EU Accession of Central and Eastern European Countries:

Democracy and Integration as Conflicting Logics

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EU Accession of Central and Eastern European Countries: Democracy and Integration as Conflicting Logics[1]

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Abstract

Although the European Union has in many ways promoted democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe, there are several tensions between democracy and integration into the EU of the applicant countries. These tensions are explored in the paper from two perspectives. Firstly, it is argued that the conception of democracy that prevails in the candidate countries – or more specifically, the coupling of democracy with the nation – inevitably implies that integration into the EU restricts democracy. Secondly, the author exposes the norms and principles that dominate the Eastern enlargement – speed, objectivity, efficiency, expertise, competition and inevitability – and argues that these constrain democratic politics and tend to limit enlargement to a narrow sphere of elites and experts. The paper also draws parallels between these two dilemmas and the "democratic deficit" of the EU and discusses the prospects for mitigating the tensions that it highlights.

[1] I am grateful to Harto Hakovirta, Hiski Haukkala, Arkadi Moshes, Hanna Ojanen, Christer Pursiainen and Henri Vogt for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to Toby Archer for checking the English language. The paper is part of my PhD research on "Democracy and integration into the European Union: the case of Estonia".

Contents

Conceptualising the links between democracy and integration

When newly established democracies strive for membership in a union of stable democratic states, it seems natural to assume that the process strengthens and consolidates their political systems. Throughout the 1990s, it was indeed widely taken for granted that the eastward enlargement of the European Union promotes the democratisation of the post-communist applicant countries. Although that is still the dominant view, more and more critical voices have recently emerged to highlight the "dark side" of the story as well.[1] Irrespective of the weight given to positive vis-à-vis negative EU impacts, democratisation scholars generally acknowledge that international dimensions have been more significant for the democratisation of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs)[2] than in any previous case of transition, and that the EU has been the external actor to play the most significant part in the process. Yet, as pointed out by Laurence Whitehead, EU enlargement as a form of democracy promotion is strikingly undertheorised and there is little research on the topic.[3]

Earlier conceptualisations of the international dimensions of democratisation[4] are of limited use here for several reasons. Firstly, they focus on earlier stages of regime change and hence on questions related to bringing about democracy and supporting the establishment of a new political system.[5] Integration into the EU of the CEECs, by contrast, could only properly start *after* these countries had already passed the transition

[1] See Robert Bideleux, "'Europeanisation' and the limits to democratisation in East-Central Europe," in Geoffrey Pridham and Attila Ágh, eds., *Prospects for democratic consolidation in East-Central Europe* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 25-53; Laurence Whitehead "The Enlargement of the European Union: A 'Risky' Form of Democracy Promotion", in Whitehead, ed., *The International Dimensions of Democratisation: Europe and the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 415-42; several articles in Jan Zielonka and Alex Pravda, eds., *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe, Vol. 2: International and Transnational Factors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[2] By "CEECs" I refer to the ten Eastern EU applicant countries.
[3] Whitehead, "The Enlargement of the European Union", 415-16.
[4] For main contributions, see Whitehead, *The International Dimensions of Democratisation*; Geoffrey Pridham, Eric Herring and George Sanford, *Building Democracy? The International Dimension of Democratisation in Eastern Europe* (London and Washington: Leicester University Press, 1997).
[5] The three categories of external impacts introduced by Whitehead – contagion, control and consent – were clearly designed to address primarily these questions. See Whitehead, "Three International Dimensions of Democratisation," in Whitehead, *The International Dimensions of Democratisation*, 3-25.

phase and started to consolidate.[6] Secondly, the impacts of the EU differ from other external factors because the applicant countries are *becoming part of* the EU – an organisation with strong elements of supranationality and extensive competencies. EU integration has increasingly penetrated domestic politics of the CEECs and is profoundly shaping their political systems. New approaches are needed to analyse the mechanisms of influence that are at work in the overall process of enlargement.

In existing studies, a basic distinction has been made between external "context" or "climate" and "actors".[7] The former has been considered exceptionally favorable to the democratisation of the CEECs, but the vague and general concept of "international context" is not a particularly useful tool for empirical research. It is easier to specify the latter aspect, the impact of international actors, and study the concrete measures taken by external actors in order to support democratisation. The EU has applied a range of instruments – most importantly, conditions for membership and financial assistance – to support democracy in the CEECs, but the importance of these instruments must not be overestimated: the candidates' preparations for EU membership have in practice focused on economic and administrative capabilities,[8] and as of 1999, an average of only one per cent of the total EU aid to the CEECs had been directed to democracy.[9] Indirect and unintended impacts of integration on the CEE democracies are more pervasive than the EU's policies of democracy promotion, but also more difficult to specify and study. It is not enough to look at the EU as part of the external context or to study its policies of democracy promotion; we need to analyse how the external context is appropriated to domestic political practices and how the logic of integration constitutes and determines both external and internal agency.

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[6] On theoretical periodisation of democratisation, see e.g. Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model", *Comparative Politics* 2:3 (1970): 337-47; Doh Chull Shin, "On the Third Wave of Democratisation: A Synthesis and Evaluation of Recent Theory and Research", *World Politics* 47:1 (1994): 143-146.

[7] Petr Kopecky and Cas Mudde, "What has Eastern Europe taught us about the democratisation literature (and vice versa)?", *European Journal of Political Research* 37 (2000): 531-32.

[8] Alex Pravda, "Introduction," in Zielonka and Pravda, *Democratic Consolidation*, 12-13.

[9] J.R. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe* (New York, Palgrave for St. Martin's Griffin, 2001), 87. Assistance to civil society in the applicant countries has increased to some extent since then (see Raik, "From a Recipient of Aid Towards an Independent Actor: The

Conceptualisation of the interplay between the internal and the external has been a major challenge for the democratisation scholars. In a recent contribution, Geoffrey Pridham argues that out of the concepts developed in earlier studies concerning the international dimensions, only two are useful for studying that interplay and the impacts of the EU in particular: conditionality and convergence.[10] Pridham underlines the importance of democratic conditionality of EU enlargement, but he fails to make a distinction between conditions for membership and other policies of democracy promotion, such as recommendations, advice and financial aid. The former are a clear example of conditionality policy where benefits (EU membership) are offered to the target countries (the CEECs) if they fulfill certain conditions (stable democracy). Membership criteria are a powerful tool of influence, but since the CEECs have for several years fulfilled the Copenhagen political criteria,[11] there has not been much need to apply democratic conditionality.[12] When it comes to other policies of democracy promotion, inclusion of all of them under the notion of conditionality is questionable and obscures the concept. Moreover, as already noted, democracy promotion has not played a considerable part in the overall process of enlargement.

