Democracy in the European Union and East-West Partnerships: Lessons from ASEAN

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The battles of the 21st Century largely stem from weakening state control and increased mobility and connectivity of individuals due to a rapidly enhanced pace of globalization. In order to enhance the capacity of national governments to tackle these modern challenges at the international level, greater efforts have been invested in regional cooperation and intergovernmental collaboration. One pertinent issue faced by nation states is the rise of non-state actor political violence across the globe. In order to defend against non-state actors, regional institutions have been set in place to facilitate intelligence sharing and to assert the sovereignty of weaker nation states. However, the focus on military defence and strategic alliances amongst Western governments appears to have motivated a parallel development in the global movement of non-state violence and urged singular insurgent movements in separate countries to band together with larger movements such as the Islamic State to fight their cause. Despite aims of democratization, efforts to strengthen national sovereignty in the defence against non-state actors have at times required compromises on democracy, both on the state level and the international level. Is it realistic to think that citizens can hold their governments accountable for non-state violence that emerges from patterns of globalization? Given that democratic national governments already face challenges in establishing a common identity within the EU, how credible can democracy be in fighting the modern battles of today? This paper assesses the quality of democracy in the EU based on existing discussions of institutional democracy, and discusses the pros and cons of democracy on regional cooperation.

The quality of democracy in the EU has been a highly contended topic. When analysed from a state-centric perspective, the EU does not appear to be highly democratic. In pursuit of European integration, coordination between governments of EU member states often involve compromising national parliamentary control for greater executive power, and the structure of the EU dictates that policy outcomes are determined largely by executive actors rather than democratic vote.[1] Furthermore, the distance between the EU and its voters – coupled with the relatively weaker strength of the European Parliament compared to that of governments in the Council – makes it difficult for citizens to view this regional organization as a democratic

[1] Andreas Follesdal & Simon Hix, "Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, no. 44 issue 3 (2006): 533-562.

system in which they have a stake in, let alone identify with a European identity.[2] Nonetheless, the EU as a supranational identity should not be evaluated using idealized standards in isolated terms; rather, analysis of the state of democracy within the EU should take into consideration social factors and real-world constraints faced by national governments in their collaboration across multiple levels of politics.

Considering the symbiotic relationship between the EU and national governments of Member States, there is an inevitable tendency for the EU to appear undemocratic, since "functions of modern democratic governance that tend to involve less direct political participation" are often subsumed under the EU.[3] However, this does not necessarily indicate a democratic deficit, as transparency and accountability can still be upheld when executive powers in the EU choose to communicate clearly their reasons behind policymaking decisions.[4] Even if the EU does suffer from a democratic deficit, there can still be effective accountability when "a combination of control instruments" is set in place within the institution; Majone (1998) argues that with a "multi-pronged approach", a supranational institution can still be kept in check even in the absence of control by an independent agency.[5] Furthermore, legitimacy of the EU does not lie in the voting procedures of policy decisions, but rather the "democratic accountability of national governments".[6] Going by this line of reasoning, EU democracy is upheld if domestic governments of its member states are committed to democratic values, as the EU will continue to be subject to constraints that hold it accountable.

In spite of the aforementioned evaluations of democracy in the EU, there appears to be a lack of an institutional mechanism that generates debate and contestation about politics in the EU.[7] Hence, there is arguably an inherent democratic deficit *within* the EU. This view assumes a gradualist perspective of democracy, where the notion of "a single *demos*" has to exist and the EU is expected to be "a community of politically equal individuals, deliberating about the common good in a single, transnational public sphere, and expressing their political will in a

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[2] Follesdal & Hix, ""Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik", 536.
[3] Andrew Moravscik, "In Defence of the 'Democratic Deficit': Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union." *Journal of Common Market Studies*, no. 40 issue 4 (2002): 606.
[4] Giandomenico Majone, "Europe's 'Democratic Deficit': The Question of Standards," *European Law Journal*, no. 4 issue 1 (1998): 21.
[5] Majone, "Europe's 'Democratic Deficit': The Question of Standards", 27.
[6] Moravscik, "In Defence of the 'Democratic Deficit': Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union.", 619.
[7] Follesdal & Hix, ""Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik"

unified global or regional political sphere".[8] However, the EU comprises of national governments with differing political alignments and a diversity of interests. Furthermore, the European public sphere currently consists of an overlap of multiple national public spheres rather than a single, unified sphere. Given this context, it is impractical to expect the EU as a supranational organization to bear responsibility for democratic participation at the grassroots level. In fact, preservation of democratic values should remain the responsibility of national governments of EU member states. Any neglect of democracy at the EU level therefore stems from democratic deficits at the national level, or from interactions between the EU and national governments, rather than solely at the supranational level.[9] Given this context, the onus is on national governments to preserve democratic legitimacy at the national level, and ensure representation of citizens' interests when convening at the EU level.

