

Democratic Deficit Critiques and the Non-Role of Epistemic Communities in the European Union

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the democratic deficit critiques of the European Union (EU). In the first part, it traces the factors behind the steep increase in the number of scholarly inquiries and analyses testing the democratic credentials of major intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and most prominently the EU, in the last two decades. In the second part, it investigates the reasons for the failure of the emergence of an epistemic community which, through expertise and scientific authority, could influence EU policymakers and guide them to adopt more democratic reforms. It is suggested that despite sharing normative concerns about the undemocratic structure of the European integration, experts greatly diverge first, on the causal factors which create the democratic deficit problem, second, on the notions of validity to test their hypotheses, that is, the type of polity that the EU is, and finally third, a common policy enterprise and the required remedies.

Key Words: European Union, Democratic Deficit, Constructivism, Epistemic Communities

Despite the outstanding accomplishments of the European integration, an increasing number of people see the EU as a distant reality, believing they have extremely little involvement and influence over how it is ruled. Known as the ‘democratic deficit’ critique, a considerable segment of European citizens claim that the lack of public accountability undermines the democratic legitimacy of the European Union. This critique however entails several inherent contradictions: Why was the problem of democratic deficit not considered a serious ‘problem’ in the early phases of integration but became an almost existential crisis in the last couple of decades? How and through what stages is the notion of a democratic deficit problematized? Finally, how do we explain why such critiques have not led to a structural shift within the EU even though they are embraced by large segments of European electorate as various referendums along the road to further integration have bitterly shown? To explore such questions, this paper will critically discuss the notion of a democratic deficit as a ‘failed norm’ which did not cause a meaningful change in the structure of the EU because it simply failed to create a small, yet resourceful and efficient expert group which could act as norm promoters and influence European leaders and EU bureaucrats to remedy the democratic deficit of the Union.

In the first section of the paper, I will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of norm dynamics; how norms emerge, are accepted (cascade down) and internalized. The second section of this paper will trace the possible reasons behind the proliferation of the democratic legitimacy critiques following the end of the Cold War and will try to explain how the concerns of a democratic deficit has been problematized over other possible problem frames. In the third section, I will expose the causes why, despite the broad consensus over the existence of a democratic deficit, one does not observe the emergence of an epistemic community which could act as a norm entrepreneur group and with their resources based on expertise and scientific arguments could have an easier access to affect the policymaking processes of the EU and change the outcomes in favor of greater democratic decision-making. Finally, in the last section, I will conclude the paper.

1. Theoretical Underpinnings of Norm Dynamics

One key element in this constructivist formulation of behavior is norms. Norms, constructivists argue, carry social content and are often independent of power distributions; they provide agent/states with an understanding of interests (constitute them) (Checkel 1999, 84). In their article *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change* Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink define norms as a “standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (2008, 891). Every norm accordingly, includes an ‘ought’ element which means that norms are based on a shared moral assessment among actors and prompt justification for actions.

According to Finnemore and Sikkink, norms go through a 'life-cycle'. In the first stage, norms are built by the interplay of human agency, indeterminacy, chance occurrences and favorable events (896). Two elements are critical in this stage: one, the suitability of organizational platforms and second, the existence of norm entrepreneurs. It is only after a successful persuasion of a critical mass of political actors by the norm entrepreneurs that the norm in question can reach a threshold or a tipping point. Organizational platforms in this process provide the necessary institutional mechanism through which norm entrepreneurs can spread their ideas and expertise. In most cases, for an emergent norm to reach a threshold and move beyond, it must become institutionalized in specific sets of international rules and organizations. It is only after that, in the second stage, does the norm cascade begin.

Norm entrepreneurs can be defined as agents who have strong notions about appropriate behavior and can successfully convince political actors to embrace new norms. These could vary among activists through protest parties to epistemic communities. These actors are critical for norm emergence because they call attention to issues or even 'create' issues by using language that names, interprets and dramatizes them. Ideational commitment, Finnemore and Sikkink note, is the main motivation when entrepreneurs promote norms because they believe in the ideals and values embodied in these norms (897).

