

DISCUSSION PAPER

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From Political Transformation to Europeanization and Democracy in the New European Union Member States: An Attempt to Review Results

Abstract: This article addresses the arguments in an article in the quarterly *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 1(193)2016, entitled ‘The Rocky Road of Europeanization in the New Member States: From Democracy to a Second Try at Democratization’ by Attila Ágh, a Hungarian political scientist. In my opinion, Ágh’s interesting article, which looks at political transformation processes, Europeanization, and democratization in new member states of the European Union (i.e., Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia), has certain methodological and factual deficiencies. Moreover, it contains numerous ideas that I believe are debatable and require further empirical research.

Keywords: transformation, democratization, Europeanization, European Union, crises.

Introduction

I have been induced to write this text in response to the article ‘The Rocky Road of Europeanization in the New Member States: From Democracy to a Second Try at Democratization’ published in the latest issue of the *Polish Sociological Review* by a well-known Hungarian political scientist, Attila Ágh. Generally speaking, the article was devoted to the results of the political transformation. The countries under consideration were Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.¹ These countries joined the European Union at different times, i.e., on 1 May 2004 (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), on 1 January 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania), and on 1 July 2013 (Croatia).

It is worth mentioning that with the exception of Poland, which is classified as a medium-size country (38.7 m people), the seven other countries are small (Bulgaria—7.5 m people, Croatia—4.2 m, the Czech Republic—10.3 m, Hungary—9.8 m, Romania—22.3 m, Slovakia—5.4 m, and Slovenia—2 m), with a total population of 62.5 m, or 10% of the entire population of the European Union. These states, as well as the Baltic states, are commonly referred to in the literature as New Member States (NMS) (Fisher 2010).

As the history of international relations shows, what determines the position, place, and role of a state in the international order is its political system, its economic, scientific,

¹ In recent years Professor Ágh has written several works and articles on the issue, published in various books and scientific journals, inter alia: see: A. Ágh, 2013; 2014, 2015.

and technical potential, its foreign policy, and many other factors that are decisive for its quality, attractiveness, and efficiency. Large, strong states, commonly called empires or superpowers, have greater possibilities in this area. They are the ones that carry out offensive foreign policy, create international conditions, and play the main roles in the international arena. They are also the ones—not small or medium-size countries—that eventually decide on the shape and nature of developing international systems (orders) or such specific entities of international relations as the European Union, and play major roles in them. This is expressed, *inter alia*, in bilateral and multilateral international contacts, membership in international alliances, and initiatives concerning the international community (Łoś-Nowak 2011, Toynbee 1925). The scale, range, and character of that membership in international life are also different because the *raison d'état*, interests, and possibilities of individual states are different.

In addition to the above-mentioned eight states, the group of ‘new democracies’ or ‘new Member States of the European Union’, which joined the EU on 1 May 2004, includes the post-Soviet countries of Northern Europe—Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia—as well as Cyprus and Malta. *Nota bene*, it is not known why Ágh skipped these countries (especially the Baltic states) in his analysis. Although they belong to Northern rather than Eastern Europe according to the UN classification, they are in fact new post-communist member countries of the EU. It seems possible that the omission was deliberate, because the social, political and economic situation in these small countries is different and better, and democracy is less façade-like than in other new member states of the EU and thus less in accord with the author’s *a priori* thesis.

It is also not clear to me and does not emerge from the text why Ágh included Croatia in the group of ‘new Member States of the EU’ when it has been *de jure* and *de facto* a ‘new’ member of the EU only since 1 July 2013, and he did not consider the Baltic countries, which have longer histories of membership. Croatia declared independence in 1991 and became independent after the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, but it is still at the stage of political transformation and on the path to Europeanization. Thus it cannot be compared even to Slovenia, which is also a post-Yugoslavian state but which joined the EU as early as 2004 and today has different democratization- and Europeanization-related problems. Croatia is a poor country, which earns its living from tourism, has an unemployment rate of 21%, and has been fighting recession and numerous social and political problems for years. While in the Yugoslav Federation, Croatia, like Slovenia, was one of the richest republics in terms of its economy and standard of living (Bujwid-Kurek 2011, Bobrowicz 2013), but the wars in which it was involved in the early 1990s brought it to ruin.

