

# What a truly democratic EU might look like



Pretending that more democracy will automatically make the EU more popular misses the point, says **Sabine Leidig** who heads the ATTAC Germany office. She argues that the EU must be made to work for the people if it is ever to achieve real democratic legitimacy

There's been a lot of soul-searching about the democratic deficit in Europe, but much of it overlooks – or deliberately distorts – the basic problem. Europe won't become more popular through some democratic quick fix, whatever some commentators claim. Nor will we ever understand public opinion in Europe if the EU's eurocrats continue to insist that every "No" vote in an EU referendum is simply an expression of domestic political disaffection.

The real answer to Europe's democratic deficit is more far-reaching. We have to address public perceptions that the Union is a serious obstacle to genuine representation in Europe, and that the EU also stands in the way of raising social standards, like higher minimum wages and better working conditions. I therefore believe that the Europe Union will only gain democratic legitimacy when it is re-constructed by the people and for the people.

One good starting point would be to listen to what people really want, rather than

misinterpreting public opinion on the rare occasions when voters are given a chance to speak for themselves. Take the French and Dutch rejections of the EU constitution back in 2005. Even though both referendums attracted a lot of public attention about the future of Europe, most commentators concluded that the "No" votes reflected domestic policy problems. Why so? A more likely explanation is that a majority of people felt important decisions about Europe were being taken over their heads and against their will. In which case, the lesson to be learnt from 2005 was that people wanted better representation and more information during the EU law-making process. Had this view been widely accepted, it could have paved the way for changes in the EU that would have truly benefited the public.

Instead, the Treaty of Lisbon made very little headway in resolving the democratic deficit within the institutions of Europe. There was no attempt to separate executive, legislative and judicial powers clearly, nor was the European Parliament given the right

to initiate legislation. Thus any serious effort to increase EU-level democracy in future would require a new “treaty for the people”, with fresh institutional reforms, new direct democratic measures, higher levels of transparency and steps to consolidate and extend current democratic achievements. Crucially, a new treaty would also have to reassess the EU’s neo-liberal economic policies which have become more and more embedded in existing agreements.

This economic aspect of the democratic deficit is often ignored. The Bolkestein directive on cross-border services, for example, has provoked widespread resistance and would not have come into force if it had to be approved by a popular referendum. Neo-liberal policies are imposed on member states – and the rest of the world – regardless of the EU’s lack of democratic accountability. These policies erode social security for many ordinary Europeans, while boosting corporate profits through lower tax regimes. They also allow companies to play employees in the EU off against each other as businesses shop around for the “best” national employment conditions. This leads to a “race to the bottom” in tax, social security and wages as countries compete to attract corporate investment. A more collective approach to taxation would be an effective counter-measure. The new treaty for the people would therefore have to include ambitious targets for EU-wide taxes on business, especially minimum standards for corporate income and capital taxation.

Neo-liberal policies also force a growing number of economic sectors into a competitive market. As a result, ownership

# COMMENTARY

By Matej Avbelj

## No, this is a political agenda and not about democracy

Sabine Leidig’s article is another example of the long tradition of EU soul-searching that seeks to tackle the issue of the so-called democratic deficit. The opinions expressed in the article are undoubtedly frank, but they are hardly original – she re-states old mantras and attempts to mix together various democracy-enhancing strategies even though they are mutually exclusive.

Leidig seeks to blame the European democratic deficit on the alleged dominance of neo-liberal policies within the EU. These, she believes, lead to all manner of negative outcomes, ranging from workers’ wages and the quality of the working environment, through to national tax regimes and the apparent inability of member states to provide even the most essential public services. If Europe was truly democratic, we are told, there would be democratic alternatives available to these neo-liberal policies which appear to have done so much damage.

It is at this point in Leidig’s article that the real cause of Europe’s democratic deficit is revealed to the reader: it’s all down to the prevalence of neo-liberal economic policies over those with a more pronounced social dimension. The democratic deficit therefore turns out to be a social democratic deficit.

This is nothing more than a political point of view, because the interests of democracy within

becomes more and more concentrated, small businesses are put at a disadvantage and social and workers' rights come under increasing pressure. Neo-liberal economics also mean that sustainability plays only a minor role in corporate and official decision-making, with predictably negative long-term impacts on both people and the environment. A neo-liberal system is more likely to allow genetically-modified and high-risk foods to be grown and sold in the EU, or water industries to be privatised.

A truly democratic Europe would limit such environmental risks through non-market-based economic policies and more enforceable rights, allowing people to resist developments that could jeopardize their well-being. So-called free competition should not be the EU's sole guiding principle. Rather than blocking member states' efforts to fund essential services such as drinking water, health care, education and transport, we should be seeking ways to provide these public benefits at the European level.