An important source of influence is using expertise and information to change the behavior of other political actors. Expertise, as Finnemore and Sikkink argue, usually resides in professionals and epistemic communities which can help or block the promotion of new norms within a standing organization (897). Epistemic communities can be defined as a "network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area" (Haas 1997, 3). According to Peter Haas, there are four requirements that any given epistemic community should fulfill: First, there should be a shared set of normative and principled beliefs which could provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members. Second, there should be shared causal beliefs which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain. Third, community members should converge around shared notions of validity, that is, intersubjective, internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise. Finally, community members should come up with a common policy enterprise- a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a result (Haas, 3).

For Haas, the need for technical expertise in epistemic communities arises most importantly under the conditions of uncertainty, when the possible outcomes of particular policy options are not clear and require technical interpretation. Epistemic communities can directly show decision makers either the interest of the state or help them find it themselves by providing the necessary information and expertise over an issue. When decision makers follow policies along the advice of epistemic communities, this could also influence the interests and behavior of other states and thus create a spillover effect in which the likelihood of convergent state behavior and policy coordination will increase. Similarly, epistemic communities can also assist in the creation of institutions which may guide international behavior.

2. The Proliferation of Democratic Deficit Critiques in Europe

2.1. The Global Level

The second half of the 20th century witnessed a higher level of institutionalization than ever before. According to the Yearbook of International Organizations, the number of intergovernmental organizations and regimes increased from 123 in 1951 to 251 in 1999 and more than 350 today¹. Faced with problems which go beyond their borders, nation states have increasingly found themselves in under pressure to move the locus of decision-making and problem solving from the national level to the level of intergovernmental cooperation and international regimes. National security, international trade, terrorism, human rights, environmental protection or cross-border criminality; all of these issues forced nation-states to seek new kinds of governance based on institutionalized cooperation at regional or global levels.

¹ Yearbook of International Organizations 1999/2000, 2009-2010

As the level of interdependence increased however, intergovernmental organizations began to enjoy greater political authority, legitimacy as well as greater autonomy from their principals, nation-states. Furthermore, high levels of institutionalization were not just limited to intergovernmental organizations (IGO). More than them, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which are founded both on grassroots and transborder links, have taken full advantage of new information technology. Depending on the criteria one employs to define the term NGO, Eric Stein notes, the number of NGOs is said to have risen from 852 in 1951 to 43,958 in 1999, a figure which is believed to have doubled in 2009 (Stein 2001, 491-492). Even though most of the time NGOs lack transparency and accountability to the public, seeing themselves as vital parts of civil society and champions of democracy, many have undertaken the task of raising public awareness about the functioning of IGOs and opening them up to the scrutiny of public opinion.

Robert Keohane points out to the fact that “various NGOs purporting to speak for affected people and principles that would help these people gain legitimacy on the basis of the widespread belief that ‘the people should have some say in what these organizations do’. One result of their endeavors is that the decision-making processes of multilateral organizations have become remarkably more transparent” (2003, 144). However, a demand for accountability does not always result in success. And when this is the case, Keohane argues, “they condemn the multilateral organizations as ‘unaccountable’. Their real targets are the powerful governments of rich countries, perhaps multinational corporations, or even global capitalism -but it is the multilateral organizations that are damaged by the NGO attacks” (145).

Historically, this development of higher institutionalization at the international level was accompanied by a victory of ‘democracy’ against other forms of governments at the national level. Even though the term ‘democracy’ is open to various interpretations and possible manipulations, the idea of democratic government and democratic theories received widening acceptance, especially with the end of the Cold War. Within a ten-year-span after the Berlin Wall was torn down, the number of ‘electoral’ democracies increased from 69 in 1988-1989 to 120 in 1999-2000². That means that in 2000, 63 percent of independent governments were categorized as democratic.

However, exactly such ‘democratization’ movement, Peter Mair suggests, has raised a need to differentiate between the various kinds of democracies. After all, up until the end of the Cold War, the political world was divided into three more or less simply defined categories: the First World, which was the capitalist world and which was also mainly, but not exclusively, a democratic world; the Second World, which comprised the countries that were then under communist rule; and the Third World, that is the ‘rest’. Within this tripartite division, democracy was more or less just ‘democracy’, Mair writes (2004, 2). But after the end of such a bipolar structure and as more and more states embraced democratic ideals, the differences between different kinds of democracies began to appear. Liberal democracy, electoral democracy, populist democracy, representative democracy or delegative democracy; all of these were different understandings and variations of a single concept, namely ‘democracy’. “By 1997”, Mair concludes, “Collier and Levitsky could publish a major article on what they called ‘democracy with adjectives’, documenting the more than five hundred terms that were being used to distinguish between different versions of democracy” (3).

