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Post-Lisbon EU and its Accountability: Did the Last Founding Treaty Improve the Democratic Legitimacy of the Union?

Unia Europejska po Lizbonie i jej odpowiedzialność: Czy ostatni traktat założycielski wzmocnił demokratyczną legitymację Unii?

Abstract

After its creation, especially after it broadened its competencies, the European Union and its institutions have often been criticized for their democratic deficit and lack of accountability. Especially after the great enlargement from 2004, and the new founding treaties from the 1990s and 2000s, the EU institutions' competencies were significantly broadened, and the need for improving their accountability arose. The huge role of the unelected bodies of the EU in the policy-making process was the main reason for the criticism. However, the Lisbon Treaty was meant to improve the accountability and democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions and to enlarge the role of the national parliaments in the EU legislative procedure. But did Lisbon bring these changes into practice, or did they stay "just words on paper"? Have the reforms brought by the Lisbon Treaty transformed the EU institutions from relatively unaccountable into accountable institutions? Is the enlarged role of the national parliaments substantive, or are the reforms regarding their role insignificant? In this paper, I will try to analyze the changes brought by the Lisbon Treaty regarding the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the EU institutions, and I will try to assess whether the Lisbon Treaty was a real reform in this manner, or if anything more can be done

to improve the democratic legitimacy of the EU. I will especially pay attention to the approach of the Cypriot MEP Fidias Panayiotou and the potential impact of his approach on the accountability and democratic legitimacy of the EU.

Keywords: EU institutions, accountability, democratic deficit, democratic legitimacy, Lisbon Treaty

Streszczenie

Po swoim powstaniu, a zwłaszcza po rozszerzeniu kompetencji, Unia Europejska i jej instytucje były często krytykowane za deficyt demokratyczny i brak rozliczalności. Zwłaszcza po wielkim rozszerzeniu z 2004 roku oraz nowych traktatach założycielskich z lat 90. i 2000., kompetencje instytucji UE uległy znacznemu rozszerzeniu, co doprowadziło do konieczności poprawy ich rozliczalności. Głównym powodem krytyki była ogromna rola niewybieralnych organów UE w procesie kształtowania polityki. Traktat z Lizbony miał jednak na celu poprawę rozliczalności i legitymacji demokratycznej instytucji UE oraz zwiększenie roli parlamentów narodowych w procedurze legislacyjnej UE. Czy jednak Traktat z Lizbony wprowadził te zmiany w życie, czy też pozostały one jedynie „słowami na papierze”? Czy reformy wprowadzone Traktatem z Lizbony przekształciły instytucje UE z instytucji stosunkowo nieodpowiedzialnych w instytucje rozliczalne? Czy poszerzenie roli parlamentów narodowych ma charakter merytoryczny, czy też reformy dotyczące ich roli są nieistotne? W niniejszym artykule postaram się przeanalizować zmiany wprowadzone przez Traktat Lizboński w zakresie legitymacji demokratycznej i rozliczalności instytucji UE oraz ocenić, czy Traktat Lizboński stanowił w tym kontekście rzeczywistą reformę, czy też można coś jeszcze zrobić, aby poprawić legitymację demokratyczną UE. Szczególną uwagę zwrócę na podejście cypryjskiego posła do Parlamentu Europejskiego Fidiasa Panayiotou i potencjalny wpływ jego podejścia na rozliczalność i legitymację demokratyczną UE.

Słowa kluczowe: instytucje UE, rozliczalność, deficyt demokratyczny, legitymacja demokratyczna, Traktat Lizboński

Introduction

As the European Union has been developing and enlarging, the competencies of its institutions have been constantly broadening. Besides the broadening of the role of the EU and its institutions in decision-making, the Union's only democratically elected institution was, and still is, the European Parliament, which, compared to the national parliaments, has a significantly lower role in the political system of the Union. On the other hand, the Commission and the technocratic agencies have the greatest impact on decision-making in the Union. As these bodies are unelected, they are not directly accountable to EU citizens, and their policies are often not aligned with European public opinion. This situation caused serious criticism by many scholars towards the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions and the EU in general. The Union was often described as insufficiently accountable, and that it has a democratic deficit. However, with the last founding treaty of the European Union, an attempt to improve the accountability and democratic capacity of the EU institutions was made. This treaty introduces several reforms, such as improving the role of the national parliaments, improving the role of the European Parliament, etc.