Hence I claim that Pridham, like many others, overemphasises the importance of *democratic* conditionality of EU accession for the CEE democracies. This does not mean that the concept of conditionality should be abandoned, but one needs to take a broader perspective and study the impacts of the overall dominance of conditionality principle in the enlargement process; conditionality referring to the general mechanism that links the progress of the CEECs in EU integration with their success in satisfying the EU's demands and expectations. This process is closely related to the second concept propagated by

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Impacts of EU Integration on Estonia's Civil Society", *Working Papers* 34 (2002), Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs. Available at http://www.upi-fiia.fi/julkaisut/UPI_WP/wp/wp34.pdf.)

[10] Geoffrey Pridham, "Rethinking regime-change theory and the international dimension of democratisation: ten years after in East-Central Europe", in Pridham and Ágh, *Prospects for democratic consolidation*, 57.

[11] As decided by the Copenhagen European Council of June 1993, the first criterion for EU membership is "stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities" (European Council: Presidency Conclusions – Copenhagen, 21-22 June 1993).

[12] The most notable case of applying democratic conditionality has been the exclusion of Slovakia from the first group of enlargement in 1997 because it did not satisfy the political criteria.

Pridham, convergence, which he defines as "gradual movement in system conformity".[13] In other words, in the course of integration the applicant countries adopt European norms and practices through involvement in common networks and increasing contacts between various actors. What is telling about the relations between the EU and the applicant countries, and reflects the strength of conditionality, is that convergence has mostly operated in one direction: the applicant countries have adapted themselves to EU rules and taken over Western patterns.

This paper approaches the mechanisms of EU influence on the CEE democracies from a different perspective than most democratisation studies, namely by analyzing the discourses or sets of meaning related to democracy and enlargement that frame and underlie the operation of these mechanisms. Discourses are understood here as systems of meaning that are embedded in social practices, institutions and organisations. They uphold sets of norms, rules and shared truths that pre-exist and condition our ways to think and act, often in an unconscious manner. On the other hand, discourses are contingent; meanings are never fixed and hence can be transformed through social action. Discourses are on a constant move and the very existence of sets of meaning hinges on whether they are "used" in practice and thus reproduced.[14]

Democracy is an example of a powerful and unquestioned discourse that conditions and frames political practices, for instance in the context of EU enlargement – to quote Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the democratic discourse is "the fundamental instrument of production of the social" in modern Western societies.[15] On the other hand, abstract concepts such as democracy have to be "lived out" in practice and acquire concrete meanings in daily life in order to be maintained. One of the purposes of discourse analysis

[13] Pridham, "Rethinking regime-change theory", 57.
[14] On the conceptions of discourse that have inspired my approach, see for instance David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Introducing discourse theory and political analysis", in D. Howarth, A.J. Norval and Y. Stavrakakis, eds., *Discourse theory and political analysis: identities, hegemonies and social change* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1-23; and Maarten A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernisation and the Policy Process*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 42-72.
[15] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 155.

is to manifest constraints imposed on our thinking and acting by discourses that we often take for granted, and to explore possibilities to alter constraining sets of meaning. This approach enables us to study the ideas and assumptions that underpin political action and analysis related to the democratic aspect of enlargement, and to question the existing frameworks and conditions.

Looking at the discourses of democracy and enlargement, I will focus on two points that highlight the tensions that exist between democracy and EU integration of the CEECs. Firstly, it is argued below that the conception of democracy that prevails in the CEECs – or more specifically, the coupling of democracy with the nation – inevitably implies that integration into the EU restricts democracy. Secondly, I will expose the norms and principles that dominate the Eastern enlargement and show that the official discourse of enlargement is in a contradictory or tense relation with a number of central features of democratic politics. The paper will also draw parallels between these two dilemmas and the "democratic deficit" of the EU and discuss the prospects for overcoming or at least mitigating the tensions and contradictions that we find.

Nation – the good and the evil

Any judgement that we possibly give on the impacts of EU enlargement on democracy in the CEECs builds on our understandings of democracy, or in other words, the conceptions of democracy imply certain limits and forms for assessing those impacts. One central feature of European conceptions of democracy is that it is tightly coupled with the nation-state – the nation is the *demos* that rules itself via common institutions, and the nation-state constitutes the space that delineates legitimate use of power. As we know, in post-communist Eastern Europe this link has proved one of the major challenges to democratisation. In earlier democratisation studies, national unity has been considered a necessary prerequisite for transition.[16] In the CEECs, however, nation-building has evolved hand-in-hand with the construction of democracy. Liberation from Soviet domination was

[16] E.g. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy", 350-51.

as much a liberation of the CEE nations as it was of individuals; it freed the way for acclaiming what was considered the natural right of the nations: to decide and govern their own destiny. Democracy in the sense of "people's rule" was made possible by the emergence of sovereign nation-states.