Under these settings, in an age where higher interdependence and increasing institutionalization at the global level became the norm, the proliferation of both political and scholarly interest in the concept of democracy directed its gaze not only to nation-states but also increasingly to the institutions of global governance. This was also compatible with the academic shift in political science from ‘grand narratives’ to pluralist approaches. As all-encompassing, state-centric theories lost their appeal, political scientists increasingly started to place international institutions and other non-state actors at the focus of their studies in an attempt to investigate their role in directing actor behavior and choice. To expose some causal relationship between institutions and state behavior however, it is necessary to find out the differences between various institutions as well as between the various forms of democratic states, else there would not be enough variation to provide a satisfactory analysis.

In sum, three factors, one, the rising level of institutionalization at the global scale; two, an increasing acceptance of democracy as a universal form of government despite the significant variations in the exact definition employed; and finally, a shift in the dominant paradigm of scholarly inquiry, led to an intensification of legitimacy critiques of IGOs by a variety of actors.

²Freedom House- Available online at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2001>

The WTO, the EU, the IMF and the World Bank; all these major intergovernmental organizations were closely scrutinized and inspected in terms of their functioning, democratic transparency and public accountability. They were criticized as being ‘undemocratic’ organizations per se since they operate behind closed doors without being subjected to parliamentary controls. Such critics also point out that citizen participation, that is the voice of those who are affected by the very decisions being taken, was absent in these organizations. By these qualities alone, these IGOs deserved to be labeled ‘undemocratic’ and ‘unaccountable’, maybe even illegitimate, and thus need to be reformed.

2.2. The European Union

The European Union was not immune to global academic and political trends. Parallel to the developments in the academy, starting from the end of the Cold War, EU studies took what Richard Bellamy and Dario Castiglione call a ‘normative turn’ (2001). From that time on, “that the EU’s ‘democratic deficit’ exists becomes a received orthodoxy” (Mény and Knapp 1998:446). This was rather unexpected since the European integration never really aspired to be democratic. The EU project was always elite-driven, claiming to be founded as an organization for the people and not by the people nor of the people, hence relying on output legitimacy rather than input. From the very start, the primary goal of the European Community was to preserve peace in Europe, for which democratic credentials could be sacrificed. Foreign policy was a matter of high politics and thus did neither require large-scale citizen participation nor popular consent. Jean Monnet himself noted that “such input would in all likelihood prevent the process reaching maturity, given the depth of post-war tensions and lack of understanding of international politics of the majority” (Warleigh 2003, 14). Democracy, according to the founding fathers, could hamper the noble and ambitious aims of the process. The choice therefore was elitism over popular participation, technocracy over democracy. Soon after the integration process was launched, a ‘permissive consensus’ accompanied it; national political elites were not to talk about the European integration on election platforms. Save the UK, national political parties were simply disinterested in discussing issues related to the European Community or to reveal their differences, if they existed, in party agendas concerning the approach towards the Community. Europe was concealed, so were the party debates.

However, as the integration process progressed to a point where peace was taken as granted and the European Community as an institution became more visible, in the early 1970s, the first critiques of legitimacy began to emerge. An economic crisis following the oil crisis also led people to start assuming that the common market by itself was not sufficient in maintaining economic growth and prosperity. The first official document which responded to such critiques was the Tindemans Report issued in 1975. According to Tindemans, the rapporteur, the European Union should be introduced into people’s daily lives, be “more immediate, more concrete and more visible” (Warleigh, 14-14). But to make these possible, structural reforms were needed. With this objective, the European Council was institutionalized and the European Parliament decided to be elected directly by European citizens. It was exactly this decision, Yves Mény believes, which actually deepened the “first wave of claims about the democratic deficit: the European Parliament started to resemble a national chamber, and comparisons could be made” (Mény 2003, 396).

