

IT'S NOT EUROPE. IT'S NATIONAL DEMOCRACY WHICH IS DYSFUNCTIONAL

Carlo Bastasin

BREXIT IS CONSIDERED to be proof that Europe is not working. Frankly, this assessment is optimistic. What Brexit demonstrates is rather that, in some cases, national democracies become dysfunctional—when complex decisions cross national boundaries, for instance. This is an even more problematic and confusing finding. Finally, we have also discovered that the EU cannot work if its constituent national democracies do not work.

Thomas Jefferson was the most famous advocate of the need for a well-informed electorate in the functioning of a democracy. He would have been puzzled upon learning that many British voters had googled what the European Union is after voting. Many, in fact, were surprised by the fallout of a decision that they had made with little consideration. Only once faced with the consequences, had they felt the need to be better informed. The vote for Brexit was more an emotional impression than an informed expression.

We are used to thinking of political choice as responding to utilitarian criteria, diversely defined, where rationality guides choices and consequences. But this bond is weaker when we decide on something complex and remote, or about a problem that can be blamed on an "external enemy." The fact that the two Tory campaign leaders for Brexit, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, were former journalists turned politicians, sheds an interesting light on the link between quality of information and quality of politics.

A recent post on Brookings' "Chaos and Order" blog argues that Brexit is the first major victim of digital democracy. Technology was expected to democratize information and decision-making, as well as bring about greater cosmopolitanism. On the contrary, according to the author, digital democracy has contributed to "polarization, gridlock, dissatisfaction and

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misinformation". There may be some grain of truth to this, but traditional media are more than capable of creating an atmosphere of prejudice and trigger authoritarian dynamics. The role of The Sun in the Brexit campaign and of Bild in Germany's response to the Greek crisis were crucial for prejudicing the public's judgment.

The real issue is the unspoken role of nationalism in the public discourse of national democracies particularly at the light of the new populist or anti-establishment movements. French President Charles de Gaulle was the first to curb European political integration, citing the need to defend national interests. He was not only a military hero, but a precursor of what we now call anti-politics. His successors in all EU countries have been much less serious, but none of them failed to target an external enemy to legitimize their forms of controlling the national consensus. A simple rule that we should account for is that whenever citizens lose faith in the functioning of national politics, they also immediately turn against non-national politics. The polls show the following direction of causality: the poor quality of national politics breeds mistrust in the supranational dimension. It happens even in countries where economic growth is very strong, like Poland and Great Britain. Needless to say, it happens even more where the economy is going down the drain.

The German government is probably the only one in the EU that looks ahead with a sense of stability and consensus. Nevertheless, its policy response to Brexit surrenders to the bitter findings about the quality of political discourse in European countries. In fact, federal Europe would require well-functioning national democracies where people trust the public powers and are not economically discouraged. There do not seem to be many of this sort in the EU today. Consequently, the supranational or federalist ideas have been set aside by the German Government in favor of intergovernmental relations, with rationality determined by the balance of power or supposed coherence of collective choices that are guided by economic constraints.

The German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, referred to the model of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM)—the fund assisting countries that lose access to the financial market—as an example of the cooperation possible today. Unfortunately, the ESM is likely to be one of the least transparent institutions in Europe. It is also worrying that such an experienced and capable man does not understand that voters in other countries precisely resent the hierarchical nature intrinsic to intergovernmental relations and embodied by the ESM, with Germany always on the right side of the knife. The hierarchy that has emerged in the EU in recent years is one of the factors pushing many citizens away from the European idea. It also shows that even the most attentive observers cannot assign the right value to the needs of citizens of countries other than their own. The picture of weak national democracies becoming a hindrance to mutual respect and cooperation can be discouraging. Still, you cannot build a democracy with undemocratic methods. National democracies need to internalize the European context. The national public discourse must open beyond its borders. However imperfect, European political integration should be strengthened, not abandoned.