (Ossis), Italy (Mezzogiorno), Spain (Basques and Catalans), and indeed the UK ( Scotland and Ulster).

Our concern today is with the state of democracy in contemporary Europe, looking back to understand how we got to the present conjuncture, and then looking cautiously forward to where we may be heading. This vast panorama demands rigorous selectivity. We cannot omit the global geopolitical context (post-1989 Anglo-centric hubris culminating in the disaster in Iraq; the rise of non-democratic China; western over-reach and backlash in Russia, etc.). Nor can we disregard the disruptive economic and technological consequences of accelerated globalization (the financial debacle of 2008; the erosion of the social market economy model under the impact of mobile capital; the environmental, security and privacy effects of rapid scientific innovation and digitalization). All this threatens to disrupt the assumptions of stability and continuity on which the European project of enlargement and democratic
convergence rested. But these should be background considerations, affecting the prospects for democracy in the world. Our agenda needs to be more regionally focused.

The European situation can be approached from the top down, or from the bottom up. Both perspectives are needed, although I suspect the first may be too remote from the citizenry, and the second too fragmented for easy analysis. As seen from an EU-wide perspective it seems clear that the “ever-closer union” teleology that spurred enlargement has reached its limit, and is now shifting into reverse. As recently as five years ago it was still being pretended that Turkey—and indeed the Ukraine—could eventually be included in a continent-wide community of liberal democracies, which would also be a welcoming beacon to the rest of the world. The turmoil and outmigration that followed the “Arab spring” (in particular aggravated by the Anglo-French operation in Libya), the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria (with its repercussions in Turkey, the Gulf, and eventually across Europe), the now “frozen” conflict in the Ukraine, and then the “Brexit”, all threw that project into disarray. It is hard to judge what the EU-27 will opt for as a substitute vision for the future, but any plausible route map will have to be much more cautious, and far better-attuned to power realities and citizen-preferences that are far more sober and realistic.

Meantime unwelcome new challenges continue to crowd-in from below. I will leave it to others at this gathering to detail the issues now arising in Hungary and Poland. For the avoidance of parochialism I would suggest that these might be bracketed with related tendencies in Austria and indeed Switzerland. My closer knowledge concerns Catalonia and Scotland. Again, to avoid parochialism it may be advisable to bracket these potential secessionisms with the no less serious problems arising in Ireland, potentially also in the Basque country, Corsica, and even indeed Belgium and perhaps Italy. Then there is still Greece- and Cyprus. This is not the place for a full listing of current serious “bottom-up” challenges to European democracy, but the sample just provided should suffice to back up my contention that they are multiple, slow burn, fragmented, and damaging. Taken together they amount to a major and neglected array of cumulative dangers. Perhaps some reassurance can be derived from the thought that the French electorate repudiated the National Front, and that Chancellor Merkel is still in a strong position to face down the AFD. But even the best of these successes is provisional, and could prove ephemeral if mainstream remedies continue to disappoint.

Hence, at the aggregate level, the current state of democracy on the continent of Europe must be rated troubled and at risk. While it is important to calibrate such judgments with care and precision, the larger and more challenging task is to retrace in comparative and theoretical terms how we got here, what it really means, what it might portend, and how it might be more effectively tackled.

From a comparative-theoretical standpoint I would suggest that the crucial features distinguishing Europe’s democratic trajectory has been the traumatic legacies of the two Europe-originated World Wars of the past century, and the eventual failure of the ensuing Soviet project for Europe. These are regional, not global, determinants of political behavior. They also produced generation-specific effects. These traumas produced a major and durable
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continent-wide political response, but it overlaid a wide range of divergent national memories and understandings, and it is now fading with the rise of generations no longer united by the outgoing “never again” narrative. There was a fairly convergent European understanding of what should count as a democracy, what supporting values were involved, and what disciplines were required to sustain it. (It would be ahistorical to overstate this convergence, but it is at least equally myopic to deny its centripetal force e.g. in the 1990s, at the time of German reunification and the crafting of the Copenhagen criteria for EU enlargement).

Another more contemporary factor is the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, and in particular the Eurozone sequel which impacted Greece so badly, and which has produced a cleavage in generational interests and outlooks (well-documented in the late international survey as reported by Dominique Reynie - Ou va la Democratie? Une enquete internationale de la fondation pour l’innovation politique (Plon, Paris 2017)). The refugee crisis and the spread of Islamist terrorism also feature here.

So today, by contrast with the 1990s, models of democracy are increasingly divergent and contested (e.g. in Madrid versus Barcelona; Dublin versus London; the city of Rome versus the government of Italy; etc.). The underlying value assumptions are also under pressure – How does direct democracy relate to the representative form? How far can wealthy donors and media moguls be allowed to set the political agenda? Have the rights of noisy minorities, and of non-nationals, swamped the interests and opinions of the “silent majority”? And so forth. Such debates over models and principles can be salutary and adaptive, but they can also generate conflict and anxiety, and raise doubts about which citizen obligations are mandatory and which social disciplines can be repudiated in the name of a more authentic version of modern democracy. (Barcelona, on October 1st, provided a vivid illustration of a more general phenomenon).