I assume, therefore, that the only criterion adopted by Ágh was the geographical one, i.e., he selected for his analysis only the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) and Southern Europe (Croatia and Slovenia), which were formerly classified as countries of East-Central Europe. However, Croatia and Slovenia were not members of the Soviet bloc, which was not monolithic either, and left long-lasting traces in all the satellite states of the USSR, especially in citizens’ consciousness and attitudes. Obviously, the changes at the turn of the 1980s to the 1990s brought great upheaval to nations’ consciousnesses, traditions, and habits. Beside such obvious values as civil liberties, the freedom to do business, a com-

plete reorganisation of the structure of authority, and lack of censorship, one of the basic achievements of the period was the restoration of national statehood, where the nation is sovereign. Apart from the clear benefits, restoration of national consciousness in individual states in this part of Europe resulted in various difficulties connected with history, heritage, and certain national myths. Undoubtedly, it had a great impact on the countries' political transformation and Europeanization (Antoszewski, Herbut 1997, Pełczyńska-Nałęcz 2011, Świda-Zięba 1991) after the collapse of communism in Europe.

The author's selection of countries for analysis based on a geographical criterion (the post-communist countries of East-Central Europe) most probably resulted in including Poland, where transformation, democratization, and Europeanization have produced much better social, political, and economic effects than in the Czech Republic or Slovakia, not to mention Hungary, Bulgaria, or Romania. The constitutional construction of the state, the separation of powers, and the rights and freedoms of citizens have been respected. Over the last twenty-five years our country has been appraised by all our neighbours, the European Union, and the whole world as an example of successful transformation and democratization. Elections have not been rigged and society has approved, more or less, of the successive governments and presidents. It is true that there have been complaints about low turnout and the community's passive attitudes, the quality of political elites and local networks; there have been scandals from time to time, but nepotism and corruption at high levels of authority have been combated and freedom of the media has not been limited. There has been much less appropriation of the public media, which demonstrates disregard for law and the principles of a democratic state, and violation of the Constitution than in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, or Hungary (Cimoszewicz 2016, Leszczyńska 2010).

After the collapse of communism, East-Central European countries found themselves in differing situations, especially in the economic, political, and social senses. For example, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania were de facto bankrupt,² while the Czech Republic and Hungary were in a much better economic situation. For instance, Hungary's debt was 18 billion USD, while that of the Czech Republic—relatively the richest state in the region—was only 6 billion USD (Wandycz 1995, Łomiński 1994). Yugoslavia and the countries that were formed after the collapse of that state, including Slovenia and Croatia, were not bankrupt either. Yugoslavia and Romania were much more independent of Moscow than Poland, Hungary, or Bulgaria, in which the Soviet Army had bases. The former did not take part in the interventions in Hungary or Czechoslovakia and were not members of the Warsaw Pact. On the other hand, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary had a strong anti-communist opposition, which was nonexistent in Bulgaria, Romania, or Yugoslavia. In Poland, unlike in other East-Central European countries, the Roman Catholic Church had a very strong social position and supported first the activities of the political opposition (Kofman, Roszkowski 1999, Błuszkowski 2007, Jarosz 2007, Król 2015, Wnuk-Lipiński 2004) and then Poland's striving for accession to the European Union.

² For example, in Poland there was hyperinflation (the annual inflation rate reached +639,6% in 1989) and \$42.3 billion in foreign debt (64,8% of GDP according to the Central Statistical Office); there were enormous market shortages and the economy was on the verge of collapse. At the same time, after 1992 there was a growing recession. For information on Hungary's debt, see P. Borowiec 2013, Sadowski 1994.

Writing about political transformation and ‘the rocky road to Europeanization’ of the new member states of the EU and the current state of their democracy, Ágh puts the above-mentioned eight post-communist states into a ‘single sack’, which I believe is a serious methodological mistake because each of them had, and has, not only different economic and social problems but also a different history, a different road to freedom, and different courses of systemic transformation. Thus, the transformation was more or less rational and resulted in real successes as well as numerous failures. The past and beginning of the road to freedom and democracy was important for every state because it influenced the ideas adopted and the changes introduced in every sphere of life. According to Marcin Król, a philosopher, historian of ideas, and opposition activist in the Polish People’s Republic, ‘A lot depends on the beginning. At the beginning you can do and consider much more than later, when you start going along a set route. It is difficult to step back. You cannot reverse. However, it is worth knowing what you did wrong at the beginning because there may be an opportunity to repair it’ (Król 2015).