There is an obvious tension between the celebration of national self-determination and the aim of joining the EU, which also bears upon the impacts of EU integration on democracy. On the one hand, integration is supposed to safeguard democracy and the "natural" place of the CEE nations as part of Western Europe. On the other hand, it sets new limits to both democracy and national identity. Since for the CEE people democracy means an ability to decide over "our own", that is national affairs, the EU easily appears as the "other" that restricts "our" self-determination. As long as the *demos* is equated with the nation and the nation-state remains the main arena for democracy, EU integration inevitably weakens democracy through taking power away from where the people are. The tension between national sovereignty and integration has been particularly difficult for the three Baltic countries that regained independence in 1991, after half-a-century of Soviet rule. The Balts have for many years been the most eurosceptic nations in CEE, one of the main reasons being the fear of losing national sovereignty and identity.[17]

While nationhood can be seen as constructed by both ethnicity, citizenship and the state, it is ethnicity that prevails in the East European conceptions of the nation.[18] The pre-eminence of ethnicity, combined with minority groups of a considerable size, makes the articulation of democracy to national sovereignty particularly problematic for democracy in the CEECs. There is a dim line between a sense of national community as a positive and even necessary building block of democracy, and nationalism as an exclusive, intolerant force that discriminates against ethnic minorities and endangers the liberal principles of individual rights and freedoms. "Western" approaches to nationalism in CEE have tended to overemphasise the latter aspect; to demonise any expressions of nationalism. Yet we

[17] *Central and Eastern Eurobarometer* Nr. 8, 1998; *Applicant Countries Eurobarometer* 2001; "Euroopa Liit ja Eesti avalik arvamus", Institute of International and Social Studies, Tallinn, January 2002 (unpublished survey study).

should not forget the positive value of national feelings as a source of a sense of belonging and motivation to take interest and participate in public life. National identity gives legitimacy to state power and functions as an important basis for attachment of the citizens to the political community.

The Western concern over the position of minorities in the CEECs has undeniably been justified. Moreover, the sensitivity to the dangers of nationalism is understandable considering the European past and the historical mission of European integration to provide a counterforce to extreme and non-democratic forms of nationalism – here one can draw a parallel between the situation after World War II and the collapse of the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, the CEECs have rightly accused the EU of being more critical towards minority issues in the candidate countries than towards similar problems in the Member States. In addition, human rights and minority issues have dominated the EU's policies of democracy promotion in the CEECs to the extent that the Union can be criticised for paying too little attention to other aspects of democracy. The position of minorities has been the main target of the EU's criticism, as well as of financial assistance directed to democracy promotion.[19] An unintended "side-effect" of the Western approaches to democracy and nationalism in Eastern Europe is that they have actually fed concern over national self-determination and reinforced the linkage between the conceptions of nation and democracy.

Estonia and Latvia have been the most problematic cases in this respect because of their large Russian-speaking minorities (about 29 and 36 % of the population respectively).[20] Majority of the Russian-speaking inhabitants moved to these countries during the Soviet time as part of the Russification policy, which caused an unprecedented change in the ethnic composition of the populations. Ethnic Estonians and Latvians experienced the rapid increase of the number of Russian-speakers together with growing dominance of the Russian language in public life as an existential threat to their language and culture. Most

[18] George Schöpflin, *Nations. Identity. Power: The New Politics of Europe* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000).
[19] See Robert Youngs, "European Union Democracy Promotion Policies: Ten Years On", *European Foreign Affairs Review* 6:3 (2001): 364-65.

of the Russian-speakers became non-citizens when the two former Soviet republics restored their independence in 1991, and the naturalisation of these people has proceeded slowly. However, ethnic relations in these countries have developed in a positive direction especially since late 1990s.[21] The EU has presented numerous recommendations to the Estonian and Latvian governments concerning the minority policy, most of which have been put into practice. The Union has also supported measures for integrating the minorities into Estonian and Latvian societies. EU integration has thus contributed to reducing the number of non-citizens and improving ethnic relations in the two Baltic countries.

Although the overall developments have been positive, many Estonians and Latvians see the EU's influence as an undue interference in "our" affairs, an imposition of a notion of democracy from the outside instead of allowing for bottom-up construction of democracy, and even a form of neocolonialism. So on the one hand, integration into the EU has made democracy in these countries more inclusive, but on the other hand, it has fuelled concern over national identity. Integration has given rise to the construction of a new border between "us" *versus* "them", "us" being ethnic Estonians or Latvians and "them" including the EU and other Western organisations as well as the local Russian-speaking minorities. Maintenance of their "own state" where Estonian or Latvian is spoken as the main language and used in all spheres of public life remains a value-in-itself for ethnic Estonians and Latvians , but it is also considered far from guaranteed – not to be forgotten, the size of the ethnic majority group is just below one million in Estonia and about 1.4 million in Latvia, and these numbers are on the decrease.

Thus, Estonians and Latvians have sought to use all possible official and legislative means in order to safeguard the position of their language and culture, while at the same time trying to satisfy Western norms of democracy and human rights. In spite of the remaining problems, they seem to have succeeded fairly well in fitting together what at the outset

[20] Peeter Vihalemm, ed., *Baltic Media in Transition* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2002), 276.
[21] See Marju Lauristin and Mati Heidmets (eds.) *The Challenge of the Russian Minority: Emerging Multicultural Democracy in Estonia* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2002).

appeared as conflicting logics:[22] building a nation-state and a democracy that respects the rights of minorities. International recognition, authorised by the EU and the OSCE, that there are no systematic violations of minority rights in these countries is an important proof of that. Nonetheless, the fear of losing national sovereignty and identity has not disappeared and continues to cause frictions with respect to both democracy, the position of minorities and integration into the EU.

Pressures to decouple democracy from the state

Preparations for EU accession restrict national sovereignty of the CEECs to a considerable extent, as the applicant states have to adopt all EU legislation and have very little room for manoeuvre in the accession negotiations. Their domestic decision-making has in the recent years been so focused on implementing the conditions set by the EU, that little space has been left for democratic politics in the sense of a plurality of views, political debate, and the possibility to choose between alternative solutions. The principle of conditionality has been applied during the current EU enlargement to an unprecedented extent. There is always in principle a conflict between conditionality and national sovereignty, which makes it problematic to use conditionality as a means of democracy promotion.[23] As already emphasised, in the case of the CEECs the scope of conditionality has gone far beyond the promotion of democracy and human rights, and its focus has been on other issues. The extensiveness of membership criteria has made conditionality a burden rather than a support for democracy, and the value of national sovereignty for the CEECs has sharpened the tension between conditionality and democracy. [24]

[22] See Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 401-33.

