Kalypso Nicolaïdis

Sustainable integration: The silver lining of a democratically challenged EU

Proposal

The EU should act as the guardian of sustainable integration. Sustainable integration in this sense comprises but is broader than the sustainability agenda of the UN, and includes all policies, laws, and actions.

Motivation

Due to electoral cycles, national electoral democracies are almost always obsessed with short-term fixes, even though many citizens in fact care intensely about the long term. A chastened EU embracing the politics of time could set out to be the guardian of the long term for the sake of our children and theirs. This would be the silver lining of the EU's perceived demo-cratic deficit: *democracy with foresight.*

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T he EU is often accused of lacking democratic legitimacy. "Brussels" for many is a synonym for a bureaucracy afflicted with what has come to be referred to as a democratic deficit. To some extent, this is unfair. Every organization needs a bureaucracy, and Brussels of course is not just a bunch of "unelected bureaucrats". After all, the European Parliament is directly elected, and the European Council is composed of elected heads of state. The President of the European Commission is nominated by the European Council based on the outcome of the parliamentary elections. Commissioners are nominated by individual national governments. All these checks and balances are common in most democratic systems, but with the extra level of oversight that comes from national governments also getting a say. The member states remain masters of the Treaty.

Nevertheless, the accusation sticks because of a fundamental democratic intuition: Democracy means that you, the people, can "kick the rascals out" if you are not happy with them. But you cannot kick "Brussels" out at one point in time, can you? No matter that, in reality, "Brussels" is the sum of governments that actually can be kicked out, the average citizen holds the view that national governments come and go, but the EU is simply continuing down the same path to ever-closer union, led by the European Commission. Indeed, the EU is democratically awkward and unlike any democratic entity they can recognise.

I suggest that there is a silver lining to the EU's democratic awkwardness. Given electoral cycles and opinion polls, national electoral democracies are always obsessed with short-term fixes, even if in fact many citizens care more about the long term. As one discussant in the Twelve Stars online debate wrote: "You have policies that require you

to sacrifice something now for a greater good in the future. People will blame you for that sacrifice and then assign the good outcome to whoever is in charge then. That is the problem with democratic incentives."

The EU, however, is less vulnerable to electoral cycles. That is the flip side of its democratic deficit. As a result, it could provide an antidote to the usual political obsession with the present – under the motto: "It is urgent to act long term!" A chastened EU could be the guardian of the long term for the sake of our children and theirs, and for the sake of our peace of mind. This would be the silver lining of the EU's perceived democratic deficit: *democracy with foresight.*

In this way, we can turn the EU's democratic deficit on its head. The EU, democratically challenged for its short-term accountability, can be democratically enhanced for long-term responsibility. Much needs to be saved for future generations, from our planet's bounty to our peace institutions. Incomplete integration is not the problem; unsustainable integration is. Long-term issues are precisely where supranational governance is needed most to secure a planetary future for humanity. This role for supranationalism has eluded UK leavers advocating Brexit, mesmerized as we all are by the spectacle of "emergency decisions" during megaphone EU summits. There is still much to be done to entrench sustainable integration, and it needs to start now – and urgently.

True, the EU already has mechanisms and agencies in charge of thinking about what they call "impact" attached to each of its institutions. The Global Trends Unit, Scientific Foresight (STOA), the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC), and a number of other EU institutions all aim to look into the crystal ball and build preparedness for upcoming challenges and opportunities. Impact assessment is also part of the EU's Better Regulation Agenda. Yet, more needs to be done.

First, the cooperation between these bodies could be improved. While the European Parliament, Council, and Commission also set up a body that coordinates their efforts and includes scientific input, this body in turn must reach out to its counterparts around the world as well as inward to plug into the legislating and decision-making processes.

Second, the kind of sustainable integration I propose includes but is broader than the UN's sustainability agenda embedded in its 17 sustainability goals. It should cover all EU policies, laws, and actions. Broadly, the EU could prescribe long-term impact-assessment filters for every EU decision, legal or political, on development and wealth, the environment, biodiversity, demography, risks posed by machines or artificial intelligence, mobility, energy, and so forth – in other words, all policies that are best designed and implemented with an eye towards the long term.

This strategy would affect various categories of things, from the physical (e.g. prosperity, standards, infrastructure) to the intangible (e.g. rights, peace, political views, information flows, sense of identity, of fear, of safety, etc). And some would be difficult to categorize (e.g. human trafficking, climate change).

Third, the approach needs to be dynamic and flexible over time. When the best policy that we can plan now for a future time is no longer the best when the time arrives, we need to be able to adapt our strategies. This, in turn, calls for a much wider use of sunset clauses for laws whose impact is uncertain and/or contested.

