

THE EU LISBON TREATY: THE FAILED STAKE OF DEMOCRATIZATION

The Treaty of Lisbon, known as the EU's Reform Treaty, attracts great attention today, as it is currently in the process of ratification. This process is channeled (with the exception of Ireland) through national parliaments. Twenty-six out of the twenty-seven EU member states have chosen to sidestep their citizens, in fear of another failed referendum and another stalemate across the Union. In this short commentary, I will contend that, even if the Treaty of Lisbon is ratified by the majority of the EU member states, the Union might indeed get closer to gain a renewed institutional framework, but it will lose the stake of democratization.

In 2001 a process of democratization was launched in the EU. The goal was to bring Europe closer to its citizens, by involving them in a more direct way in vital decisions that would affect the future of the Union. The Laeken European Council (met on December 2001) placed the issue of democratization high on its agenda. The European Convention on the 'Future of Europe' led to the drawing up of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. That Constitutional Treaty sought to address the very issue of the Union's democratic deficit. The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty, however, by the people of France and The Netherlands, indicated that the gap between the EU executive and its citizens had not been bridged. The EU tried to reverse this situation in the period that followed. By declaring that as a 'period of reflection' on the future of Europe, and by initiating Plan D (D connoted Democracy, Dialogue and Debate), the EU endeavored once again to involve the citizens in the European 'design'. Plan D aimed at addressing the pervasive notion of skepticism and distrust that prevailed across the civil societies of the member states.

Paradoxically, the Lisbon Treaty that is currently in the process of ratification in the member states is perceived by EU bureaucrats and national political figures as another attempt to bring Europe close to its citizens. Nonetheless,

the paradox in this is that, following the 'period of reflection', the EU stepped back from the process of involving citizens, and suddenly opted for ratification through national parliaments. This clearly conveys two messages: The first one is that citizens are kicked off the process of European integration, which remains instead a largely top-down one. This instigates assumptions regarding the lack of 'competence' of citizens, and the lack of trust that the EU places in them. The second one is that this decision is a clear failure on the part of the EU as far as its attempts for democratization are concerned. The choice of bypassing citizens renders the process of ratification quite undemocratic. What is more, it is highly contradicting to advance democratization as rhetoric, but at the same time circumvent citizens in practice. The fact of the matter is that the EU needs to keep its citizens involved; and it needs to do this even if it means taking risks. Following this line of argument, if the EU was serious about the process of democratization, it should have considered pursuing a more democratic process of ratification that would have involved European citizens as well.

It is clear, from the example of the one country that actually held a referendum, how distanced away citizens feel from the political leadership and the EU's bureaucracy. At the end of the day, it is not that 'European citizens do not understand the way we (sic) design the EU', like Mr. Sarkozy said in the aftermath of the Irish referendum, but it seems that the way the EU is designed has arguably reached its very limits.