



Polish Academy of Sciences
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European Studies Unit



Working Paper no. 3/2007

(Artykuł dyskusyjny nr 3/2007)

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**The concept of democracy in the European
integration discourse in the enlarged Union¹**

Warsaw, 2007

¹ The text has been presented at the CONNEX Research 2 group seminar in Belfast on September 23, 2005 (within 6th European Framework Programme).

Instead of an abstract

During the recent international forum in Cernobbio, the Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, known for his notoriously eurosceptical comments, suggesting a new name for the integrating Europe said: “Let us change the name: not Union any longer but European States Organization. I believe, the discrepancy between real Europe and political Europe is deepening. European Union suffers serious democracy deficit, therefore, we better change its aims”. Reacting to the Klaus’ proposal, former member of European Commission, Mario Monti responded : „I have an impression, that the citizen of the Czech Republic claims that the Union has reduced democracy. Without the Union your country would not be democratic”¹.

This episode in the constant debate over the nature of European integration seems to be very instructive for my present task. It shows, **first**, that it is possible to use the same words and operate within different discourses. **Next**, it clearly demonstrates that the concept of democracy may play an organizing role in the discourse of European integration – it certainly does in the discourse Vaclav Klaus has operated in. And, **finally**, it makes obvious, that the discourse is not only a matter of communication but is an important part of politics itself. In the current paper I will attempt to develop these observations further.

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Democracy has become a problem in European integration as soon as this process gained a clear political dimension. Accepted in most of the world as a necessary principle and most desirable practice in the organization of political and social life, democracy has been – in a way – elevated to the position of a “political technology” of our time². In fact “democratic” has come to mean “civilized”, “acceptable”, as opposed to all other “non-democratic” political regimes. This is why autocratic, even totalitarian communist, regimes pretended to be democratic, and even more, to be the only true democracies, that is, people’s democracies as opposed to “bourgeois democracy”.

That way the idea of democracy became an organizing principle in our thinking about the right political order in any plausible contemporary polity. Although the idea of democracy has been designed and practised mostly in nation-states it has been assumed that it is an obvious, primary condition also in the European Union. I will attempt to inquire whether this assumption is well- founded. The present considerations will focus on the role of language in

establishing democracy in this position and on its power to steer human perception and behaviour in the area of politics and within it, European integration.

The concept of democracy became one of the crucial elements in theoretical reflection on politics as well as an important component of modern political discourse in general. This does not mean, however, that such a role has stimulated enough reflection on part of the average users of political language. Most often, in everyday language it is just taken for granted that “democracy” belongs to the basic linguistic categories which do not require further elucidation. It is exactly opposite situation in the political science. Democracy has been established as one of the major subjects of this discipline and the enormous number of works on its problems does not help to clarify the issue but seem to make it more and more complicated.³ The works of specialists – however – who stress its “essential contestability”⁴, only rarely influence a popular perception of democracy understood as an idea which is basic and simple. Although the ideal of democracy serves as a core idea of a modern, western society, neither public nor political scientists seem to notice – with very few exceptions - a special role of the concept of democracy in our political discourse. Also, popular evaluation of democracy continuously appears to be very ambivalent: on the one hand it has been accepted as the best form of political order, but on the other on many occasions democratic procedures are blamed for its deficiencies. In the context of European integration this ambivalence is still being deepened, and investigation of the discourse involved may allow us to see its new dimensions.

The concept of democracy slowly became – to a great extent unwillingly – an organizing element in the European integration discourse too. It tends to replace other concepts that earlier spontaneously aspired to such a role, like the concept of community or the concept of solidarity. It seems that the last enlargement which brought into the Union Central European post-communist countries also had its impact on this process. After all it was on this occasion that democracy, a tacit principle of political life in Western Europe, became one of the essential conditions for the new countries’ membership. Of course the issue of democracy in the EU has been discussed much earlier but it only recently took a central place in political debates in Europe. In a sense enlargement increased awareness of a new conceptual environment that has been created by a clash of the ideal of democracy and the process of European integration. Traditional linguistic instruments, sometimes centuries old, when applied to the unprecedented political experiment (as European integration is) made the ambivalences mentioned above especially acute. We tend to miss the fact that although we still use the well known linguistic categories like “democracy”, “sovereignty”, “citizenship”,

“state” and others, none of them has preserved its meaning unchanged. In fact each became a part of a completely new discourse, which has not necessarily been recognized sufficiently quickly as new. As never before, social communication and the language used appeared to have direct practical and political significance. This new situation well confirms and illustrates William E. Connolly’s observation that discourse “is not a prelude to politics but a dimension of politics itself”⁵.