Generational change is by no means the only endogenous centrifugal factor impacting on European democracies. Hierarchical and verticalist structures of mass organization (including mass two party electoral systems) have given way to much more horizontal and evanescent forms of political association, reflecting the digitalization of communications technology. State-centric conceptions of political order (and “national sovereignty”) have come under pressure both from the pooling of sovereignty on crucial matters to inter-governmental institutions, and from the decentralization of other powers (e.g. from London to Edinburgh and Belfast; from Brussels to Antwerp, Namur, etc.; but also within reunified Germany, and elsewhere). In some cases ancient historical cleavages have reappeared within as well as between the modern states of Europe (the Habsburg empire can be discerned in Slovenia and Croatia; Prussia is visible in the 2017 election results; the Treaty of Trianon still feeds a sense of grievance in this bend of the Danube; and so on). So, today’s anxieties and indeed conflicts over democratic models and values reflect a broad array of divisive historical continuities and unplanned socio-political innovations that underlie the commonalities of generational progression.
So what do these disconcerting changes in European democracy really mean, what greater upheavals might they portend, and how (if at all) can/should the potential dislocations be managed? I take it that the idea of this meeting is to stand back a little from the details of the day-to-day, and to try to isolate a few major and recurrent underlying patterns and possible trajectories. That is a risky and speculative enterprise, but the main alternatives (retreating to the ivory tower, or reacting unsystematically to a succession of unanticipated surprises) are counsels of despair. So here goes with a few tentative and personal reflections.

At least in the near term we should anticipate a succession of trials of strength between competing “democratic” projects, with few if any actual decisive breakdowns. That is how I understand the secessionist challenges in Scotland, Catalonia, and perhaps elsewhere. It is also my reading of the tests posed by the National Front, UKIP, Afd, and Five Star movements. The manoeuvres between Warsaw and Brussels; the challenges from Syriza in Athens; and the operations of Sinn Fein and the DUP in Belfast can also all be viewed within this general framework. In each case there are specific organized interests seeking to expand their reach and to shift the “rules of the game” in their favor, willing to use electoral leverage and democratic rhetoric in a limit-testing series of challenges to the status quo, but not – at least on my assessment – either strong enough or sufficiently united/determined to take their projects to the ultimate extreme. They seek to extract concessions rather than to overturn the whole legal/constitutional order. To cope with an upsurge of episodes of this kind European democrats will need a great deal of patience, ingenuity, tactical flexibility, combined with underlying resolve. Often those required to solve these problems will be the very same blinkered incumbents who allowed them to fester. So there can be no guarantees that any let alone of these trials will prove manageable. Indeed, on a longer term view it may be plausible to speculate that half-hearted compromises and hastily improvised stop gaps can easily create a dynamic of growing radicalization and mounting intolerance. But my suggestion is that we are by no means there yet. Behind the confrontational rhetoric in nearly all these cases there is a set of unspoken arrieres-pensees about how far to go, and a tacit recognition that the cause in question can be ruined if too much of a backlash is provoked. The obvious counter-argument to my relative complacency is to point to Brexit - in this case the challengers really did upset the applecart. Even here, however, the nature of the eventual outcome is still up for negotiation, and the whole operation can still be turned into a vindication of the benefits of peaceful democratic processing of inescapable differences. (I voted to remain, but a narrow victory for my side would not have left the EU-28 in a very good position). If the eventual result is unhappy, that too has its benefits from a democratic perspective, so long as the parties concerned can preserve the freedoms needed to learn from their mistakes.

So, on a longer term view, the European democracies are being made aware that they have no grounds for complacency, that existing and prospective challenges could pose an eventually existential threat, and that creative learning, adaptation to new conditions, and innovation (both institutional and normative) are essential survival skills. Coming generations cannot rest on their laurels, or simply take as given their democratic inheritance. In my view democracy needs constant reinvention for future use. It can therefore be a spur to action,
rather than a source of dismay, to confront challenges and anxieties of the kind outlined above. More particularly, in the case of the continent of Europe, notwithstanding the worries and setbacks of the current period, in comparative terms today’s democratic inheritance remains exceptionally positive. Compare the Europe of 1942 with that of 2017! 75 years ago democracy was barely surviving, in Sweden Switzerland, and the British Isles, yet from those few redoubts it spread back until now the whole of Europe has been reclaimed. No other large region of the globe has achieved anything like as much, either in scope or depth. If Uppsala could cling on to its principles and institutions in extreme adversity, how can we all lose heart in face of today’s far more benign conditions?

Finally, may I suggest that as academics we are also far better equipped both to understand, and to respond to the demands of democratic development in our region and indeed across the world? This is not the place to rehearse the history of democratization studies since the height of the Cold War, but as one who has followed that scholarly debate over four decades I am struck by the major advances that have been achieved (notwithstanding the various deviations and false trails that also need to be chronicled). For example, both our conceptualizations and our measurement tools have greatly improved. The “quality of democracy” literature is more sophisticated, multi-dimensional, and better balanced than before. National chauvinisms still pervert some thinking on the subject, but the ranges of voices from around the world is now far more plural, and the dialogue between them is generally more balanced and respectful. Within Europe there are major contributions from across the entire continent, and in many languages.

To end on a parochial note, I am exceptionally proud to have a volume published in Hungarian (although sadly I cannot read what I am said to have said there). Likewise the CEU- and also the Central European Political Science Review- provide testimony to the vigor and diversity of the local debate. Why even your Prime Minister took the trouble to write a doctoral dissertation in Politics in my university! Not all these academic ventures have proved equally productive from democratic development viewpoint, but taken in the round they provide a strong intellectual foundation for the next stage of learning, adaptation, and innovation, that lies ahead both for Hungary and for all of Europe.
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Impressum
© 2017
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