Looking back from the perspective of the twenty-five years that have passed since the beginning of the systemic changes in East-Central European countries and the Balkans, it can be clearly seen that after the initial euphoria the transformation period held more problems and the road to a democratic system and market economy turned out to be more difficult than had earlier been predicted and required great sacrifices from society (Fiszer 2007). Poland is an excellent example: the political transformation and reforms after 1989 included a shock-therapy-related increase in prices and decrease in purchasing power and living standards for a large part of society. The liberalization intended to open the economy to the world resulted in bankruptcy for many companies because they were not prepared to compete with imports from western countries. The ruined companies did not pay taxes, which quickly led to the state having budget difficulties, inter alia, because of the growing deficit. The lack of budget resources especially affected public sector employees and pensioners. The crisis in public services—education, science, and healthcare—deepened. Instead of a general improvement, the reforms resulted in a worsening of the situation. Fear, uncertainty, and disappointment dominated all social groups. Liberalization was accompanied by a normative chaos. The transformation to a market economy, release from fixed prices, and privatisation, together with the liquidation of inefficient companies, caused a growth in unemployment—a phenomenon that was rather unknown in the communist era. Unemployment and the impoverishment of society resulted at the time in increased pessimism and greater numbers of suicides (Jarosz 2005, 2013; Kozłowski 2003).

The pace of introducing changes, which was called ‘shock therapy’, and their negative social as well as political and economic consequences became a ‘trademark’ of Poland’s transformation. Shock therapy had both supporters and opponents at home and abroad. Not everyone, however—not even those who introduced the changes—was fully convinced they were right. Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki (1990) was for a ‘long march’—a slower political transformation, the postponed acquisition of power by the opposition, and thus, slower economic change.

After the collapse of communism, other East-Central European countries adopted a course of transformation similar to the Polish one or softened it in order to limit social costs. They made larger or smaller mistakes that are still debated today. Transformation and

democratization after 1989 encountered many barriers in Poland and other East-Central European states but were necessary for those countries' Europeanization. Some obstacles were the result of the former mentality, developed during forty-five years of communist propaganda, others resulted from political changes overlapping with changes connected with the rapid development of information and communications technologies, especially the Internet. Modern media, the use of the Internet, and mass use of new technologies also changed the sphere of political activities in subsequent years and had a large influence on Europeanization processes in Poland and other post-Soviet-bloc states (Adamowski 2004; Dobek-Ostrowska 2004).

The social sciences, especially political science, did not avoid mistakes either, as in the early 1990s they optimistically assumed there was only one model of post-communist transformation and its consolidation was just a matter of time, i.e., the near future.

However, thorough analysis and careful observation of the transformation processes determined by the economic, political, and social reforms in post-communist European states verifies that optimistic assumption. Today it can be argued that there was, and is, no single model of change in post-communist East-Central Europe. The course of change in fact depended, and still depends, on numerous internal and external premises, e.g., countries' own statehood traditions, democratic traditions, the quality of political elites, the ethnic composition of society, the political culture, relations with Western culture, the level of civilizational development, etc. (Ardelli 2003; Grosse 2010).

In the context of the above, I cannot agree with Ágh's idea that the European Union and Europeanization have contributed to 'controversial democratization' and turbulences in the political systems of the new EU member states. In my opinion, such disturbances have been the result of political transformation processes overlapping with accession processes in post-communist countries—their deficiencies and mistakes as well as insufficient preparation for EU membership. In sum, the enormous political, social, and economic difficulties in those countries have been contributing factors and the global financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009 exacerbated the situation. The Western world, and therefore also the post-communist countries, was not prepared to counteract the crisis, which largely resulted from the conviction that the neoliberal order had a self-correction mechanism eliminating disorders in the functioning of the real economy. A possible financial crisis remained outside the sphere of imagined threats. Belief in the system's proper functioning prevailed because commercial banks are entities perfectly set in the free market environment, know its mechanisms well, and are able to counteract pathologies. However, it turned out that banks not only failed to prevent the crisis but had also been mainly responsible for its outbreak (Bożyk 2009; Zaorska 2006).

The economists of academe were not prepared for the crisis either. Most were uncritical worshippers of the neoliberal faith. Therefore, they outlined their optimistic visions of globalization while ignoring the crisis-like phenomena that occurred from time to time as being unimportant in terms of mainstream global development. A similar situation occurred in Poland and other post-communist countries, which in addition believed that EU membership would be a sufficient remedy for all difficulties. The media publicized government economists' and bank experts' opinions full of optimism and an unwavering belief in fast social and economic development. The opinion prevailed that these countries were

crisis-resistant because their economies were well integrated with the EU's economic system and were functioning in full compliance with the Washington Consensus, a codified neo-liberalism manifesto (Friedman 1962; Williamson 2002; Grosse 2013).