Seeing the challenges that arise from coordinating democratic governments at the regional level, it seems a tall order for Western democracies to be victorious in their collaboration towards defending non-state actor violence. On top of that, intergovernmental cooperation amongst democratic states will not always naturally lead to regional institutions that are democratic. Theoretically speaking, EU democracy should be relatively high given that the Union is comprised of democratically-elected governments, and decisions on EU policies abide by core veto rules. However, impressions of a democratic deficit are still eminent, especially in specific policy areas involving foreign, security and defence issues. This lack of trust in the effectiveness and credibility of the EU is attributed to the lack of a single, unified narrative of European identity.[10] The EU narrative arguably lacks credibility two counts: on the one hand, the European narrative is based on a constellation of national narratives that are often also challenged and are unstable; on the other hand, there is an elite-driven narrative of European identity based on notions of excellence and exceptionalism, which is often "weakly disseminated and vigorously contested".[11] Since the EU does not have a singular, constructed narrative (for opinions on foreign, security and defence issues), it does not have a strong foundation to base its policy decisions and does not allow for effective mobilization of a European public. From this perspective, the EU as a supranational organization is limited in its

[8] Francis Cheneval & Frank Schimmelfennig, "The Case for Demoicracy in the European Union," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, no. 51 issue 2 (2013): 336.
[9] Cheneval & Schimmelfennig, "The Case for Demoicracy in the European Union," 347.
[10] Ben Tonra, "Democratic foundations of EU foreign policy: narratives and the myth of EU exceptionalism." *Journal of European Public Policy*, no. 18 issue 8 (2011): 1190-1207.
[11] Tonra, "Democratic foundations of EU foreign policy: narratives and the myth of EU exceptionalism.", 1192.

capacity to ensure that EU policies are responsive to voter preferences of the European public.[12] Although democracy goes beyond "matching the present preferences of voters to policy outputs", some scholars point out that a necessary condition for democratic legitimacy in institutions is the need to "reliably ensure that policies are responsive to these preferences, rather than matching by happy coincidence".[13] In that case, democracy in the EU is hindered by the lack of a clearly defined public space through which policies may be deliberated by the European public.

How then can the quality of democracy be improved in the EU? Across scholarly debates, there is a consensus that national governments of Member States are best positioned to tackle this issue. In terms of upholding a democratic EU foreign policy, collective identity is key and it has been observed that "the concept of a European foreign policy identity has to be closely anchored in established concepts of national foreign policy identity".[14] The link between European and national narratives has to be tightened, and governments have to respect the role of the EU as a platform whereby member states can share collective interests and strive towards shared ambitions rather than use the EU as a tool to pit against one another in political competition.[15] In this regard, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) provides a good example of how commitment to perceive commonalities rather than differences amongst member states can cultivate a healthy regional security culture, without explicit emphasis on formal military dimensions.

Over the years, ASEAN members have managed to circumvent challenges of coordination through strict adherence to the policy of "non-intervention and non-interference by outsiders in the domestic politics of individual member countries".[16] Despite the tendency to shy away from implementing formal mechanisms, ASEAN appears to be effective at providing a framework for informal modes of dispute settlement and conflict management amongst member states. The set of unconventional diplomatic practices of ASEAN is arguably a product of the unique East-West disposition of several states in Southeast Asia. Evangelista

[12] Tonra, "Democratic foundations of EU foreign policy: narratives and the myth of EU exceptionalism."
[13] Follesdal & Hix, ""Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik", 556.
[14] Tonra, "Democratic foundations of EU foreign policy: narratives and the myth of EU exceptionalism.", 1203.
[15] Tonra, "Democratic foundations of EU foreign policy: narratives and the myth of EU exceptionalism.", 1194.
[16] Kamarulzaman Askandar, "A regional perspective of UN peace operations in Southeast Asia," *International Peacekeeping*, no. 12 issue 1 (2005): 36.

(1998) posits that the unique history of colonial conquests in Southeast Asia has created "a sort of double vision", whereby ASEAN political leaders have extensive awareness of "both Eastern and Western approaches to conflict and peace making".[17] This diplomatic acumen confers a degree of flexibility to the group of young, independent ASEAN member states in navigating an international system dominated by both Eastern and Western powers.

Although "the ASEAN way"[18] has been heavily criticized by Western states in terms of its effectiveness in decisive conflict resolution, politicians in ASEAN point out that it is the process of confidence-building that matters, and goals set during ASEAN meetings are secondary in comparison to relational ties that are being strengthened each time political leaders gather to discuss an issue.[19] Although not all 200 meetings conducted under the ASEAN banner every year result in solid resolutions, the coming together of member states with such frequency cultivates and reinforces the ASEAN identity amongst the national governments of Southeast Asia. Perhaps the ASEAN model of incorporating flexibility and space for informality can be adapted to the EU in building a collective European identity at the level of regional politics.