## MATTERS OF OPINION

### Europeans know less and less about the EU and the rights it guarantees them

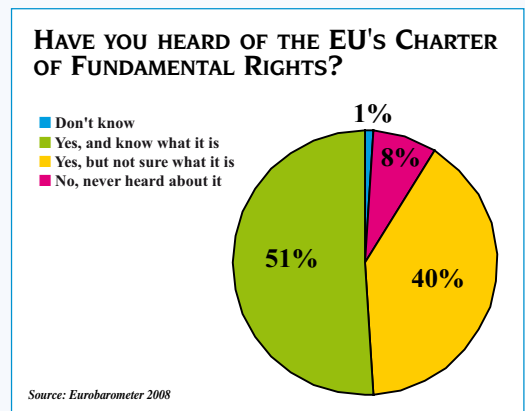
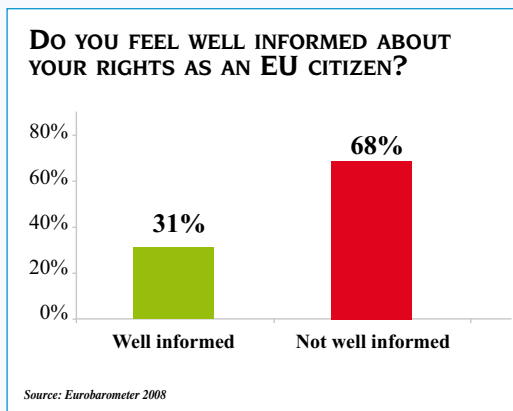
In a recent Eurobarometer survey of European citizens' awareness about the European Parliament, fewer than 5% in any of the 27 Member States said that they were "very well informed". Only in four countries – Luxembourg, Slovenia, Ireland and Malta – did more than one in three of the population describe themselves as "well-informed".

In an earlier Eurobarometer survey about rights, fewer than two in 10 people (18%) could correctly identify six rights that they possessed as EU citizens. Two-thirds of the 27,000 people questioned (1,000

in each EU member state) in autumn 2007, said they did not feel "well-informed" about their rights as EU citizens.

Alarming, respondents now know less about their rights (a 15-17 percentage point drop) than they did in a poll five years ago. Then, many more Europeans knew that they could vote or stand as a candidate in municipal elections in any EU member state, as well as in elections for the European Parliament.

In addition, half of the people surveyed had never heard of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, and fewer than one in 10 said they had heard of it and knew what the charter signified for EU citizens.



A more democratic Europe must also find ways to allow the public to take an active part in decisions that will shape the Europe of tomorrow. Today, people are forced into the role of passive recipients of EU laws because the institutions of Europe are closed to direct popular participation. It would be much fairer if ordinary people were able to intervene if enough of them felt that important decisions were being made without proper consultation or popular support. One option would be to allow people to initiate EU legislation – on condition that the proposal is supported by a sufficiently large percentage of the total EU population who come from, say, a pre-determined number of member states. The proposed legislation would then have to be debated and put to a vote in the European Parliament. A similar system could be introduced for referendums, with a pre-arranged popular quorum able to force the European Parliament to organise a binding referendum on a specific question.

Another barrier to more public participation in Europe is the incomprehensible language used in EU treaties. Ordinary people must be able understand the legal basis of rules that affect their lives in so many ways. Unfortunately, very little has been done to overcome this deplorable situation. Were a new treaty for the people to be drafted, the EU could address the problem by holding direct elections to a special Assembly. Citizen representatives from all the member states could get support from their national parliaments to write the new treaty, which would also have to be ratified and enforced in a transparent way.

Another problem with democratic decision-making is the excessive influence wielded by financially powerful lobby

the EU are equally served whether people choose a political and economic agenda that is social democratic or neo-liberal. Disagreements about political and economic objectives are an essential and intrinsic part of a pluralist modern democracy. The quality of the latter does not depend on concrete policy outcomes, but on appropriate institutional and broader constitutional conditions which guarantee that all shades of political opinion have an equal opportunity to win support.

The EU's political shade may well not be intrinsically social democratic, but it is unreasonable to claim that the Union suffers from a democratic deficit for that reason alone. European integration is a pluralist political project because it is attempting to unite a diverse collection of peoples who hold very different social and political views. And this diversity has been further accentuated by the EU's eastern enlargement. Ordinary Europeans, to use Leidig's own term, are actually a very heterogeneous body of individuals living in different states in unequal socio-economic conditions. While classical social democratic policies might be preferred by the majority in the EU's more affluent member states so as to sustain their welfare state regimes, neo-liberal measures may well appear more advantageous to those living in the newer member states. It is therefore by no means clear that neo-liberal measures, like the Bolkenstein directive cannot be popular in the Union.

In short, although EU democracy is far from perfect, it is hardly in a terminal state either. Much of the debate on the European democratic deficit therefore looks to be overdone for purely political reasons. Our energies would be better directed elsewhere, and here there is

groups. The process could be made more transparent if these lobbyists had to identify all their interests and sources of funding in a public register. Privileged access for corporate lobby groups to EU decision-makers should also be limited.

More should be done, too, to improve the enforcement of democratic rights in Europe. For instance, individuals cannot currently make their own claims at a European court, nor does any EU court effectively enforce fundamental rights. All people living in a truly democratic society – together with organisations such as trades unions – should be able to assert their social and labour rights through an effective judicial system.

Thus, a great deal can and should be done to make the European Union more democratic and more responsive to the social and economic demands of its citizens. But change, no matter how important, won't happen by itself. The drive for democracy needs to be constantly renewed through discussion and education about the complexities of EU procedures. Change will also require cooperation within civil society so that a host of individual voices can unite into a powerful popular movement. The ATTAC network is proud to take part in this process, furthering cooperation and helping to develop alternatives for a better Europe. Our European Summer University in Saarbrücken this year will be another opportunity for people from different countries to exchange their visions for a more democratic and social Europe and begin to create a more desirable model of EU development. □

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# COMMENTARY

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some scope for finding consensus with Leidig. More than anything else, it is essential to educate Europe's citizens about the value of European integration – and that must go well beyond a dry discussion on constitutional matters. We need to project an image of the Union that demonstrates the pluralist and diverse nature of Europe, and it's in this social rather than institutional context that the democratic deficit may conceivably lurk. □

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