After the large expansion of the EU in the period 2004–2007, development of European integration was based on a supranational agreement of the elites on the community model. The agreement was in fact concluded without citizens' participation and with an attempt to limit the influence of electoral democracy on European matters. On the other hand, post-communist societies were fed European ideas, and integration—as an unambiguously beneficial project in the political, economic, and social sphere—was intensely promoted. Instead of democratic legitimization procedures, the bases for authorization of integration processes were utilitarian issues connected with measurable benefits and the improvement of most citizens' living conditions. Thus, utilitarian legitimization and Europeanization were based on economic development and improvement of social conditions. This state of affairs was disturbed by the financial and economic crisis, which affected East-Central European states to varying degrees. Given the crisis, which had begun in some countries as early as 2008 and had prolonged itself, it was more and more difficult to avoid electoral verdicts and the influence of democracy on integration processes. The tendencies were reflected in the double objection of electorates, that is, in central states and peripheral ones, in the 'old 15' and new member states. In both groups the support for Europeanization and integration ideas has weakened and the influence of Euro-sceptical opinions has been increasing (Neyer 2010; Medrano 2012).

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In failing to notice the many differences and specificities of individual post-communist countries, their historical conditions and their courses of transformation after 1989—as well as the objective and subjective difficulties of democratisation, which affected their Europeanization—Ágh's article, in my opinion, presents too far-reaching generalisations of the processes and their political, social, and economic consequences. The picture he presents of the democratic changes in post-communist European countries and the effects of their Europeanization in the last twenty-five years is out of focus, lacking in contrast, somehow grey, subjective, and controversial. It better matches the situation in Russia, Moldova, Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine—or Georgia and Kazakhstan (Cianciara, Burakowski, Olszewski, Wódka 2015).

Furthermore, the author's arguments are controversial because they are formulated through the prism of Hungarian experiences and Hungary's current economic, social, and political situation, which is much different from that in, for instance, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or Poland (Burakowski 2010; Komendy 2011).

Let me remind the reader that in 1989 Hungary was emerging from half a century of totalitarianism in much better condition than other post-Soviet-bloc states. The economy, though submerged in the crisis that had impacted all links in the communist system, was functioning incomparably better than the economy of Poland or neighbouring Romania. And this was not only reflected in macroeconomic indicators but was also translated into relatively high living standards for ordinary citizens. At the turn of the 1980s to 1990s, the

Hungarian economy was mainly focused on satisfying the needs of the country's inhabitants and not on fast growth; thus from the very beginning of the political transformation it obstructed the introduction of economic reforms necessary to adapt the country to conditions in the European Communities. In spite of expectations, Hungary did not manage to join the European Union earlier than other East-Central European states. Over time, Hungary lost its position as a leader of change, and soon after accession it fell into a political crisis from which no one can see a way out. This was accompanied by the global financial and economic crisis, which was more severe in Hungary than in other countries of the region. Another important aspect of Hungary's transformation and functioning in the EU was, and still is, the ethnic issue—the political elites thought the EU might be a useful platform for uniting the nation, which was divided after World War I (Burakowski 2010; Komendy 2011).

The trajectory described by Ágh in his article, i.e., the evolution of East-Central European and Balkan countries from communism to democracy (capitalism) through the transformation of their political, social, economic, and cultural systems in the period of 1989–1991, and then through their Europeanization after EU accession, was neither simple nor easy, however. It was not a linear process without disturbances. Quite the opposite, it was in actuality a 'rocky road', which cost the post-communist countries a great deal. This was the price the East-Central European and Balkan countries had to pay to return to Europe after forty-five years and to be able to join Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e., the EU and NATO, and thus to strengthen their regained sovereignty and ensure their security.

Ágh's article is a critical sociological and political analysis and, as I mentioned earlier, a summary of his research into the current social and political situation and, more precisely, the crisis of democracy in the new European Union member states. Ágh presents these countries' paths over the past twenty-five years, from socialism to democracy, from sovereignty obtained in 1989 to EU membership and Europeanization, and seeks answers to questions about these processes and their effects, which are currently being more and more audibly criticised and which evoke different emotions all over Europe. In analysing the premises of these complex processes, he tries to discover the regularities that govern them and present the sources of the current crisis of Europeanization and democracy in the new member states and in the whole European Union. The weakness of his analysis, which is based on abundant sources, is the superficiality of his assessment and conclusions and also a lack of reference to specific economic, sociological, or political science theories. Some of his ideas and opinions cannot be approved, for example, the idea that EU accession and the Europeanization of post-communist countries have not produced the expected effects and have led these countries to the present political crisis. Ágh writes that there has been a turn from 'apparent' democracy to 'majority' democracy in the new member states. The change has been taking place for a short period and only in some of the countries, mainly in Slovakia, Hungary, and recently in Poland.