[23] Nevertheless, in the post-Cold War period it has become increasingly acceptable and legitimate especially for international actors to apply conditionality policy in order to promote democracy and human rights. See Smith, Karen E. (1998) 'The Use of Political Conditionality in the EU's Relations with Third Countries: How Effective?', in *European Foreign Affairs Review* 3(2): 256-57.

[24] Cf. Jan Zielonka, "Conclusions", in Zielonka and Pravda, *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*.

However, the CEECs would not necessarily have more of democratic politics or national sovereignty if they were to stay outside the EU. They would need to follow most EU norms in any case, one significant practical reason being that they are economically dependent on trade with the EU.[25] What is even more important, the problem of external constraints on national sovereignty is a world-wide phenomenon that is by no means restricted to the transition countries. The democratic aspect of EU enlargement has to be placed in the context of globalisation and the overall weakening of the ability of nation-states to guide and control developments in society.[26] In order to tackle the effects of globalisation that constrain democracy on the nation-state level, some degree of extension of democratic procedures to the international level seems inevitable. Regional integration can provide an important arena for counterbalancing the pressures imposed on states – and on democracy in its state-bound form – by globalisation. Regional institutions such as the EU are in many fields (from the so-called new security threats, to control over transnational economic actors or conditions of trade) more capable of exercising political power than the nation-states. Nevertheless, states are in general reluctant to transfer their power to international institutions, or to "pool" their sovereignty as it is called in the EU. For the CEECs, the situation is particularly painful: just as they have started to fulfill their dream of a sovereign nation-state, they are faced with the impossibility of their ideal.

The tension between European integration and democracy confined to the nation-state is at the heart of the "democratic deficit" of the EU, and the coming enlargement has made it all the more acute for the EU – as formulated by Jacques Rupnik, "The question reopened /…/ to include the new democracies is: Does the nation-state remain the framework *par excellence* of democracy?"[27] The link between democracy and the nation-state is not only the main hurdle on the way of solving the EU's democratic deficit; it is inherent in our understandings about the nature of the deficit and possibilities to solve it. Since the EU lacks a common identity or a *demos* similar to those of the nation-states, and it cannot

[25] In 2000, an average of 62 % of the candidate countries' exports went to the EU and 58 % of their imports came from the EU. (European Commission, *Key Documents related to the Enlargement Process, Strategy Paper 2001*.)

[26] For a thorough analysis of these developments, see David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

become a nation-state comparable to the existing ones in Europe, it is difficult to legitimise its power or to "bring the Union closer to its citizens", to quote a current phrase. Solving the democratic deficit requires novel approaches to democracy, be it the construction of European identity around shared civic values, as envisaged among others by Christopher Lord; legitimation through deliberation, as proposed by Erik Eriksen and John Fossum; or a "cosmopolitan legal order" praised by Robert Bideleux.[28]

It is of course uncertain to what extent people in Europe and elsewhere will ever be ready to redirect their political and civic attachments from the nation-state to the EU or other international institutions. This is, however, a central prerequisite for developing democratic procedures that would transcend state boundaries. "Europeanisation" of civil society has often been viewed as one important means of including citizens in EU level political processes, and in constructing a European identity needed for the democratisation of the Union. Contrary to such visions, some recent studies show that there is little readiness among NGO members of EU countries to act on EU level, and that the domestic political context plays a crucial role in mediating between the EU and civic organisations. NGO involvement is often limited to the leadership of organisations, and only strong organisations with extensive resources are able to influence EU policy. Thus, there are reasons to be critical towards recent attempts to strengthen the role of NGOs in the EU's governance and thereby promote European identity and democracy.[29] When it comes to civil society of the CEECs, the obstacles to achieving these aims – especially lack of resources and skills, but also a relatively limited involvement in European networks – are even more difficult to surmount.[30] The general weakness of civic activity in the CEECs as

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[27] Jacques Rupnik, "Eastern Europe: The International Context", *Journal of Democracy* 11:2 (2000), 128.

[28] Christopher Lord, *Democracy in the European Union* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); E.O. Eriksen and J.E. Fossum, eds., *Democracy in the European Union: Integration through deliberation?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Bideleux, "'Europeanisation' and the limits to democratisation". For a general analysis of different conceptions of democracy that underpin the "democratic deficit debate", see Lord, "Assessing Democracy in a Contested Polity", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 39:4 (2001): 642-47.

[29] Laura Cram, "Governance 'to Go': Domestic Actors, Institutions and the Boundaries of the Possible", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 39:4 (2001): 595-618; Alex Warleigh, "'Europeanizing' Civil Society: NGOs as Agents of Political Socialisation", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 39:4 (2001): 619-39. See also the White Paper on European Governance (COM (2001) 428 final).

[30] These problems were discussed by civil society experts from various EU member and candidate countries at the European Civil Society Forum in Tallinn, 22-23 March 2002. For an overview, see

compared to EU countries[31] is also discouraging for those envisaging a strong role for civil society in the democratisation of the EU.

Altogether, the Eastern enlargement is not likely to make it any easier for the EU to develop supranational democratic procedures that would weaken the position of the nation-state as the main arena for democracy. Enlargement will bring to the EU a large number of new members with strong national sentiments and scepticism towards any forms of decision-making that constrain national self-determination. The CEE citizens are not inclined to see democratic decision-making on an EU level as a possibility to strengthen democracy, to reinforce their rights and freedoms or to enhance their opportunities to influence decisions that affect their own lives. More often they see any transfer of decision-making to EU level as letting somebody "else", a distant power, to decide over "our" lives. Most of the members-to-come (with the exception of Poland) are small states, which further enhances their concern over their abilities to influence the EU's political processes. In spite of these concerns, in the future of Europe debate the CEECs have expressed support for making the EU a stronger global actor and called for an increase in democracy, transparency, participation and legitimacy of common decision-making.[32] It is difficult to fit these aims together with their emphasis on safeguarding national sovereignty.

Power of the official discourse

Let us now turn to the logic of enlargement and its implications for democracy in the applicant countries. Building on the conception of discourse outlined above, we can approach democracy as a continuous process of democratic politics; as being constantly

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http://www.euroopaliikumine.ee/euforum/docs.html. For a case study on Estonia, see Raik, "From a Recipient of Aid Towards an Independent Actor".