Despite the efforts made through the Lisbon Treaty to improve the democratic capacity of the Union and the accountability of its institutions, it seems that the debates about the democratic deficit are still ongoing. The continuous low voter turnout for the EP elections, the relatively low trust in the EU Commission as a major institution when it comes to policy-making in the EU, and the 'gap' between the electorate and the EU officials are some of the most important reasons why these debates are still ongoing. In this manner, the constant growth of the so-called 'Eurosceptic' political parties should also be mentioned.

In this paper, I will try to analyze the contemporary issues of accountability in the European Union. After a brief overview of the pre-Lisbon issues, I will try to describe the main improvements of the last founding treaty in the accountability and democratic legitimacy of the EU. I will not only try to 'find out' the reforms that Lisbon brought in this manner, but also to analyze their effectiveness and their meaning in practice. My focus in this paper will also be on citizens' current views on trust in EU institutions, particularly the Commission, and on the accountability and democratic legitimacy of the EU. In the end, I will try to express

my points of view on these issues and to describe my stance on the approaches needed for improving the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the EU officials.

Criticism of the accountability of the Union in the pre-Lisbon age

It is argued that debates over democratic legitimacy and the democratic deficit, as well as the lack of accountability of the EU institutions, began with the creation of the Union itself. The formation of the European Community of Coal and Steel, as the first step in the European integration process, was not followed by the establishment of directly elected institutions that would function on a supranational level. Its Common Assembly was composed of MPs of the member states' parliaments, and its powers have been very limited.¹ This has been detected as the main source of the democratic deficit of the then European Communities. However, in 1979, the first European elections took place, and the European Communities got their first directly elected governing body – their Parliamentary Assembly. Despite being directly elected, this body was not equivalent to the national parliaments when it comes to its powers and competencies in the EU. Therefore, the main 'source' of the democratic deficit of the EU was not eliminated with the introduction of the European elections. It was more to be done in this manner, and according to David Marquand,² the democratic legitimacy of the EC would be improved with the empowerment of its directly elected body – the Parliamentary Assembly, or, as it is named today, the European Parliament.³ Consequently, the first step for reducing the democratic deficit – establishing a directly elected governing body – was done in 1979. In this period, it has been considered

¹ Tulli U., *Historical Perspectives on the Democratic Deficit(s)*, [in:] *The Rule of Law in the EU*, red. L. Antoniolli, C. Ruzza, Cham 2024, p. 21

² The concept of the democratic deficit itself, and its appearance in the political system of the EU, was first discussed by the mentioned author. According to Marquand, the introduction of qualified majority voting in the Council and depriving the national parliaments of the right to impose a veto had negative consequences on the democratic legitimacy of the European Union. For more see: D. Fromage, *The Parliamentary Accountability of EMU Decisions: Between Informality and Fragmentation*, „European Papers” 2021, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 1419.

³ C. Fasone, D. Gallo, J. Wouters, *Re-connecting Authority and Democratic Legitimacy in the EU: Introductory Remarks*, „European Papers” 2020, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 176.

that broadening the Parliament's competencies would improve the EU's democratic legitimacy and accountability. However, the first significant shift in the role of the Parliament was made with the Maastricht Treaty.

Despite these efforts, Maastricht opened new dilemmas. The post-Maastricht EU has enlarged its scope of competencies. These occasions opened new discussions – after Maastricht, it has been considered that 'simple' broadening of the role of the European Parliament is not sufficient to eliminate the democratic deficit and improve the accountability of the EU. The EP still has not reached the similar level of influence that national parliaments have in the member-states of the EU. On these occasions, the ideas for an enlarged role of the national parliaments in EU affairs started being discussed. As the parameterization of the EU has been seen as insufficient, the accompaniment of the strong national parliaments was seen as a need for improving the democratic legitimization of the EU.⁴ In the post-Maastricht period, until the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, the criticism of the democratic legitimacy and the lack of accountability was still ongoing. This criticism was caused by several reasons, such as the lack of European *demos* or more *demoi*, the lack of transparency of the EU institutions, the low voter turnout in the EP elections, the lack of accountability of the technocratic bodies, etc.⁵

Lisbon Treaty and its impact on improving accountability

The last founding treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, was seen as a reformist treaty that, among other reforms, should improve the democratic capacity and accountability of the European Union in general. It is indisputable that Lisbon brought changes that can be seen as positively influencing the democratic legitimacy of the EU. This treaty continued the tendency of strengthening and improving the role and competencies of the European Parliament, and the improvement of the role of the EP is the first part of the reforms brought by Lisbon that are related to the enlargement of the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the EU. The legislative competencies of the European Parliament were significantly broadened

⁴ A. Wille, *The evolving EU accountability landscape: moving to an ever denser union*, „International Review of Administrative Sciences” 2015, vol. 81, no. 4, p. 7.