Ágh forgets that we have long been experiencing a crisis of participation throughout the European Union, and not only in the new member states—as is reflected, for instance, in elections to the European Parliament. A similar phenomenon is occurring in many other countries of the contemporary world, including the United States. On the other hand, it is commonly known that in any country—within the EU or not—the path to a stable democracy and civil society requires time. However, the new member states' road to democracy

was covered too quickly and involved the taking of short-cuts. As a result, three preliminary conditions necessary for a stable democratic system have not been met: an efficiently functioning state, the rule of law, and the authorities' accountability to society.

Moreover, as Francis Fukuyama (2012: 533, 534) rightly notes, democracy, which is today believed to be the most legitimate form of governance, requires social legitimization and this depends on economic achievements. These, on the other hand, rely on the maintenance of a certain balance between decisive action on the side of the state when there is such a need and individual liberties, which are a foundation of its democratic legitimacy and are conducive to the development of a private sector. Notably, according to Eurostat data, as many as 41 million people in the European Union were living in a state of material deprivation in 2015. The worst situation was in Bulgaria, where 34% of the population experienced severe material deprivation. Hungary also reported a high rate—19.4%. The best situation was in Holland (2.5%) and Finland (2.2%). The situation in Poland is quite good in comparison with other countries: 13.5% citizens experienced material deprivation in 2012, and in 2015 the rate fell to 8.1%, i.e., there were 3 million citizens living in poverty.³

In spite of what Ágh writes, the deficiencies of contemporary democracies, including those of the new EU member states, take many forms, but the most common is the weakness of the state. Contemporary democracies, including those belonging to the EU, have been tightly cramped and have become too rigid; thus they are unable to take the difficult decisions on which long-term economic and political survival depends. And this is conducive to the growth of populism and to antidemocratic and anti-EU tendencies. Populism and nationalism deform—'cripple'—democracy and lead to attempts to 'simplify' it, as has been clearly seen in Hungary over the last few years and also in Poland recently. As a result, the system of a separation of powers, a *sine qua non* of democracy, is becoming less and less efficient while the executive power is getting much stronger and is not counterbalanced (Rosanvallon 2016).

At a time of growing threats, including the escalation in international terrorism and an integration crisis, people want strong authorities capable of quick and efficient decisions, but the stronger the executive power, the greater the need for its increased control. Otherwise, liberal democracy will be transformed into 'majority democracy' or 'sovereign democracy', whose theoretical foundations were tailored by Vladimir Putin. Then, in practice, democracy becomes fictitious, and authoritarianism develops in the state.

Looking for the reasons for the weakness of democracy in the new EU member states, Ágh points out that there are social, political, and good governance deficits. He writes that after accession, 'only a large European façade of large formal institutions without the full architecture of democratic institutions was built' in these countries. Moreover, he emphasizes that these countries had to overcome a triple crisis: a transformational one, a post-accession one, and the global financial one, which had a negative effect on the processes of Europeanization and democratization. As a result, 'democracy eroded' and was deprived of many essential elements, inter alia, a civil society and a 'political culture based on social trust' have not been developed. In sum, Ágh writes that in the first decade of the new EU

³ Material deprivation, in accordance with the Eurostat definition, is a situation in which a person cannot afford, inter alia, a week's holiday away from home, eating meat every second day, heating a house in winter, or paying the bills. See: 'Nierówności społeczne. Mniej biedy w Polsce', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15 April 2016, p. 23.

states' membership, a 'controversial development with many successes and failures' took place. This statement should be approved. Assessment of the first ten years of Poland's membership in the EU confirms the same (Janowicz 2016; Misiąg J., Misiąg W., Tomalak 2013).

In general, membership in the EU has given Poland an opportunity to further develop, but this requires activeness on the part of Poland's elites and the development of strategy. The elites are not exempt from responsibility for the future of the country and should not pass all power to EU institutions. On the other hand, accession has caused Poland to follow certain fixed rules, which constitute a broad framework—not solely in the economic sense—for the country's development. Although Poland changed the context of its international alliances, it has not freed itself from peripheral status and this means that it has little influence on key decisions taken within the EU system of governance. There is a tension between the opportunities created by European integration and the limitations it imposes. Poland, like other EU member states, was given a historic chance to improve its international position, i.e., an opportunity to get promoted from the periphery to the so-called semi-periphery of Europe. However, this is a chance that could be wasted and Europeanization may even entrench our dependence and peripheral status on the geopolitical map (Fiszer 2014; Grosse 2012).