Fourth, these assessments ought to incorporate systematic foresight exercises, looking at uncertainties about what could happen as opposed to classic impact assessment, which refers to what you want to achieve. Scenarios should refer to alternative time horizons, such as 5, 10, 30, 50 and 100 years. The assessments need to have periodical reviews for contingent and unforeseen developments.

The European Parliament has been promoting a foresight approach that is about getting EU publics and politicians to think in terms of scenarios

and to prepare for imaginable future events as wells as actions that might be considered should such events eventually happen. But it is not clear how these publics are actually engaged in imagining the possible unintended or adverse effects of each of the actions considered. We need to think about how we generate such thinking, how to combine open brainstorming with a few people of diverse backgrounds or with bigger groups and the media; how unfamiliar settings might help. In short, we must give thought to how we gaze into the crystal ball not under the dictation of "future experts", but as interconnected societies.

Why not stay with the national level?

One question raised in the Twelve Stars online debate was why the European Commission and Parliament should be better at formulating long-term policies than national governments and parliaments. Being better, after all, starts with democratic legitimacy – and national institutions are more legitimate. EU institutions might make better policies from a technocratic perspective, but are worse in terms of legitimacy. This, in turn, means there will be little buy-in for the public. Germany's national parliament and government deciding to pour considerable resource into pursuing renewable energy and reducing CO_2 emissions, for instance, is acceptable from a legitimacy perspective even though the policy produces considerable costs, especially for less well-off households, in terms of rising prices for energy. The same policy decision, however, might not be acceptable from EU institutions without the backing – and potentially against the opposition – of national parliaments. In other words: no foresight without accountability. If you want to impose short-term costs, the EU will not deliver!

There are two ways to respond. A minimalist would suggest that when we say "the EU should" we mean to say that the EU can and should help formulate challenges and benchmarks but leave it to national parliaments and governments to flesh out and implement resulting policies through democratic decision-making. Countries should continue to make their own choices regarding how they are governed because *different members of the EU want different things.* As a result, there would be

a two-step process for future-oriented policy, with the implementation decisions varying across member states.

A maximalist would argue that for EU institutions to better take on long-term challenges, you also need to give them the power to influence the future. Otherwise, we could end up in a situation where the EU merely talks about long-term issues but has no way of actually addressing them. This would leave the EU to be seen as useless. So it would be better to give agency to the European Commission and Parliament and to hold them accountable for their decisions.

Of course, if a policy has short-term costs, it ultimately needs to be debated and agreed nationally. The national sphere will be the most relevant for the foreseeable future. But given the externalities in both time and space, the EU needs to orchestrate long-term assessments that require dealing with deep uncertainty, such as climate change or AI. Long-term decisions need to take into account a range of possible outcomes where costs and benefits across borders can vary hugely. How do you make these tradeoffs?

But either way, for this sustainable integration agenda to happen, the EU cannot rely on business as usual. Instead, it needs to concentrate its efforts on democratising foresight.

How do you democratise foresight?

It is hard to disagree that long-term decisions need to be owned as broadly as possible. The EU needs to reinforce and deepen the authority and democratic legitimacy of its foresight bodies not only by joining the dots between them, but by radically opening them up to the public at large. This is easier said than done. How does one hold collective debates on the specific tradeoffs between short-term losses and long-term gains of actions and policies, on other respective risks and opportunities, on how these are distributed, on what time horizon we need to worry about? More generally, how do you engineer *a bottom-up approach*? Sustainable integration needs to be embedded in a collective understanding on the

part of the wider society, the media, NGOs, "movements", all of which can influence it. All of us must learn to imagine our social world as a constellation of "subsystems" that will be influenced in different ways by this new EU as a guardian of the long term.

To truly make this happen, the EU needs to harness the power of bottom-up participatory, deliberative, and contestatory democracy as well as "distributed intelligence" through innovative mechanisms, such as internet-based participatory channels connecting citizens, groups, and institutions of all sorts to the EU. The traditional "EU stakeholder" approach needs to be dramatically enlarged and become truly user-friendly. As a democracy with foresight, the EU could match China, an autocracy in which long-term planers reign supreme. In our European way of doing things, the long-term planers would be the people. One could envisage a citizens' "Committee for the Future" entirely devoted to the long term. How would it be chosen? As a first step, some suggest that the European Parliament use the seats vacated by Brexit. But the reader can imagine many other options!