[31] See Marc M. Howard, "The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society", *Journal of Democracy* 13:1 (2002): 157-69.

[32] For an overview of the CEECs' interests in the Future of Europe debate, see Kirsty Hughes, "The Future of Europe Convention: travelling hopefully?", *Joint Working Paper*, EPIN (European Policy Institutes Network) and CEPS (Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels), May 2002. As Hughes points out, there

redefined, reproduced and shaped through political practices. It follows that *any* political process involves an aspect of constructing democracy. In other words, all political practices – including those related to integration into the EU – that take place within a democratic system inevitably reproduce the system. The constitutive effect of integration on democracy in the CEECs has presumably been considerable because, firstly, integration has for several years been a dominant dimension in their domestic politics, and secondly, in the transition countries democratic institutions and practices continue to be in the process of formation more than in "old" democracies.

The EU's Eastern enlargement has been governed by a set of rules, norms, principles and aims – let us name them the "official discourse of enlargement". That discourse has guided, often in an unquestioned manner, any activities related to the process, both on the side of the candidate countries and the EU. It has also conditioned the ways in which democratic rules have been put into practice in the CEECs. What are then the limits that the official discourse has put on the functioning of democracy in the applicant countries?

In order to answer to that question, we have to identify the core principles of the official discourse of enlargement.[33] Firstly, the key official texts such as Commission Reports repeat time and again the importance of speed, "momentum", "dynamics" or "pace" of the process – although until recently the EU did not specify any timetables or target dates.[34] Secondly, the objectivity of the accession criteria and the evaluations concerning the candidate countries has been underlined: each country has been "judged on its own merits", "progress" has been identified through "objective measurement", and hence, the success of the candidates has depended on their "actual achievements". Related to this, the expertise and impartiality of EU Commission has been praised. Efficient and effective

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are of course differences among the CEECs, with Hungary being one of the more integrationist candidate countries and Estonia representing the other end of the spectrum.

[33] My analysis is based on an extensive amount of texts produced by different institutions of the EU and the CEECs, with a focus on the case of Estonia, and a period from 1997 to 2001. The keywords highlighted here can be found, for instance, in the Regular Reports of 2000 and 2001 and Progress Reports of 1998 and 1999 by the European Commission (available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/overview.htm).

[34] Keeping up the pace became a more tangible challenge after it was agreed in the Gothenburg European Council in June 2001 that the EU aims at completing the accession negotiations by the end of 2002 with "those candidate countries that are ready" and that they could join the Union before the European Parliament elections of 2004. (European Council: Presidency Conclusions – Göteborg, 15 and 16 June 2001.)

expert work is also demanded from the applicant states whose weak administrative capacity has been one of the main targets of the Commission's criticism. Furthermore, competition between the applicants has been a central component of the logic of enlargement, even though the contrary has often been assured – the need to deny the importance of competition reveals its pervasiveness rather than abolishing it. And finally, the official discourse conveys a strong sense of inevitability: enlargement is something that simply has to happen, there is no other choice.

The main author of the enlargement discourse is the European Commission, especially its yearly reports issued since 1997 that include suggestions for an overall enlargement strategy as well as an assessment of each applicant state. Up till recent debates over the most difficult and most politicised issues – agricultural policies and budgetary questions where the present member states have considerable national interests at play – the strategy outlined by the Commission has been by and large approved by other EU institutions and member states. For the applicant countries, adoption of the official discourse has been a significant key to success in moving closer to membership. The reports of the Commission have to a great extent drawn on materials provided by the CEECs themselves, so the quality of these materials – mastering the right rhetoric being one important sign of quality – has been essential for the Commission's assessment. In addition, each successive assessment has been conditioned by responses of the CEE governments to the criticisms leveled at them in previous reports. In the National Plans for the Adoption of the Acquis and other documents required by the Commission, the candidate countries have been expected to show that they are doing their best to remedy the weaknesses they have been criticised for. By producing the "right" kind of documents, the applicants have been able to prove their convergence with common norms; their ability to internalise EU system and "speak the same language" with the EU's political elites.

The keywords identified above – speed, objectivity, efficiency, expertise, competition, inevitability – might be downplayed as "merely" ideals and norms that have not necessarily been followed or achieved in practice. Nevertheless, these are principles that underlie the assessments given to the enlargement process, construct visions of how it

should proceed, and thus condition political thought and action related to it. One might wonder now, is it not a positive thing that speed, objectivity, efficiency and expertise are aimed at; that enlargement is considered inevitable; and that the candidate countries compete with each other, seeking to do their best? When it comes to democracy, an answer depends again on the meanings that we attach to the concept. If we confine ourselves to a minimal, procedural conception of democracy,[35] there is no reason for concern – the CEECs are functioning democracies with relatively stable institutions and respect for the basic principles of democracy, and EU membership will give an additional guarantee to the maintenance of the new regimes. However, if we understand democracy as a constant process and daily politics characterised by plurality, choice, accessibility, inclusion, public debate etc., we find that the principles and ideals that govern the enlargement are contradictory to, or at least in a tense relation with, a number of central features of democratic politics.

The questionable ideal of speed

The rhetoric of speed has buttressed itself by constructing an understanding that a slower pace would be highly dangerous – an understanding that lies on shaky grounds, but belongs to the "irrefutable" core of the enlargement discourse. Integration into the EU has undeniably speeded up reforms in the CEECs, but the quality of democracy has been harmed by pressures from the EU to do too much and too fast. Preparations for accession have placed an immense workload on the state machinery of the applicants. It has been difficult to find the human and financial resources needed for taking over and implementing the extensive *acquis communautaire* and conducting accession negotiations. The emphasis on speed together with lack of resources has reduced the quality of work and led to superficial adjustment of legislation, often not accompanied by proper

[35] E.g. the famous minimal criteria defined in R.A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), 2-3.

implementation or a coherent approach as to how best incorporate EU norms into the existing domestic frameworks.[36]

What is at least as problematic for democracy, the tight timetables have left little space for discussing EU related matters in public *before* the decisions are taken, and for inclusion of different political and social groups in the process. EU integration has been concentrated in the hands of governments and top civil servants, leaving parliaments and non-governmental actors in the role of bystanders.[37] Competition with other candidate countries has supported the ideal of speed and contributed to a situation where political leaders of the CEECs have been more responsive to conditions and demands set from the outside than to domestic expectations.