⁵ U. Tulli, *Historical Perspectives...*, p. 31.

with the Lisbon Treaty. The role of the Parliament and the Council was equated in the so-called co-decision procedure, which was named 'ordinary legislative procedure'. The role of the Parliament was broadened to almost all areas in which the Council of Ministers passes the decisions with a qualified majority. In the same manner, the budgetary functions of the Parliament were improved, and the Parliament was equated with the Council in the budgetary procedure.⁶

Parliament's role as a 'supervisor' of the work of the other institutions, in particular the Commission, was also preserved and slightly improved. The election of the President of the Commission is done by the Parliament, on a suggestion of the European Council, which has to take into account the results of the elections for the EP. Having the election results in mind when proposing a candidate for the Commission President is also a novelty brought by the Lisbon Treaty.⁷ In addition, the Parliament has to confirm the composition of the Commission after the President chooses the commissioners. The political control over the Commission through the 'censure motion' was also preserved, as per Article 234 TFEU. The Parliament is able to pass this motion with a two-thirds majority, and it will cause a resignation of the Commission, which confirms the principle of political responsibility and accountability of the Commission before the European Parliament.⁸

What has been seen as another reform to tackle the democratic deficit and improve the accountability of the Union is the enlargement of the role of the national parliaments in the EU. As directly elected bodies that represent the will of the electorate directly, the enlargement of their role was seen as a positive change in improving the democratic legitimacy of the EU. Lisbon obliges the Commission to inform the national parliaments on its plans regarding the legislative planning and the potential draft legal acts that are to be proposed in a legislative procedure.⁹ National parliaments have been given the possibility to control the application of the principle of subsidiarity and to react to potential violations of it. Two new procedures were introduced that give national

⁶ J.A. Emmanouilidis, C. Stratulat, *Implementing Lisbon: narrowing the EU's 'democratic deficit'?*, „EPC Policy Brief” 2010, pp. 1-2.

⁷ S.C. Sieberson, *The Treaty of Lisbon and Its Impact on the European Union's Democratic Deficit*, „Columbia Journal of European Law” 2008, vol. 14, no. 3, p. 460.

⁸ Y. Devuyt, *The European Union's Institutional Balance after the Treaty of Lisbon: Community Method and Democratic Deficit Reassessed*, „Georgetown Journal of International Law” 2008, vol. 39, no. 2, p. 308.

⁹ Y. Devuyt, *The European Union's Institutional Balance...*, p. 312.

parliaments mechanisms to respond to a legislative proposal that, in their view, violates the principle of subsidiarity. The first procedure is known as the ‘yellow card’ procedure, which is described in Article 7(2) of Protocol No. 2 TEU. If one-third of the national parliaments of the member states pass a decision that a particular legislative proposal violates the subsidiarity principle, the Commission is obliged to review the proposal.

However, this does not oblige the Commission to withdraw the proposal or change it. The Commission can continue with the unchanged proposal, but it is obliged to justify its decision in a reasoned opinion. The Commission should also refer the issue to the Parliament and the Council. The ‘orange card’ procedure requires decisions from the simple majority of the national parliaments. If initiated, it also obliges the Commission to justify its proposal. However, the last word is to be said by the Parliament and the Council – they decide if the proposal will be rejected, which means that national parliaments cannot block the proposal by themselves. When speaking about the legislative procedure, it should be mentioned that the Lisbon Treaty introduced the citizens’ initiative. If more than a million citizens from a significant number of member-states sign the initiative, they can submit it to the European Commission, which can decide to accept it and initiate a legislative procedure.¹⁰

The effects of the Lisbon accountability reforms: substantial or illusory?