In this conceptual environment European integration discourse underwent a reorientation which unveiled a troublesome aspect of the issue of democracy in the European Union. Within this discourse the principle of democracy appeared as a practically unsolvable political problem: European Union can either save democracy by expanding its communal, federal tendencies – an option which does not receive enough public support - or maintain the present intergovernmental model of governance, which excludes any chance of a radical improvement of its present decision-making system, which does not receive public support exactly because of the democratic deficit. The network of concepts involved, many of which refer rather to the historical experiences of different nations than to the newly emerging common, supranational political entity, does not offer any coherent conceptual instruments. The analysis of the role of the concept of democracy in the European discourse may help to initiate a revision of the very principle of democracy in general or - at least - point out to the need for an alternative design of the whole European integration discourse organized around a different concept.

In order to clarify the above thesis I will have to explain several points. First, the concept of discourse I use and the role of specific concepts in the discourse. It appears that some concepts turn out to be organizing elements of a specific conceptual network. Next, I will discuss the relationship between discourse and political practice. Finally, I will move to the European integration issues discussing the place of the concept of democracy in the political discourse involved.

1. The concept of discourse has been widely used in different disciplines of social sciences and humanities in a number of meanings. Also, there are numerous methods of discourse analysis⁶. In the present study I understand discourse as a network of concepts, which are semantically linked and together reflect the way in which a specific object of reflection is grasped in social communication. In most cases discourse is expressed in the form and meaning of complex linguistic messages and seems to be responsible for the general structure of sense that determines ways of apprehension of reality including its social and political

dimensions. Such an approach to the role of discourse in analysis of a specific area of social life is well expressed by Ernesto Laclau, who says, that „ The basic hypothesis of a discursive approach is that the very possibility of perception, thought and action depends on the structuration of a certain meaningful field, which pre-exists any factual immediacy”⁷. Some other authors move further, pointing to the direct impact of the language we use on social and political practice. “The language of politics is not a neutral medium that conveys ideas independently formed - suggests William E. Connolly - it is an institutionalised structure of meanings that channels political thought and action in certain directions”⁸. “Institutionalised structure of meaning” is exactly what makes the set of concepts – a discourse; an interlinked conceptual network which appears to the language users as a condition imposed on them from outside.

Michel Foucault is one of the authors whose contributions to the theory of discourse seem the most useful for our present area of study, although it is clear that some of the details of his theory go beyond my present approach. But European integration offers excellent illustrations supporting some of the basic assumptions of Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*. One of them is the problem of continuity and the lack of continuity, the problem with which Foucault starts his discussion of “the unities of discourse”⁹. European integration is certainly a case of a break in a certain continuity; a continuity which used to be reflected by the evolution of a political form of states and relations between them. In consequence, European integration also breaks the continuity of specific political discourse, something that should be followed with a revision of our conceptual apparatus (but it is not). Also in the case of European integration discourse “we must rid ourselves of a whole mass of notions, each of which, in its own way, diversifies the theme of continuity”, as Foucault put it.¹⁰ Of course, there is a possibility to see the process of European integration differently, as a case of continuity; namely as a continuation or even development of European civilization. With such an approach also the new status of the state – to refer to the Ball’s illustration presented further on - may be perceived just as a stage in the development of civilization. But this will get us into debates full of further controversies concerning, for example, the concept of civilization, and the problem of inadequacy of the discourse used would only change its context.

Sometimes contemporary students of discourse try to make distinctions among different theoretical bases useful for the theory of discourse. According to Ernesto Laclau such a different basis is offered by poststructuralist theory of sign, on the one side and Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge, on the other. The first approach is represented by such authors as Roland Barth, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Laclau, pointing to the same inspiration

formulates the concept of discourse “as a meaningful totality, that goes beyond the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena”.¹¹ It is clear, though, that he profits also from the Foucault’s inspiration and his distinction reflects only a difference of accents in these two ways of building up the concept of discourse. In fact, both these theoretical frameworks lead to the idea of discourse which is not only useful for the theory of communication but also serves certain epistemological and social functions. These are exactly the functions that are of interest to us in the present text. Therefore – unlike most of the authors who on the basis of chosen definitions and methods of discourse analysis are studying specific aspects of a political system of the EU¹² - I attempt to look at mechanisms which in social communication decide about perception of European integration. In those mechanisms a crucial role belongs to the concepts used. It appears that one of them has become the concept of democracy which indeed appears to be an organizing element in the European integration discourse.