In the EU, one of the main arguments for fast enlargement has been that slowing down could endanger the overall reform process in the CEECs. This claim suggests that the CEECs need "a carrot and a stick" from outside to keep them on track with reforms, which neglects the uncontested support for democracy and market economy in these countries. The CEECs have not gone through the transition in order to please the West; they have done it for their own sake, and that is why they could start accession negotiations with the EU to begin with. The overall direction of reforms does not hang on the prospect of EU membership, even though EU demands have had a positive impact in several specific issues, such as for instance the protection of minorities or administrative reform. In general, the EU's role has been confirmative; it has been able to exert a considerable influence on only those East European countries that have been committed to democracy and integration with the West in any case, and where the priorities of domestic leaders have by and large overlapped with Western expectations.[38] Moreover, it is important to

[36] Cf. Heather Grabbe, "A Partnership for Accession? The Nature, Scope and Implications of Emerging EU Conditionality for Central and East European Applicants", *EUI Working Paper* (1999), 31. The problems of weak implementation and lack of resources have also been repeatedly pointed out by EU Commission.
[37] For case studies on Hungary and Estonia, see Attila Ágh, "Early democratic consolidation in Hungary and the Europeanisation of the Hungarian polity", in Pridham and Ágh, *Prospects for democratic consolidation*, 157-79; Raik, "Bureaucratisation or strengthening of the political? Estonian institutions and integration into the European Union", *Cooperation and Conflict* 37:2 (2002): 137-56.
[38] Cf. Pravda, "Introduction", 24-27; Pridham, "The European Union's Democratic Conditionality and Domestic Politics in Slovakia", *Europe-Asia Studies* 54:2 (2002): 223.

note that a great deal of EU norms (such as product standards of the single market or the Common Agricultural Policy) are not at all necessary for a democracy or market economy, but have imposed an extra burden or "overload" on the transition countries.[39]

In spite of the difficulty of coping with the speed, fast EU accession has been persistently demanded by the political leaders of the CEECs. More than anything else, the rhetoric of speed has probably been needed for keeping the EU committed to the project. The EU's leaders have been caught in the trap they have themselves helped to create – each statement where they have stressed the necessity of fast enlargement has enhanced their commitment and made it more difficult to retreat without risking a serious blow to the reputation of the EU itself. On the other hand, the more the applicant states have insisted on speed, the more committed they have become to maintaining the pace of their preparations for membership. The logic of enlargement has not allowed for slowdowns, and in cases where these have occurred, they have been rapidly pointed out by the EU as failures and damaged the reputation of the country in question. The discourse of speed has effectively made itself inevitable.

Among the CEE people, promises of fast enlargement have created unrealistic expectations and frustration. Because of these expectations – raised and reinforced by the political elites – slowing down the pace could endanger public support of EU membership in the CEECs. It is worth noting, though, that fast EU accession has not been supported by public opinion in all the CEECs. The Baltic countries, especially Estonia, stick out again as the most hesitant candidates. Although their political leaders have striven for joining the EU as soon as possible, the speed of integration has been widely criticised in their public debate, and surveys have shown considerable support for joining the Union later rather than sooner.[40] Thus, the political leaders have been subject to contradictory expectations, coming from the EU and the mechanism of enlargement on the one hand, and their own publics on the other.

[39] Cf. Giovanni Sartori, "How far can free government travel?", *Journal of Democracy* 6:3 (1995): 105, on the problem of overload for democratisation in general; and Heather Grabbe, "How does the EU measure when the CEECs are ready to join", in Charles Jenkins, ed., *The Unification of Europe? An analysis of EU enlargement* (London: Centre for Reform, 2000), 44-45, on preparations for EU accession of the CEECs.

Estonia offers an interesting example of domestic reactions against rapid and intensive EU integration, and an attempt by the government to deliberately slow down the accession negotiations due to domestic opinion. In spring 2001, support for EU membership dropped lower than ever in Estonia, which was an alarming news for the government that had declared fast EU integration as its top priority. The decline of EU support occurred in parallel with a steep decrease of general trust in government.[41] According to domestic debate, one of the main reasons for expanding public dissatisfaction was that, faced with the "difficulties in harmonising the necessities of internal development and the externally imposed restrictions",[42] the political elite had prioritised the latter and neglected the worries of "ordinary people". Furthermore, the government was strongly criticised for not defending national interests in accession negotiations with the EU and for being ready to join the Union at any price.

In response to that criticism, political leaders pulled on the brake in membership negotiations and started to stress their demands and positions vis-à-vis the EU. This did not, however, suffice to turn the tide among the public. The domestic tensions culminated with the presidential elections of September 2001, won by Arnold Rüütel, the candidate of the Rural Union. Change of government followed in December 2001-January 2002. Both the new government and especially the president spoke out for socially weaker groups or the "losers" of transition, and underlined the need to reduce social cleavages. At the same time, both supported the continuation of rapid EU integration. In spite of earlier protests against fast integration, support for EU membership increased considerably during the second half of 2001 (from 39 % in May up to 57 % in December). This was explained first and foremost by the presidential elections: the new president primarily represented those social groups that had been most negative towards both the EU and the political leaders,

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[40] *Applicant Countries Eurobarometer* 2001; "Euroopa Liit ja Eesti avalik arvamus".
[41] See Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vihalemm, "The Transformation of Estonian Society and Media: 1987-2001", in Vihalemm, *Baltic Media in Transition,* 44-45. EU support has correlated with trust in the sitting national government also in several EU member states (see Mark Franklin, Michael Marsh and Lauren McLaren, "Uncorking the bottle: Popular Opposition to European Unification in the Wake of Maastricht", in *Journal of Common Market Studies* 32:4 (1994): 455-72).
[42] *Estonian Human Development Report* 2000 (Tallinn: United Nations Development Programme), 10. Available at http://www.undp.ee/nhdr00/.

and he was able to turn the opinion of these people to a more pro-EU position.[43] A considerable rise in levels of trust in government during the first half of 2002[44] presumably had a similar effect.