As seen above, through the last founding treaty, an effort was made to improve the democratic legitimacy of the Union and the accountability of its institutions, or, in other words, an attempt to tackle the democratic deficit through several reforms was made. These changes went on in two directions: improving the role of the European Parliament and the role of the national parliaments. Almost 20 years after implementing the Lisbon Treaty, the questions of the democratic deficit and lack of accountability are still frequently asked. Consequently, one can legitimately ask: did the post-Lisbon EU improve its accountability, and was the democratic deficit at least reduced, if not eliminated?

¹⁰ J.A. Emmanouilidis, C. Stratulat, *Implementing Lisbon...*, p. 2.

The improvements in accountability and democratic legitimacy introduced by the Lisbon Treaty went in two directions: strengthening the role of the European Parliament in the EU's political system and enhancing the role of national parliaments in EU affairs. The introduction of the EU citizens' initiative, as a form of direct democracy, has also been a significant novelty in this manner. Speaking about the enhanced role of the European Parliament, besides the fact that Lisbon had a positive impact, the Parliament is still the weakest of the main European Union institutions. Improving its role in the legislative procedure only equated it with the Council, but the Parliament is still not dominant in the procedure, and still has to reach compromises with the Council if a conflict occurs. It is still evident that the Parliament's role in the political system of the EU is not equivalent to the role of the national parliaments in the political systems of the member-states. The role of the European Parliament as a 'supervisor' of the other institutions, and as an institution before which the executive institutions of the EU should be accountable, was not improved with the Lisbon Treaty. The election of the President of the Commission and the possibility of dissolution of the Commission are the only effective instruments in the hands of the MEPs. The practical meaning of these instruments is not huge and influential, especially when it comes to the usage of the censure motion against the Commission. Collecting a two-thirds majority in the huge European Parliament and reaching an agreement between the different parliamentary groups composed of different member-states seems like a 'mission impossible', and the practice just proves this stance. The last censure motion, from October 2025, has been unsuccessful, as well as all the previous motions, which shows that this instrument is practically unusable.¹¹ Therefore, it is not a surprise that in the academic literature, the stance that reforms in the checks and balances system inside the EU are needed, and that Lisbon did not bring any positive novelties in this manner, is still present.¹²

Another issue when it comes to the European Parliament is the issue of how well it represents the views of the citizens of the European Union. The complicated composition of the Parliament, as there are different

¹¹ European Parliament, *MEPs reject motions of censure against the European Commission*, „Press Release” 2025, online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251003IPR30667/meps-reject-motions-of-censure-against-the-european-commission> [accessed: 28.01.2026].

¹² S.C. Sieberson, *The Treaty of Lisbon...*, pp. 453 and 464.

parliamentary groups from different member-states, raises the question of the (un)representativeness of the EU's only directly-elected body. The lack of a common European identity, or as it is often defined, the lack of a European *demos*, is one of the biggest reasons for this. The differences in the languages and cultures are seen as obstacles to creating a common *demos*.¹³ As such, the European Parliament is fragmented, and it is another weakness besides its weak position in the political system of the EU.

Since collective participation requires a "shared or common identity", the further advancements in collective identity will have positive influence on the integration process as well as democratization of the EU. The problem here is whether it is possible to create such *demos*.¹⁴

However, the lack of common *demos* is an obstacle to improving the democratic legitimacy from a socio-psychological aspect.¹⁵ What is even more problematic, and a stronger reason for the not-so-high democratic legitimacy of the European Parliament, is the voter turnout for the elections. The European elections traditionally suffer from significantly lower voter turnout than the national elections.

The highest voter turnout was in 1979 at 61.99%, but has since gradually decreased to only 56% in 2019. In comparison, U.S. voter turnout in 2020 was 66.7%. EP elections do not coincide with government or policy formations, leading to a discontent between voting and democracy.¹⁶

The last elections had a higher voter turnout of 50.74%, and together with the 2019 elections, they had a relatively higher voter turnout than the previous several elections.¹⁷ Some authors argue that the reason behind the low turnout and the low interest among the EU citizens for voting on the elections lies in the low level of understanding how the EU functions. The political system of the EU is complicated, and the

¹³ S. Griller, A. Orator, *The European Union's Institutional Balance...*, p. 454.

¹⁴ K.D. Azman, *The Problem of Democratic Deficit in the European Union*, „International Journal of Humanities and Social Science” 2011, vol. 1, no. 5, p. 247.