Nonetheless, a large obstacle to credible commitment by national governments to a unified European identity is the need to safeguard national sovereignty in light of regional cooperation. European national governments face a dilemma in holding on to state power while submitting to a regional authority when convening at the EU level. This creates a challenge for international cooperation in defending against non-state actors, because the EU is unable to provide a credible guarantee on supporting the state in the face of attacks by non-state actors. In contrast, the principle of non-interference amongst ASEAN states allows trust to be built up

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[17] Susan Evangelista, "Peace making in Southeast Asia," *Peace Review*, no. 10 issue 1 (1998): 44.

[18] Amitav Acharya, "Ideas, identity, and institution-building: From the 'ASEAN way' to the 'Asia-Pacific way'," *The Pacific Review*, no. 10 issue 3 (1997): 328-330.

The 'ASEAN way' is essentially a "code of conduct for inter-state behaviour", containing well-known principles of international relations , that has been uniquely "operationalized into a framework of regional interaction" by ASEAN member states. Some key features of the ASEAN process are:

- Foundation of inter-personal contacts that allows for informal exchanges between political leaders.
- Developing a "regular but flexible framework of coordination and cooperation" that does not require delegating state sovereignty to a regional authority, and avoiding fixed and rigid protocol.
- Practice of consensus: all member states are consulted in the decision-making process, and a synthesized conclusion that encapsulates the opinions of all participants are delivered by the head of the meeting.

[19] Aarie Glas, " Habits of peace: Long-term regional cooperation in Southeast Asia," *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 23 issue 4 (2017): 841.

amongst nations in the region and improves bilateral relations in a way that publicly acknowledges national sovereignty of existing states, making it more challenging for insurgents to resort to political violence as a means of expressing discontent with existing national governments. Although non-interference in the state affairs of other nations may pose a threat of democratic reversal or encourage authoritarian rule, the net benefit of democratization is higher in the international system.

One case in point is how ASEAN reconciled differences between nation states of different political systems to encourage collaboration based on an alignment of interests. Even though ASEAN was first founded in 1967 to gain leverage against rising communist influence in the Southeast Asian region, it accepted Vietnam – a communist state to date – as a member state in 1995. This was largely due to the interest of ASEAN for regional unity in Southeast Asia so that member states may better deal with the emerging challenges brought about by the end of the Cold War. The inclusion of Vietnam and its socialization to ASEAN norms across the past two decades provides a good background to learn how democratic states can work together to enhance bilateral ties with nondemocratic states so as to establish democratic regional cooperation.

Given that ASEAN is a regional organization that comprises nation states with political spectrums that go across the range of democracy, some learning points can be taken by the EU in its interactions with neighbouring nondemocratic states. ASEAN diplomacy has founded itself based on a unique blend of Western practices and Eastern modes of interaction, thereby providing a good model from which the EU may learn in its regional interactions with Eastern Partnership countries.

Overall, quality of democracy in the EU should not be dismissed simply based on evaluations of the degree of participation of EU institutions. Rather, attention should be directed towards analysing coordination processes between national governments at the regional level. In trying to understand whether democracy is helpful in solving contemporary global issues such as non-state actor political violence, it is crucial to first define at which level democracy should be prioritized. Although the EU safeguards democracy through necessitating that member states ought to uphold democratic governments, regional cooperation has been held back by the mandate of national governments to first conduct deliberation within their domestic voting spheres. On the other hand, ASEAN does not require member states to be democratic, although the regional organization was founded based on anti-communist values

and leans towards Western democracy. Despite being criticised for the seeming neglect of democracy, regional cooperation in Southeast Asia over the past five decades has been relatively harmonious and ASEAN has preserved democracy at the regional level in terms of according an equal say to each member state in multilateral negotiations. Furthermore, ASEAN has been growing into an effective security community in the fight against non-state actor violence in the region, despite the fact that this regional organization first started out without any planning for formal military dimensions. Henceforth, instead of political reforms at the supranational level, EU democracy can potentially be enhanced through a commitment by national governments to respect and safeguard the national identity of fellow member states. This reduces the incentives for national governments to use the EU as a tool for political manoeuvring during domestic election cycles, and encourages commitment towards forging a unified European identity.

In conclusion, democracies can win the battle against the challenges that are arising from globalization – not with democracy at the state level, but rather democracy at the regional level. Democratic national governments may not necessarily win the fight against non-state actor violence, but democratic cooperation between national states at the regional level strengthens the state sovereignty and weakens the threat of political violence posed by the spread of non-state actors across the globe.

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