This episode highlights that EU integration of an applicant country is tightly interwoven with domestic politics. It shows the crucial importance of trust in political leaders for a major undertaking such as EU accession. But it also shows the pervasiveness of the discourse of speed and the logic of enlargement. Estonia's slowdown in the integration process turned out to be just an instant reaction of the government to serious public dissatisfaction, which was very soon followed by a speed-up again. As the train of enlargement moved on, a single candidate country could not simply jump off and hope to be able to get on again in a few years' time. The momentous slowdown did not make any notable difference for Estonia's EU relations (in terms of accession conditions, for instance), but it did make a difference for the relations between the citizens and the political elite.

Democracy *versus* efficient implementation of inevitabilities

Objectivity and expertise were singled out above as part of the "core" of the enlargement discourse. The high value given to the supposedly objective and non-political expert work in the context of EU enlargement is in line with the anti-politics sentiments and scepticism towards politicians, as opposed to experts, that are widespread in current democracies. Certainly expertise is needed for deciding over societal matters, but if we can trust experts to always take the best possible, objective and impartial decisions, then why do we need democracy any longer? Belief in expertise that is free from political judgements and values undermines democratic decision-making, and EU enlargement is a good example of that. While the activities of the Commission in the field of enlargement have been portrayed as non-political expert work, the aspects of politics and power inherent in that work have

[43] "Euroopa Liit ja Eesti avalik arvamus"; *Postimees* (the largest Estonian daily newspaper), 30 May 2002.
[44] Tõnis Saarts, "Kaksikliit ja kolmikliit võrdluses", *Postimees*, 12 August 2002.

been denied or played-down. Yet the whole process has hung on the strategies, reports, recommendations etc. produced by the Commission. The Commission has interpreted the extremely vague accession criteria; it has given a content to such obscure expressions as "progress" or "readiness to join"; and it has ranked the criteria and the applicants, drawing on its "objective" authority. In the end, other EU institutions and member states have relied on the Commission's authority and accepted most of its proposals when taking *political* decisions on enlargement.

Relying on expert work, the logic of enlargement has depoliticised matters of judgement and choice. The rhetoric of objective criteria and expertise has offered a way for both the EU and the CEECs to avoid taking political responsibility. In the day-to-day preparations for membership of the applicant states, politics has to a great extent been replaced by technocratic policy-making. A lot of the preparatory work has in fact been of very technical nature and has demanded specific expertise, which is due to the nature of EU legislation. Issues that could be politically relevant have easily got lost in the midst of technical details and bureaucratic regulations. It has been difficult for CEE politicians to sort out questions where political choices would have to be made, and for citizens to understand EU related issues and relate them to their daily lives or issues that they consider important.

This sounds all too familiar from debates going on inside the EU. The Union's system of governance on the whole suffers from the dominance of officials and experts and lack of political deliberation.[45] On the member state level, EU integration has tended to strengthen the position of executives as opposed to other institutions and actors, and favoured a strong role for civil servants in policy-making.[46] In line with attempts to reduce the democratic deficit inside the EU, the discourse of enlargement expresses concern about the elite-centeredness of the process and calls for increasing public debate and inclusion of

[45] See e.g. Christoph Meyer, "Political Legitimacy and the Invisibility of Politics: Exploring the European Union's Communication Deficit", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 37:4 (1999): 617-39.
[46] Gerda Falkner, "How Pervasive are Euro-Politics? Effects of EU Membership on a New Member State", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38:2 (2000): 230-33.

citizens and civil society.[47] In the candidate countries, several measures have been taken in order to strengthen the democratic aspect of preparations for EU membership, such as strengthening the role of parliamentary committees, laying greater emphasis on communication with the public, and establishing consultative bodies for non-governmental actors. It is too early to assess the success of these measures, but the experiences so far show the difficulty of breaking the existing patterns.[48]

The depoliticisation of enlargement has been supported by the rhetoric of inevitability. Inevitability as such is always contradictory to democratic politics, as the former denies the possibility of choice, whereas the latter is essentially about making choices. Politics ends at the moment when inevitability becomes established. Thus, as soon as everybody agrees that EU enlargement is inevitable (for guaranteeing peace and stability in Europe, for example), the question becomes politically uninteresting. For the CEE people, joining the EU appears very much as a matter of no choice, and the whole process seems to follow its own logic anyway – so why bother to take interest in it? Hence, the sense of inevitability helps to explain public apathy and frustration towards EU accession in the CEECs. This brings us back to the problem of external constraints on democracy discussed above: if external forces leave no room for manoeuvre in domestic decision-making, we cannot really speak about democratic politics any longer, and it is no wonder that citizens lose interest in politics or turn to radical protest groups. The popularity of populist anti-EU movements has recently grown in several CEECs, most notably Poland and the Czech Republic.[49]

Yet deciding whether to join or not is not the only choice there is to make; even if the overall aim of EU membership is accepted as inevitable, the process still involves moments of choice. It is true that the "rules of the game" are largely set by the EU and, as it has been argued above, domestic decision-making in the CEECs is to a considerable extent determined by EU norms. Nevertheless, it is an exaggeration to claim that the EU

[47] To promote these aims and ensure public support for enlargement, the Commission introduced a special Communication Strategy in May 2000 (see "Explaining Enlargement: A Progress Report on the Communication Strategy for Enlargement", DG Enlargement Information Unit, March 2002).
[48] See n. 37.

and other Western actors have "largely constrained any effective self-rule by Eastern European 'democratic' governments".[50] Integration into the EU is not just about doing what is inevitable in order to achieve membership. In many fields EU norms set a framework for domestic decision-making, but leave space for alternative solutions – the diversity that exists among current EU member states as well as the applicant countries is clear proof of that. To mention some examples, the CEECs need to combine domestic ideas and preferences with EU norms while designing their regional policies or national strategies for agricultural and rural development. Also making full use of financial assistance available from the EU has required not only technical competence, but also vision and creativity from the CEECs.