¹⁵ K.D. Azman, *The Problem of Democratic Deficit...*, p. 247.

¹⁶ M. Peak, *Op-Ed: The European Union has a Democratic Deficit Problem*, „The Pardee Atlas Journal of Global Affairs” 2023, online: <https://sites.bu.edu/pardeeatlas/opinions/op-ed-the-european-union-has-a-democratic-deficit-problem/> [accessed: 28.01.2026].

¹⁷ European Parliament, *Turnout | 2024 European election results*, „Official Website of the European Parliament” 2024, online: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/turnout/> [accessed: 29.01.2026].

decision-making inside the EU is not as simple as on national level. A large part of the electorate does not clearly understand how these processes go on inside the Union institutions,¹⁸ which is considered a reason why they are not interested in voting. Even if one assumes that this stance is not true, it is a mere fact that the voter turnout is relatively low and that it lowers the legitimacy of the European Parliament. As analyzed above, the conclusion is that the efforts made through the Lisbon Treaty to improve the position and the democratic legitimacy of the European Parliament did not have any significant practical effect. In other words, Lisbon did not tackle the main problems related to the only directly elected body of the EU.

Speaking about the impact of Lisbon on the national parliaments' role in the EU, the above-mentioned 'yellow card' and 'orange card' procedures were among the most important changes made with the last founding treaty. But analyzing their practical use shows that their effect is nonexistent. First, even if these procedures are successful, they do not cause any change. The only consequence of this procedure is that the Commission must explain its legislative proposal, not amend or withdraw it. After this explanation, the Commission has the right to continue with the same, unchanged legislative proposal. Second, the numbers show that these procedures have not been used often. More precisely, the 'yellow card' procedure has been used only three times, while the 'orange card' procedure has never been initiated.¹⁹ It is not a surprise that these procedures are not practically useful, having in mind the differences in the perspectives of the member-states, and consequently the difficulties for reaching an agreement for initiating one of these procedures between their parliaments. Therefore, the Lisbon Treaty's 'improvements' of the role of the national parliament are not significant as well, and they are reduced to two procedures without any legal force, which are not used

¹⁸ S.C. Sieberson, *The Treaty of Lisbon...*, p. 448.

¹⁹ M.L. Wang, *Houses of Cards: reflection on parliamentary involvement at European level 10 years after the Lisbon Treaty*, „Eyes on Europe” 2019, online: <https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/houses-of-cards-reflection-on-parliamentary-involvement-at-european-level/> [accessed: 29.01.2026].

in practice. Similar conclusions could be drawn about the usage of the citizens' initiative.²⁰

After analyzing the (un)successfulness of the Lisbon Treaty reforms in the field of democratic legitimacy and accountability, the 'old' problems that exist in this manner, and that were not tackled with the last founding treaty, have to be mentioned. Namely, the critics related to the democratic deficit and the accountability of the European Union are directed in several other directions: the strong position of the unelected Commission in the political system of the EU and its lack of accountability,²¹ the lack of linkage between the national policies and the policies of the EU as the former are seen as democratic and the latter as technocratic and elitist, the lack of accountability of the European Council and the Council of EU²² who are also not directly elected, the constant expansion of the power of the Court of Justice, the huge impact of the lobbying activists, the high level of delegation of powers to the bureaucratic agencies, etc.²³ The constant growth of the so-called 'Eurosceptic'²⁴ parties and the decline of trust in the EU institutions are often mentioned as proof of the democratic deficit as well.²⁵

Out of all the mentioned weaknesses, I would especially point out the Commission, which has the strongest impact on the policy-making process and is responsible for proposing the EU legislation. Despite its power, as

²⁰ The usage of this instrument is very low. First of all, collecting one million signatures within the EU is not the easiest task. Even when they are collected, it is up to the EU institutions whether the initiative will be fruitful. As an example, in the period April 2012 – June 2025, 119 citizen initiatives have been registered, but only 14 of them collected the needed number of signatures. Even the successful initiatives can be easily dismissed because of some 'manifest errors'. Therefore, the introduction of the European citizens' initiative is defined as 'A Democratic Revolution Unfulfilled'. For more, see: A. Alemanno, *When Failure Succeeds and Success Fails: A Reality Check on the European Citizens' Initiative*, „The Good Lobby” 2025, online: <https://thegoodlobby.eu/when-failure-succeeds-and-success-fails-a-reality-check-on-the-european-citizens-initiative/> [accessed: 29.01.2026].