Nevertheless, the protection of sovereignty and assurance of security are still the most important objectives for Poland and the new EU member states and their authorities. But today the protection of sovereignty does not mean solely strengthening the army and getting ready to force the enemy back but also further integration and strengthening the institutions of the state in order to ensure that they appropriately fulfil their functions as laid down in the constitution. Today, however, in Poland and other EU countries both 'old' and 'new'—e.g., in France, the UK, or Hungary—populist and anti-system political parties are calling for the liquidation of some of the foundations of the rule of law and a democratic state. They argue that democracy should function on the majority model and elected authorities should be most important. Thus it is necessary to protect the still young democracy in the new EU member states and it must be remembered that a democratic state must have impartial institutions, independent of the majority, as a protection against authoritarianism.

Ágh (2015) emphasizes that one of the reasons for the weakness of democracy in the new member states is democracy's appropriation by political parties and the development of oligarchic control over social and economic life, leading to the transformation of formal democracy into a type of façade democracy, which is democracy on its surface but is more and more authoritarian inside and in reality. This appropriation of democracy, in his opinion, leads to 'velvet dictatorship', which means that the authorities act without repressing the political opposition but increase their power on the basis of negative, informal networks of political and economic elites on the one hand, and the media-based hegemony of the excessively centralised authority on the other. In practice, the functioning of the system of control and balance is eliminated, citizens' participation in exercising power is limited, and civil society disappears. This leads to further degradation of the role of formal institutions in a state in favour of informal institutions.

Summing up the discussion about the effects of the political transformation and Europeanization in the new EU member states over the past twenty-five years, many authors,

including Ágh, emphasize that they have led to a striking asymmetry between formal and informal democratic institutions, to ‘Potemkin democracy’. According to such authors, this is to a great extent the fault of the European Union, which pushed for the development of formal institutions connected with the rule of law, and overlooked ‘the sociological and subject-matter dimension of the development of constitutional democracy’ (Heidbreder 2012). In some countries, this was conducive to the development of informal institutions that created informal patron-client corruption networks, weakening formal democratic institutions and diminishing their role in social, political, and economic life (Jacques and Zielonka 2013).

Research shows that after ten years of membership in the EU there has been a retreat from democracy in some countries of Eastern Europe, especially Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria—a situation that reflects the weakness of these states and the inefficiency of their Europeanization. Appropriation of the state by political parties, oligarchic relations, and corruption has resulted in democracy’s seizure by the ruling elites, creating façade democracy. The oligarchs’ informal patron-client corruption networks have created a new type of political system in these countries, changing large formal institutions into ‘sand castles’ on ‘quicksand’, as has been confirmed by the European Commission.⁴

Some researchers go even further in their assessment and argue that the new system of rule in the post-communist states in Europe, including the new EU member states, is based on linked political and business groups and a fusion of economics and politics. In such a political system, the rule of law has been transformed into the ‘right to rule’ or the ‘rule through law’, and political and administrative elites have merged with, or at least been ‘synchronised’ with, oligarchic business elites, creating a common political and business elite that creates law to make all its activities ‘legal’ (Ágh, Kaiser, Koller 2014). This has led to deepened erosion of the political systems in particular countries, where democracy is limited to parliamentary and local elections, and moreover with less and less participation of citizens, who have been deprived of the information and motivation to be active in political and social life.

All in all, according to many experts and researchers, including Ágh, in the new EU member states, in spite of twenty-five years of Europeanization and democratization, we still lack real, civil, participation-based democracy. The quality of democracy at present, in spite of the great expectations and optimism accompanying the beginning of the political transformation in East-Central and Southern European states after the collapse of communism, still leaves a lot to be desired. Democracy must undergo a massive change (Mach 2012; Zielonka 2007). I agree, but how is this to be done?