Even while the national level remains key, a European democratic debate has to be transnational, with each nation opening its debates to the others. If the web is the place to express popular discontent, it follows that radical new forms of direct and virtual democracy should live on the web, too, diffusing authority within and across borders. This is not a vertical restructuring beyond the state to replace closed and self-centered democratic institutions. Rather, it is about the art of managing democratic interdependence and togetherness across borders, a practice that is about horizontal connections, mutual engagement, and reciprocal vulnerability. While present problems tend to be dealt with in local spheres, future ones belong to transnational ones.

With due credit to Eurosceptics, let us recognise that grass-roots democracy was not in the EU's DNA, and that mistrust in the people was its original sin. Yet, paradoxically, this may be where its redemption lies today. Robert Dahl has argued that democracy's first two great historical transformations were the birth of democratic city-states in ancient

Greece and Rome as well as the 18th-century emergence of large-scale representative democracies. Can we now not imagine a third democratic transformation, a transformation so inclusive as to stretch democratic time much beyond the voters of today?

Whose incentives? What incentives?

One commentator in the Twelve Stars online debate reminds us that while democracy has straightforward incentives, the priorities of technocrats – as brilliant as they might be – are not necessarily aligned with pursuing our long-term interest. Career public servants, she says, can sabotage reforms in order to keep their position in the internal workings of the administration or simply to avoid extra work. We need to think, then, about the incentives that actors have in truly pursuing a long-term agenda.

You could ask, in particular, how we know that a more participatory democratic process will generate more incentive to tackle the long term. And, indeed, perhaps there needs to be more thoughtful politics and debates to consider uncertain long-term outcomes. It is truly hard to understand and make decisions on big long-term problems, such as climate, immigration, AI and automation, and financial structures. But why should we think that these problems are too complicated for the average European voter to understand at least enough to make an informed decision on them, but not so hard for politicians to do so? Indeed, the accepted divergence of opinion on technical issues can be just as wide among technocrats as among citizens.

Can the EU be trusted anyway?

Many think that the EU did not think long term when it designed the euro, that it failed to take into account the long-term distribution of its costs and benefits. It is not even clear whether the EU has learned its lessons, quips one of our Twelve Stars online debate participants. Others argue that, quite to the contrary, the euro is a good example of long-term strategic thinking that causes problems in the short term in order to move to a world where the euro can truly compete with the dollar and

thus provide the EU with the wealth and power that comes with owning a reserve currency. The truth is that we are not very good at factoring in counterfactuals: What would have happened without the euro or with different requirements on the pace of deficit reduction? The question remains whether the EU has a process to make debates about alternative long-term scenarios enter the democratic sphere.

For the foreseeable future, the EU will remain more remote from and complex to citizens than public authorities closer to home. Sustainable integration can make up for this flaw - not just as a technical fix, but as a narrative and an ideal. For this to happen, sustainable integration needs to become a widely shared mindset and praxis. It is time to try to imagine collectively what this ideal would look like and how we could achieve it.

For background information on how the proposal fits with the EU's political agenda and procedures, see www.twelvestars.eu/CMV/Kalypso-Nicolaidis.

For further readings, visit http://kalypsonicolaidis.com/.

Objections

On 27 May 2018, Kalypso Nicolaïdis defended her proposal in the Twelve Stars debate. The main objections are presented below. Rebuttals can be followed in the online debate:

www.twelvestars.eu/CMV/Kalypso-Nicolaidis

⊙ Would it be feasible for the EU to act as the guardian of sustainable integration?

"Things like climate, immigration, AI and automation, financial structure, etc, are an order of magnitude too complicated for an average European voter to understand enough to make an informed decision, even if that particular voter has a college-level education." *Freevoulous*

"For long-time sustainability, people need to accept rule by the EU. At the moment, this is the biggest challenge faced by the EU." *rocqua*

"When Brussels formulated the euro, it did not think long term and considered the economic reality that a single currency will bring. Instead, the euro was created as a political symbol of EU integration." *CharlesChrist*

⊙ Would it be beneficial if the EU acted as the guardian of sustainable integration?

"One important standard of betterness is whether these policies have democratic legitimacy. But institutions at the national level are better democratically legitimized by any standard [than the EU]." *marcomeyer24*

"What incentive does a bureaucrat in Brussels have to decide what's best for a middle-class citizen in Kaunas, Lithuania, regardless of how well-intentioned they are, regardless of how incredible his/her long-term vision is, and regardless of how sustainable their plan is?" *Thinking_King*

⊙ What risks would arise if the EU acted as the guardian of sustainable integration?

"While this EU may be better at formulating policy, it is fundamentally anti-democratic and elitist and fuels populism throughout the EU." *nofriendsonlykarma*