²¹ M. Costa, *The Accountability Gap in EU Law*, London 2017, p. 22.

²² Yanis Varoufakis gives a really interesting explanation of the lack of accountability of the ministers that are part of the Council. As per him: “When our leaders return home following an EU Council meeting, they immediately shed responsibility for unpopular decisions, blaming their Council colleagues instead: “It was the best I could negotiate,” they say with a shrug. EU functionaries, advisers, lobbyists, and European Central Bank officials know this. They have learned to expect member-state representatives to toe the line and tell their national parliaments that, while they disagreed with the Council’s decisions, they were too “responsible” and committed to European “solidarity” to resist.” For more see: Y. Varoufakis, *The EU's Widening Democratic Deficit*, „Project Syndicate” 2023, online: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/european-union-democratic-deficit-widening-by-yanis-varoufakis-2023-08> [accessed: 30.01.2026].

²³ K.D. Azman, *The Problem of Democratic Deficit...*, pp. 245-246.

²⁴ I would argue that the mass media often use the term 'Eurosceptic' in a suspicious way, describing the political parties that are criticizing the current state of affairs in the EU. By doing so, these political parties are not merely against the EU; even a significant part of them are pro-European.

²⁵ C. Fasone, D. Gallo, J. Wouters, *Re-connecting Authority and Democratic Legitimacy...*, p. 185.

explained above, the political system of the EU lacks an efficient instrument for holding the Commission accountable. The Commission is *de facto* the government of the EU, and it is unacceptable that it has such an ‘untouchable’ position. It seems that not much effort is put into the EU to improve this situation. After the 2024 European Parliament elections, Ursula von der Leyen was re-elected as President of the Commission. Despite the perception about her among the Europeans and the policies that she promotes, the huge scandal regarding the purchasing of COVID-19 vaccines, *Pfizergate*, harmed her reputation and caused suspicion about her values. However, despite this and all the controversies related to her, she was re-elected in 2024. Von der Leyen was not only not held accountable for *Pfizergate*, but she continued to lead the ‘government’ of the EU at a time when Europe is divided and faces many geopolitical and economic complications. Similar to the Commission, the growing influence of the bureaucratic agencies is even more problematic from the aspect of accountability. Executive competencies are being conferred to the agencies, and it is problematic since neither national parliaments nor the European Parliament possesses mechanisms to hold them accountable.²⁶

How can accountability and democratic legitimacy be improved? The approach of Fidias as an inspirational example

Among the scholars, there are many different ideas and approaches on how the democratic deficit should be tackled, and how the accountability of the EU institutions should be improved. Some of the suggestions are additional enlargement of the role of the European Parliament, establishing more effective checks and balances instruments between the major EU institutions, bigger openness and transparency of the institutions, election of the President of the Commission by elections, etc.²⁷ Strengthening the impact of the national institutions, more precisely the national legislative bodies as democratically, directly elected bodies, on

²⁶ D. Fromage, *The Parliamentary Accountability...*, p. 1423.

²⁷ S. Griller, A. Orator, *The European Union's Institutional Balance...*, pp. 464-465.

the policy-making processes inside the EU is another idea. Potentially, other forms of direct democracy besides the initiative can be introduced. However, aside from how good these ideas are, it should be noted that for their implementation, an intervention in the primary law of the EU is needed. Nowadays, such an intervention seems impossible, since Europe is really divided, and there are no initiatives in this manner. What can be done is in the hands of the EU officials: more transparency, more listening to the stances and opinions of the EU citizens instead of the lobby groups, more communication with the public, taking responsibility for the decisions that are made, etc.