In my opinion, the current criticism of the accession, transformation, and achievements of the new EU member states is overly severe (and groundless as far as particular states are concerned). Ágh is not alone in making such criticisms, because criticism of the EU, its institutions, policies, and role in the international arena has been growing in many countries in recent years. There are attempts to negate the appropriateness of specific countries’ accession decisions and more audible criticism of the political, social, and economic effects of ten years of EU membership. In Poland as well, both Euro-sceptics and Euro-realists

⁴ European Commission; 25 Years After the Fall of the Iron Curtain: The State of Integration of East and West in the European Union, https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/east-west_integration.pdf

speak the loudest, and the Euro-optimists have hidden somewhere. There is less information about the successes and more about the failures of Poland's integration policy. The opinion that Poland pays extra to the EU budget is sometimes encountered. However, according to data published on the Ministry of Finance website, in the period between 1 May 2004 and 31 January 2016, Poland received EUR 124.8 billion in subsidies and paid EUR 39.4 billion in contributions to the EU budget. In addition, in the same period, we had to return the funds we did not use (EUR 151 million) and thus from accession to the end of last January, we received EUR 85.3 billion net. Thanks to these funds we implemented many important projects, which could not have been realized if Poland were not an EU member state. In the period between 2004 and 2015, Poland's GDP rose on average by 3.8% annually and had the second highest growth rate after Slovakia (3.9%) among all the EU countries. The average annual growth rate in the EU in that period was only 1%. In 2004, Poland's GDP per capita was 49% of the EU average, and in 2014 it was already 68%. Would Poland have been able to develop faster if it were not an EU member? Absolutely not. In spite of this and much other data showing that all in all the balance of our membership is positive, opinions can be heard that accession was a trap to make Poland dependent on foreign capital. Today Euro-sceptics argue that Poland has become a semi-colony of the EU states, especially Germany, which supposedly took over Poland's dynamic industrial sector, led to its collapse, and made Poland a market for German products and a location for a few assembly plants, where Polish slaves work for peanuts (Czekaj 2016; Fiszer 2015; Tereszkiwicz 2013; Mróz 2014; Burgoński, Sowiński 2011).

As a result of these opinions, a special Parliamentary Team of Euro-Realists has recently been formed in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland. Its aim is to analyse and assess the costs and benefits of our EU membership. The Team's members, who belong to the Kukiz' 15 and Law and Justice parties, are to focus on the economic and legal consequences of Poland's membership in the EU. It is not out of the question that the result of their work will be a referendum on Poland's withdrawal from the EU.

Populism and Euro-scepticism are growing everywhere in Europe. Not only supporters of national states criticise the EU but also the leaders of the richest EU member states, which have benefited most from the enlargement. Five, two, or even half a year ago no one would have thought a prime minister of France would publicly say, as Manuel Valls did, that the EU project 'might die quickly and suddenly', or that the president of the European Parliament, a socialist, Martin Schultz, would state that 'the collapse of the EU is a quite realistic scenario'. The ideas of a referendum on the withdrawal of the UK from the EU and the Finnish euro exit are called political realism today. Marine Le Pen's interview for the British newspapers, in which the leader of the French nationalists compared Brussels to the Berlin Wall and said that Brexit would be for Europe what the collapse of the Soviet Union was for East-Central Europe, did not receive much comment (Wróblewski 2016).

Today not only the new members but the whole European Union has problems. Undoubtedly, something bad is happening with the EU and its democracy. The creation of a common currency was a turning point, but the EU should not have rested on its laurels. It should have developed a model of better and deeper interference into every member state's matters. However, that required development of a better EU budget. There were discussions on the EU's aspirations to be a world power, able to defend its interests, on making

its economy more dynamic, and on solidarity with less-developed regions and countries, but the national states refused to contribute more to the EU budget. As a result, the existing differences deepened and expectations grew—especially as European politicians fed them—persuading people that the European Union was a cure for every trouble. Then, however, it emerged that the EU was unable to solve problems within the Community.

The European Union has been suffering from a serious crisis, which is the accumulation of many crises: the EU integration crisis, the EU leadership crisis, a financial and economic crisis, an axiological crisis, a political and social crisis and others. Timothy Garton Ash, a British historian, Oxford professor, and expert on Europe and the European Union, states that:

This is obviously the most important crisis after World War II. A crisis that is really existential in character, which may mean the beginning of an end of the European Union. So far, an integration tendency has dominated, now we have a disintegration trend. (...) Europe has always lived with crises but it could recover from them, and the response was always stronger integration. Now, this response is weak, rather rhetorical and in Brussels. There is a lack of it inside the member states, even those most important like Germany and France. Moreover, Marine Le Pen's nationalist movement dictates the policy of France. (...) A belief is growing in the whole of Europe that these were elites, technocrats from Brussels, neoliberals and free market champions that were at fault. (...) Elites, cosmopolitans, people from big metropolises, corporations and contemporary capitalist owners are appropriating Europe. They get richer, we get poorer (Ash 2016).