Such reforms were initially successful in increasing public support for the EU from 50 percent to 70 percent between the 1970s and the late 1980s (Ruchet 2004, 11). However, beginning with the late 1980s, this trend reversed once again. Paradoxically, during efforts to make Europe more visible in people’s eyes, European bureaucrats inevitably raised the public’s attention, unparalleled to any other stage of integration. While the integration process through the 1970s could have been hidden from the public eye, first the Single European Act in 1986 and then the Maastricht in 1992, as Andrew Moravcsik puts it, “returned European integration to public prominence” (1998, 315). In this sense, the tighter and deeper Europe became integrated, the more public scrutiny and discomfort it encountered. The number of academic articles, media coverage and opinion polls about the EU all increased significantly during this process. This process had political consequences. Both the SEA and the Maastricht treaties faced great difficulties during the ratification processes, particularly in Denmark and Ireland, two countries where referendums were held. Maastricht had aimed to turn the EC to a full-scale economic and monetary union but it was not limited to this. By setting plans for establishing European-wide citizenship, creating a pillar structure in which the member states pledged to follow common foreign and security policy and justice and home affairs and introducing the subsidiarity principle, the Maastricht Treaty was a revolutionary attempt and, like all revolutions, it encountered resistance.

At the same time, while deepening the integration process beyond imagination and promising a federal outcome, it introduced very minor changes in the non-participatory nature of decision-making in the EU. No one was really happy. Anti-integrationists were concerned about the deepening integration process and were not convinced that subsidiarity alone could defend national interests. Federalists on the other hand were discouraged about the limited measures taken towards a United States of Europe. The common point of critiques was that despite the euphoria for a tight integration, member governments had failed to create common values, norms or a common ideology at the popular level. At the same time, officials or representatives of the EU had spent little effort in explaining the treaty and the decision-making procedures to the public.

The second half of the 1990s and early millennium witnessed a new peak in stories and academic articles covering the undemocratic nature of EU policymaking. As Europe was being discussed more, parties increasingly included EU policies into their agendas. To complete the circle, as the European Union was being politicized, party differences regarding this issue became more visible, more decisive and played a greater role in domestic elections. One outcome of such politicization was the rise of protest parties. Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands or the Front National in France enjoyed considerable amount of support due to the public's discontent with the European Union. Aware of the source of their support base, these parties tried their best to differentiate themselves from establishment parties. An easy way of doing so was to engage in democratic legitimacy debates and question the EU and their government's EU policies. Seeking to use the EU as a political material for their political interests, these protest parties succeeded in making the EU vulnerable vis-à-vis public scrutiny.

As such, subsequent treaty revisions and a novel attempt to write a Constitution for the EU at the start of the new millennium suffered the exact same fate as their predecessor. The Constitutional Treaty was believed to be another milestone in the history of integration, much like Maastricht. It had an ambitious vision and a confident tone; for the first time, the EU was ready to become a concrete, unified political actor, comparable to nation-states. Yet, instead of creating public support behind a signed contract, the Constitution raised another wave of criticism about the democratic credentials of the Union. The proposals of a common flag, anthem or motto provided enough reasons for people to transfer the failures of domestic political actors to the European stage. Economic hardship, foreign policy failures and growing immigration problems were all viable excuses in shifting the blame onto European integration. The inevitable consequence was a major referendum fiasco as the electorate in France and the Netherlands watered down the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. This was a final reminder for EU leaders of the fact that little success is achieved in breaking the critique on the undemocratic nature of the EU.

3. The Role of Epistemic Communities in Framing Democratic Deficit Problem within the European Union

In the previous section, I discussed how the democratic deficit critiques regarding the EU had proliferated over time. The dominant paradigm on European studies accepts that the EU in its existing form discourages - if not prevents - active citizen participation, takes its decisions as an administrative agency in which there is a lack of citizen control and operates without or with minimal accountability and transparency. By these qualities, many scholars deem extensive reform packages as vital requisites for the legitimacy of the EU and for the sake of further integration. Yet, the existence of such a broad consensus over the democratic deficit of the EU did not lead to the emergence of a scientific community which would guide politicians and bureaucrats in their campaign for a more democratic EU. Although there were various attempts to increase the democratic credentials of the Union in both the Amsterdam and Lisbon treaties, both fell short of making dramatic changes. After all, the post-Lisbon EU today has an unelected president for the European Council, an unelected foreign minister and an unelected commission president. In 49 policy areas, the final say is transferred from national parliaments to the supranational EU level where the electorate has much less influence. Furthermore, despite the bold rhetoric of policymakers, the influence of epistemic communities in the negotiation or drafting processes of Lisbon was minimal. In this section, I shall try to explore the causes of such inability of professionals to form an epistemic community which could point out the democratic deficit and affect the decision-making processes to remedy this 'problem'.