Speaking about the idea of bringing the EU closer to its citizens, I find the ideas and approaches of the Cypriot MEP Fidias Panayiotou very creative, inspirative and effective. Fidias is a young social media personality who was elected as an MEP in the 2024 elections. Not affiliated to any political party or group in the European Parliament, he is a non-inscrit MEP. What is common for him is his approach to his mandate. Very active on social media, he is explaining in a simple way to his followers what ‘happens’ inside the European Parliament and in the EU, therefore making the processes inside the EU more understandable for the public. In 2024, several months after his election, he announced that he was launching a smartphone application for a ‘direct democracy’. The application, named ‘Agora’, is a ‘place’ where EU citizens can discuss and suggest ideas related to EU issues. However, its most important feature is that Fidias uses it to determine his way of voting inside the Parliament. He creates polls on the app prior to the voting in the Parliament, and his way of voting is determined by the opinions of the users of the app.²⁸ He also created a political party named ‘Direct Democracy’ in Cyprus. His unconventional approach is often heavily criticized by the establishment politicians and the mass media. Nevertheless, if used by the EU, Fidias’ approach has a high potential to bring the EU closer to the people and to improve the trust in the EU institutions, and consequently, the democratic legitimacy of the Union.

²⁸ T. Orbán, *Youtuber MEP to Launch Direct Democracy App Where Citizens Can Vote on EU Laws*, „The European Conservative” 2024, online: <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/youtuber-mep-to-launch-direct-democracy-app-where-citizens-can-vote-on-eu-laws/> [accessed: 31.01.2026].

Conclusion

The lack of democratic legitimacy and accountability was often discussed by the scholars who research the European Union in the pre-Lisbon era, and these discussions were ‘as old as the EU’. After the Maastricht Treaty and the broadening of the competencies of the EU, these discussions continued, and David Marquand’s idea of removing the democratic deficit through the broadening of the competencies of the European Parliament was not sufficient. Maastricht did not bring any significant enlargement of the role of the European Parliament, but besides it, the critics of the democratic legitimacy of the EU went on in several other directions: too much power conferred to the unelected bodies, especially the Commission, lack of checks and balances instruments that will hold the major EU institutions accountable, low level of influence of the national parliaments on the EU affairs, etc.

The Lisbon Treaty was seen as a potential ‘improver’ of the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the EU. The accountability reforms brought by the last founding treaty went in two directions: improving the role of the European Parliament, and enhancing the role of the national parliaments in EU affairs. The European Citizens Initiative was also introduced. But after almost 20 years of implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, it seems that the last founding treaty did not have any significant impact on improving the accountability of the European Union. The European Parliament still has a relatively weak position, especially when compared to the national parliaments’ role in the national political systems. In the legislative procedure, the Parliament has to reach compromises with the Council, and the censure motion, which is an instrument for holding the Commission accountable, is almost unusable. The lack of democratic *demos*, the high fragmentation of the Parliament, and its low level of proper representativeness of the EU citizens, the traditionally low voter turnout in the elections for the European Parliament, additionally confirm this stance. When it comes to the national parliaments, the two instruments given by the Lisbon Treaty, the ‘yellow card’ and ‘orange card’ procedures, are also practically unusable – the former has been initiated only several times, while the latter has never been initiated. Despite this, even when successful, they cannot impose an obligation on the Commission to change or withdraw the legislative proposal. The European citizens’ initiative’s practical (un)usage also shows that its

introduction did not have any positive implications on the democratic legitimacy of the EU.

Concluding that the Lisbon Treaty did not improve the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the EU, the question of what can be done in this manner is raised. In the relevant academic literature, several solutions are offered, such as enhancing the role of the European Parliament, establishing more effective checks and balances mechanisms, electing the President of the Commission on direct elections, improving the impact of the national parliaments in the EU affairs, etc. However, even though these ideas may be good, they require intervention in the primary law of the EU, which at the moment seems almost impossible, given the fact that the EU is really divided inside. The officials of the EU have the biggest responsibility in improving the accountability within the EU, and they should improve the transparency of the EU. The approach of the Cypriot MEP Fidias Panayiotou, who is constantly trying to 'listen to the voice' of the voters, seems really inspiring. He created a smartphone application, on which the citizens can discuss the issues, and decide how he will vote in the Parliament. He is also using his social media to explain in a simple way the processes that are happening in the EU. Bringing the Union closer to the people, taking into account the opinions of the EU citizens when making decisions, and holding the high EU officials accountable for their deeds are highly necessary. Unfortunately, it seems that there is no motivation inside the EU for improving the situation. Fidias' actions are often backlashed by the media and the establishment politicians, and he is often heavily criticized for it. If there is no effort to bring the EU closer to the people in some way, there is a potential for additional growth of the negative attitude towards the Union, which will cause negative consequences for the EU itself.

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