Garton Ash sadly admits that scepticism and lack of faith in the future of the EU are also growing in the countries of East-Central Europe, which so longed for a common Europe and joined it just a few years ago, and where many crisis phenomena have not appeared yet or are only appearing weakly. He emphasises that 'The distrust trend occurs in the whole of Europe in many variants: SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the National Front in France, UKIP in England, Jobbik in Hungary, the Peace and Justice party in Poland. These are different phenomena but they have something in common. (...) Scepticism is that common element' (Ash 2016).

At present, the European Union resembles a boat that was not solidly built; water is leaking in and slowly filling it. It is sinking and if it is not repaired quickly, it may go under. Pierre Rosanvallon (2015), a French historian and sociologist, also admits that 'a slow process of European Union disintegration has probably started'.

Thus, the European Union urgently needs a good captain and steersman, new political elites, and visionaries who will have ideas for its restoration and will mobilize the whole of Europe to further integration and democratization. However, today there is less and less solidarity, trust, and cohesion, as well as faith and optimism concerning the EU's future prospects. Today, nationalists, populists, and Euro-sceptics are not the EU's only enemies, but there are also the Euro-realists, who announce that the EU is falling apart, that it is working badly, and that we must look out for our own national interests.

Conclusions

The financial and economic crises, as well as the migrant crisis, laid bare many other weaknesses of the European Union—especially the impotence of its technocratic management – and disclosed the real centres of power in the complicated political system, where everyday

activities do not always indicate, at first sight, where key decisions are taken. First of all, the crises revealed the weakness of the major supranational EU decision-making organ, i.e., the European Commission. The crises, which are unprecedented in the modern history of Europe and the EU, also showed the decision-making weakness of the intergovernmental factor and the divisions, egoisms, and particularisms that still exist in the European Union. In most European countries, citizens have lost confidence in the EU, and the disintegration process is strengthening. This is because the EU has not had charismatic leaders, visionaries, or outstanding politicians for a long time. Today, bureaucrats and party activists, who seem to live on a different planet than citizens and are unaware of their needs, govern the EU; the EU's political system is imperfect and requires not just cosmetic changes but deep ones. This must alter as quickly as possible. If the European Union wants to survive, it must evolve towards a civil and social state (Ruszkowski, Wojnicz 2013).

Undoubtedly, after the fifty years since the first Communities and the twenty-five years since its creation, the European Union needs a new development vision, a course-of-action strategy, and far-reaching modernization and democratization. Today, we must decide not only whether the EU should become a state (a superpower) and whether the model of democracy used by states could be a model for it but first of all what must be done to make European citizens want the EU and want to prevent its collapse (Fiszer 2014).

Ordinary citizens and political elites have many different visions and opinions about the European Union and its prospects and opportunities, and the threats to it. In the history of the EU, the period of 2004–2014, the decade after the enlargement in East-Central Europe, provokes special controversies. Today the countries of the 'old EU' claim that the 2004 enlargement was a mistake, because it was untimely and too costly for them (Koszel 2012). On the other hand, the 'new' EU countries in East-Central Europe have a grudge against the EU and say that they are abused by the 'old EU' countries and not sufficiently nurtured. This results from a lack of knowledge and the excessive expectations that East-Central European countries had in connection with their accession to the European Union (Ash 2012).

Research carried out by sociologists, psychologists, lawyers, and political scientists—including my own research—confirms that we want a strong and totally efficient Union. We want a Union that will be a guarantor of national interests in Europe and the world and, on the other hand, we are afraid of the EU, which is 'governed by Germany and France operating in tandem', interested in the maintenance of their states' sovereignty and making other member states give up theirs. De facto, here in Poland and other East-Central European countries, there are two options, two ways of seeing the European Union and the effects of ten years of membership—positive or negative, depending on a person's political party and professed axiology (Antoszewski 2009; Krasnodębski 2003). On the one hand, the organization is approved; the positive balance from membership is indicated and the need to get involved in its decision-making mainstream is indicated. On the other hand, the hazards of, and threats from, Brussels and the negative effects of accession have been exposed. Consequently, either deeper integration and strengthening of the EU is desired or, vice versa, there are calls to soften it, to relax it politically and ideologically, and to change it into a kind of optional association of sovereign states protecting their borders against the flow of immigrants. The same Union is still an attractive 'promised land' for hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world. It still has great gravitational pull, as

is confirmed by the queue of states waiting for membership in this specific organisation of democratic and sovereign states. Today, it is difficult to imagine Europe and the world without the European Union.

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Since both Authors have clearly presented their stances, we consider the discussion closed unless some new ideas are presented and supported by sociological analysis.

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