3.1. Differing Causal Beliefs: What exactly constitutes a 'Democratic Deficit'?

As already discussed, a set of normative concerns about the democratic deficit and lack of democratic legitimacy in the EU is shared by a broad range of professionals and expert communities, hence fulfilling the first condition for the emergence of epistemic communities.

Nevertheless, such principled beliefs on democracy largely do not derive from a similar set of causal beliefs; beliefs about cause and effect relationships which “provide guides for individuals on how to achieve their objectives” (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 12). To meet around a shared set of causal beliefs, the members of a potential epistemic community should first reach a consensus on the definitions of the given problem and the parts which constitute the problem. However, when we analyze the ‘problem’ of ‘democratic deficit’ within the EU, one can hardly see any agreement over the basic parts of the question. To a large extent, this stems from the differing understandings of the term ‘democracy’, so defining exactly what ‘democratic deficit’ means, what it entails and in turn how to deal with it become questions over which various opinions compete with few signs of convergence.

Broadly, there are four strands of critiques regarding the democratic credentials of the EU. First are those who point to the weakness of the European Parliament as the only directly elected institution in the EU structure (e.g. Weiler et al. 1995, Katz 2000). Although in a growing number of issue areas the EP has gained equal legislative power with the Council by the co-decision procedure, in many other areas the EP’s role is still only secondary under the consultation procedure. In a widely cited article *Models of Democracy: Elite Attitudes and the Democratic Deficit in the European Union* Richard Katz equals the democratic deficit as the weakness of the European Parliament as the only directly elected EU institution and the inability of the EP to hold the European executive accountable to it in a manner comparable to national governments (2004, 3-4). Katz names two major attributes of a ‘democracy’: one, popular sovereignty which refers to the belief that the will of the people should be put into effect; and two, the model party government, in which major political decisions are made by elected officials who are accountable to the electorates through parties (4). In both of these, the EU fails to conform to the democratic principles. Although the Lisbon Treaty attempted to increase the competence of the European Parliament in nineteen policy areas at the expense of the Council, critics point that most of these issue areas concern only second order policies.

The second strand of critiques problematizes the lack of ‘real’ European elections. In national elections, European issues are rarely discussed among mainstream parties. With regards to the EP elections on the other hand, the electorate remains rather disinterested due to the dwarfed role of the EP in decision-making processes. Joseph Weiler et al. argue that the European Parliament elections are second-order elections, essentially measuring national popularity, without much concern with Europe (1995). Similarly, Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix note, “at no point, do voters have the opportunity to choose between rival candidates for executive office at the European level, or to choose between rival policy agendas for EU action” (2006, 552). Frank Decker too, asserts that the more competences are transferred to the supranational level, the more distant the EU becomes from the citizens, since the members of the key EU institutions, such as the Commission or the Council, are not directly elected (2002, 261).

The third strand of critiques poses that legitimate lawmaking can only arise from the public deliberation of citizens; therefore as long as the EU fails to create effective citizen participation through transnational parties, identities and discourses, one cannot talk of the existence of democracy within the European Union. Siffert et al. argue that the EU mainly relies on national legitimating mechanisms since it cannot legitimize its decision through the deliberations of a European public (2007, 149). This leads the proponents of this strand to stress the vital importance of ‘demos’ in creating a democratic Europe. Accordingly democracy can be meaningful only if there are ‘demos’ - people who consider themselves as a community, a group sharing a sense of belonging to the same whole. “Not only does this sense of community enable the generation of solidarity, it also makes possible the creation of meaningful political debate about what should constitute public policy through a process of deliberation”, Warleigh writes (2004, 25). The problem is that as long as national affiliations take precedence over European ones, creating a European public, and thus an efficient public space and argumentative and deliberative democratic processes, become impossible to establish. Decker (269) suggests that democratic practices must be implemented by effective identity policy measures. Jan Zielonka claims that efforts to create a true European demos and public space will require decades, if ever (2004, 33).