In order to make EU integration interesting for the CEE publics and to strengthen the democratic aspect of the process, it is essential to bring forth the choices related to it and submit them to public debate prior to decision-making. By the same token, democratic political culture in the applicant countries could grow stronger and problems of apathy and alienation of citizens might be eased. However, from the viewpoint of the civil servants and politicians who are responsible for EU issues in the CEECs, it has often been useful and rational to support the impression of inevitability; to present their making of EU related decisions as necessary, instead of bringing forth scope for choice. This has saved the time and energy that broader deliberation of alternative solutions would have required. Such a pattern has been supported from both "outside" and "inside": by the logic of enlargement as well as domestic context and political culture. On the one hand, the discourse of enlargement has valued and rewarded fast and efficient expert work. On the other hand, there were no established norms and practices of democratic decision-making in the CEECs prior to starting preparations for EU membership. In addition, the lack of human and financial resources has spoken for focusing on what is inevitable for coming closer to membership and limiting deliberation to a minimum.

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[49] *Financial Times*, 18 June 2002.
[50] Zielonka, "Conclusions", 525.

It is often underlined when speaking about the democraticness of enlargement that the CEE people will eventually decide the question of their countries' EU membership at referenda. However, submitting the accession treaties to referenda is hardly enough to legitimise the whole process (which has been acknowledged by the political leaders of both the EU and the CEECs). Here we come to more fundamental questions concerning the essence of democracy and control of citizens over political power. Democracy is not just – or even not primarily – about voting over preferences; it is at least as essential that citizens and various societal groups can participate in setting the agenda, formulating the preferences and debating over alternatives, and that decision-makers justify their choices to the public.[51] These aspects are all the more important for the CEECs' integration into the EU because the process extends over several years (even over a decade) and encompasses virtually all spheres of society. Referenda on EU membership will not undo the weakness of these aspects of democracy during most of the long integration process, but they do encourage public debate and increase interest in EU issues in the final, decisive phase of enlargement. As the referenda are already drawing closer (likely to be held in most CEECs during the next year), and the final and most difficult issues are being dealt with at the accession negotiations, EU integration has recently become more politicised in the CEECs – in a positive meaning of becoming increasingly a matter of democratic politics.

Common challenges

In spite of the criticism presented so far, I still argue that going ahead with EU integration at a swift pace is likely to be the best option for the CEE democracies in the long run. Remaining in the position of an applicant country, on the contrary, offers the worst possible conditions for democratic politics. The speed of preparations for membership does considerably restrict democratic politics in the applicant countries, but a delay in accession would be even worse. That would keep the CEECs in a position where their domestic politics primarily aims at responding to the EU's expectations. It would also prolong the

[51] These features are underlined by theories of deliberative and discursive democracy; see e.g. John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

situation where the CEECs have to adopt all new EU decisions without being able to influence them. EU membership will pose new challenges to the CEE democracies, but it is needed to remove the constraints inherent in the applicant status and to open up new possibilities of change. Altogether, from the perspective of democratic politics, the choice between fast preparations for membership and a slowdown is one between bad and worse.

The keywords of the official discourse of enlargement – speed, objectivity, efficiency, expertise, competition and inevitability – form a set of mutually reinforcing principles that all constrain democratic politics and have tended to limit enlargement to a narrow sphere of elites and experts. Here we can find a classical conflict between democracy and efficiency: EU accession has required fast and efficient decision-making, whereas public debate and inclusion of various political and societal groups would have demanded more time and resources. Even though some of these problems will apparently move to history when the CEECs join the EU, this will not make them irrelevant for the future. The long and intensive pre-accession period has promoted bureaucratic, executive-dominated policy-making with little deliberation and inclusion, and the current patterns will not change overnight. Democracy promotion being one of the major purposes of enlargement, it is ironic that the process itself has been democratic only in a limited, formal sense.

This is no wonder considering the nature of the current Union – the democracy promoter is struggling with its own democratic deficit. It is not surprising that the principles that characterise the functioning of the EU at large, also govern the process of enlargement. Through enlargement, the technocratic, elite-centered and complicated EU system is gradually being extended to the applicant states. It is promising, however, that the candidate countries are already included in the future of Europe debate and the European Convention that deal with precisely these problems and seek to clarify and democratise the use of power in the EU. The position of the CEECs in these debates is, again, constrained by their applicant status – they have to be "nice" to all member states in order for not to spoil their opportunities to "join the club". Even so, inclusion gives them some influence and makes them better prepared for the coming membership.

The strong linkage of the CEE conceptions of democracy to the nation-state is probably the most durable hindrance to mitigating the tensions between democracy and integration into the EU. Here we seem to be faced with an unsolvable dilemma: the functioning of democracy within the framework of the nation-state has become more and more constrained by external forces, whereas due to its attachment to the nation-state, democracy on an international level appears as a contradiction in terms. In order to ease the dilemma it is not enough to clarify and strengthen democratic forms of decision-making in the EU. EU membership can only come to be seen as positive for democracy in the CEECs, if the notion of democracy is detached from the nation-state so that the latter becomes just one of the possible contexts for its functioning. Again, this is a common challenge for all EU member states, present and future. The present lack of citizens' attachment to the EU, and the importance of national sovereignty especially for the CEE people, do not augur well for a rapid change in this respect.

The parallels between the democratic deficit of the EU and the impacts of enlargement on the candidate countries' democracy strongly suggest that there is need for research that would combine these two topics. Studies on the EU's democratic deficit and the functioning of democracy in the member states can provide valuable insights to the problematic impacts of EU integration on the CEE democracies. On the other hand, research on the democratisation of the CEECs can contribute to the debate on how to democratise the EU. The same link has to be made on the practical level as well. An understanding of democracy in the EU and the various ways in which integration shapes the political systems of member states is essential for the applicant countries when they seek to strengthen their democracies. At the same time, the CEECs can offer to the EU their fresh experience of building a democratic system and going through radical reforms, and as new members they might bring to the Union the openness to new ideas and readiness for change that the latter desperately needs.

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