The fourth broad range of critiques focuses on efficiency and the output legitimacy. A particular line of critiques within this strand concerns the ‘superstate’ structure of the EU that relies on heavy technocracy. The justification of democracy for supporters of this critique is to check and limit the arbitrary and potentially corrupt power of the state.

Thus, no matter how efficient the EU actually is, the existence of potentials for arbitrary rule by supranational technocrats and the so-called ‘bureaucratic despotism’ constitute the basis of that critique (e.g. Mény 2002). On the other side of this line stand cosmopolitan critiques. According to this perspective political entities and civil societies should reorient themselves to promote ‘public welfare’ for populations, guarantee human rights, remedy social inequalities and provide the general good. By regarding democracy as a means rather than as an end, these critics suggest, the final outcome should be the real determinant of a polity’s legitimacy. The vital test should be to what extent a community achieves the objectives it sets for itself and to what extent it provides for the welfare of its citizens (Grande and Jachtenfucs 2000). However, Warleigh notes, a cosmopolitan account of democracy have an inherent contradiction: “it is essentially progressive, but it is not necessarily either ultimately democratic” (24). After all, a dictatorial regime could be equally efficient in providing citizen welfare.

One other related critique on the output comes from social democrats. According to that line of thought, democracy should aim to remedy social inequalities, so the EU is essentially undemocratic with its founding principles which favor liberalization and free trade over social protection for its citizens (Scharpf 1999). Furthermore, because of unanimity and negotiation principles in EU decision-making, redistributive policies will be vetoed by potential losers, which further hamper effective and legitimate governance at the EU level (Zürn 2000, 195).

3.2. Differing Notions of Validity- The Problem of Polity and Differing Policy Enterprises

A second factor that hinders the emergence of a unified epistemic community to push for democratic reforms is the lack of shared notions of validity; the understanding of the appropriate criteria to validate the knowledge and expertise as a common policy enterprise. The members of a potential epistemic community need further consensus over a proper understanding of the type of polity the EU is so that they can test their beliefs and hypotheses and propose the necessary remedies. Since democracy and a democratic deficit have different meanings for different types of polities, be it a nation-state, IGO or NGO, unless one can find some conformity among the members of the epistemic community over the structure of the EU, any attempt to define the ‘democracy’ or ‘democratic deficit’ and any policy initiatives to remedy this ‘problem’ become futile.

Analyzing the literature, there are at least three conflicting views about the nature of the EU as a political entity. From a popular sovereignty perspective, the EU is a model aimed at transforming into a unitary state of Europe replacing the existing nation-states. This model assumes that the EU should possess its own sovereign authority, judicial and legislative branch, parliamentary government, constitution and own ‘demos’. A second group, the advocates of intergovernmental cooperation, stress that it is the nation-states upon which ultimate authority resides and as long as the integration process is in the interests of the member states, it will be alive. Finally, there are the critics who argue that the EU is simply too exceptional to be limited to traditional forms of polities. It is a *sui-generis* being, a unique experiment in history. As an unfinished process, having a dual character of supranationalism and intergovernmentalism, European integration cannot be defined in any of the pre-existing categories. The term network governance in this respect increasingly finds supporters to define the integration process.

In terms of democratic legitimacy arguments, by emphasizing the role of states as the starting point, the first and second group share some important characteristics. The proponents of both groups assume that modern democracies have developed to a large extent within nation-states. In the Westphalian system, the notion of sovereignty served as the necessary means to protect and legitimize the democratic form of government. The instruments of democratic systems have furthermore derived their legacy essentially within the national boundaries; parliaments, courts, governments, all are institutions operating at the national level. Comparing the democratic systems at the national level with ones at the international level, to remedy the democratic deficit of the EU the proponents of both approaches suggest that one should simply project the proper institutions and principles at the national level to the EU level. Political parties, national parliaments, majoritarian governments or popular elections are of critical importance for this objective. There are however significant variations in possible policy proposals. For instance, while the policymakers adhering to the federal polity idea support a dual structure of a popularly elected assembly representing the people of the polity (the European Parliament) and member state representation at the federal or union-level (the Council), proponents of the intergovernmental cooperation polity idea support the proposal to make national parliaments and member state governments more accountable to their national constituents (Rittberger 2004).

Furthermore, while federalists defend direct accountability of EU institutions to European demos, intergovernmentalists prefer indirect mechanisms of accountability over national institutions. For example, a more federalist oriented Mény argues that it would be a grave mistake to mirror rules and practices at the national level to the European level. Instead, the EU should develop new paradigms, rules and institutions. Though Christopher Lord and David Beetham partly agree with this view, they argue that some aspects of representative democracy should actually be transferred to the EU since the underlying principles apply to the EU as well (2001, 444). Given that, despite agreeing on the primary importance of representative systems and elections, the two groups diverge sharply over how and on what scale to implement democratic control mechanisms.

Differently, scholars and politicians adhering to network governance start their analyses by pointing out to the diminishing power of nation-states vis-à-vis public and private networks often extending across national frontiers. Thus, the proponents of the governance approach to argue that representative democracy no longer exists and has been “replaced by the polyarchy of bureaucracy and organized interests in an administrative state, with massive official bodies, ‘independent’ agencies, and central banks” (Stein, 495). Unlike nation-states, the EU does not enjoy the existence of European demos, nor a Europe-wide public sphere. Therefore, it is claimed, the model of representative democracy with electoral accountability and majoritarian decision-making - a concept of democracy associated with nation states- does not apply to the EU in the first place. The EU needs a different interpretation of democracy and different types of remedies; democratic legitimacy cannot be obtained by defining democracy in terms of nation-states and projecting institutions at the domestic level to the EU. “Rather than adapting Europe to make it more democratic” Mair states, “it makes more sense to adapt the notion of democracy to make it more European” (2004, 20). Markus Jachtenfuchs suggests to start from slow steps that could “increase citizen participation in decision-making which is of relevance to them and the preservation of small-scale identities” (1997, 12). In this process, networks which are organized according to functional and sectoral lines could provide the essential mechanisms of legitimacy through enhanced opportunities for deliberation among political actors (Skogstad 2003, 326-327).

4. Conclusion

It is true that ideas and norms shape identities and interests of political actors. But as Thomas Risse-Kappen once put, “ideas do not float freely” (1994). On the very contrary, to have an impact, they need active agency; they need to be claimed ownership. One major source of agency is offered by transnational networks of knowledge-based experts or ‘epistemic communities’. By providing empirical studies to show the possible consequences on a particular issue area based on their shared causal beliefs, epistemic communities can have a dramatic effect on shaping state interests and policies. In this paper, I focused on the democratic deficit critiques of the European Union as a ‘failed norm’. It was my aim to explain the reasons of professionals and scholars’ failure to form an epistemic community which could act as norm entrepreneurs to improve the democratic legitimacy of the Union and change the political structure EU despite converged upon similar normative concerns. In the first part, I traced the reasons why democratic deficit critiques gained popularity in European studies in the last two decades.

I argued that such proliferation was due to the interplay of higher levels of institutionalization at both the global and European levels as well as the collapse of ‘permissive consensus’ on Europe and politicization of the European integration. In the second part I answered the question of why, even though a near-universal consensus could be found among knowledge-based experts about the ‘undemocratic’ character of the EU, it has been hardly possible to find any shared causal belief about the nature of the problem, a shared notion of validity to test the hypothesis and finally similar policy enterprises. Therefore, I have claimed that despite the existence of shared normative beliefs on the spurious democratic structure of the EU, professionals and expert communities failed to form an epistemic community across Europe. Such a failure however, has greatly damaged academics and experts’ influence on national and international policymaking in the recent rounds of treaty drafting and negotiations, most recently the Lisbon Treaty. The end result unfortunately has been just another key text with weak democratic credentials. Whether policymakers will do a better job in closing the gap between EU institutions and European citizens in the future seems to be a function of how much expert communities can converge on the nature of the ‘democratic deficit’ problem.

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