2. Our object of interest in this text is European integration understood both as a process of political transformation in Europe and as social and psychological changes caused by this process. In fact this is how European integration is usually apprehended in writings and discussions on popular perception of European political reality. Therefore, I will take into consideration - first of all - common thinking, which is usually expressed in the every day application of political ideas in communication by members of society but to a great extent also in the language of journalists and politicians. Theoretical reflection on European integration, including a variety of “theories of integration” in most cases appears to be a case of theorizing *ex post*, in which already accomplished integration is being analysed and explained¹³. The discourse involved is made up of many concepts which are constitutive for the political life of contemporary societies. But each of these concepts has its origins, history and its own place in social consciousness. Some of them - like the concept of power - are mostly an instrument of description, while others – like the concept of sovereignty – function in social consciousness mostly as a value; moreover as a value which is autonomous and fundamental. Although all are susceptible to a continuous evolution of their meanings, this fact in most cases escapes attention of the average user of language who acquires those concepts in a process of socialization and accepts them as a part of reality. Such “inertia of concepts”¹⁴ is usually empowered by tradition, mythology and literature. Our present area of interest is close to the field which has been called by Terence Ball a “critical conceptual history”.¹⁵ However, there is at least one difference. Ball is fascinated by the relationship between the institutions of public life and the understanding of basic concepts of politics; he

believes that evolution of institutions leads to the changes in meaning of given words as in his example of the institution of a state and the concept of power¹⁶. He seems less interested in the changes of politics which are so much faster and – in addition – unprecedented, that the concepts used to describe them are unable to reflect the essential difference in political reality. And this is exactly the case of European integration.

There is no doubt, that also in this case the changed political reality of Europe will slowly transform connotations of the concepts used in political language, sometimes already for centuries. But before that moment comes both the theory and the practice of politics have to face the inertia of meanings that have been inherited from the past. So far this situation is the source of a troublesome inadequacy of European integration discourse and of the political process that goes on in integrating Europe. The problem with democracy in the EU is part of it.

Observation of the political behaviour of people who are directly embraced by European integration allows us to see that a successful process of integration requires changes that go beyond material, legal and institutional spheres. As important, if not more important from the sociological point of view, are the changes in the conceptual environment which constitutes political discourse. Significance of this environment is especially clear when taking into consideration some of the distinct features of European integration.

First, European integration is to a great extent the project of elites who have a continuous task to attract to their idea “the masses”. At the bottom of this view there is an assumption that the masses have not much to say and, therefore, the whole process has failed to observe the principles of democracy. **Second**, some aspects of the process of integration have become an object of electoral rhetoric which does not care about clear language or the meanings of basic concepts. On the contrary, from the semantic point of view some concepts may be consciously used in a wrong way if such a step happens to be instrumental for political aims. Quite often politicians or journalists refer to meanings that are established in the social consciousness even if they know that those meanings are inappropriate for the description of the contemporary social and political processes¹⁷. **Third**, many of the concepts essential in any political discourse have been created in the remote past and their present applications carry almost inevitable misunderstandings.

These three observations indicate a quite specific social dimension of European integration which links the discourse and the substance of this process; it is indeed the case of discourse which is itself politics. These observations are also most relevant when discussing

the issue of democracy in the EU. Therefore I will devote now a few more words to them starting with the first one.

3. Like many other theses in the area of European integration the suggestion that this process is elite-driven and by the same token undemocratic, is also debatable. Its opponents point out that after all the whole process is under the control of democratically elected national governments¹⁸. Supporters, on the other hand, stress that the very idea of democracy has been increasingly becoming an abbreviation for procedures which do not have much to do with the will of “masses”. In general, however, there is no doubt that the elite-masses or elite–public division leads us directly to still more difficult aspects of democracy in the EU. In fact one can say that the idea of democracy can hardly be applied to the European Union. The problem is that all cases of democratic systems known earlier have been applied to states, and were closely linked to their systems of governance. The European Union appears to be an exceptional political entity, earlier unknown. In addition to a number of other differences, it tends to assume a uniting system of governance while separate governments of the participating states are in place. Democracy is supposed to be the core principle in both of them but, in both of them this principle seem to be questioned by the process of European integration. While the EU is accused of a democratic deficit it constantly gains more and more impact on the legal framework of member states governed within the scheme of parliamentary democracy. The superiority of a Union law over national regulations (established by democratic procedures) in effect also limits democracy in all participating nation states.

Let us however take for granted the thesis that European integration has been so far accomplished in accordance with accepted democratic procedures. But even then the issue of the role of the political elite remains an important question. Democratic procedures mean that in societies embraced by integration there are two categories of members: 1. Those, who due to their legitimate power are in a position to create political and economic projects that determine the continuity or development of their societies, states or territorial units and 2. Those, who are later subjected to those projects. Among the first group there are members of parliament, leaders of political parties, members of governments etc., in other words – the political elite. The second group is comprised by “the masses” or “the public”. It is true, that decisions of the elite are based on their mandate received in democratic elections. But it is well known, that – for variety of reasons – the opinions of European societies about important issues of European integration differ from the opinions of the political elites of those societies.¹⁹ The idea of the citizen’s engagement that makes the sense of the civil society

concept, does not eliminate the problems that have appeared with the elite- public distinction. There are many indications that the conception of civil society in many cases functions as a substitute for participation in decision-making. A variety of nongovernmental organizations, social movements and associations offer a field for action to those who are in need of such activity, but their impact on the political decisions that are made by members of the government is in many cases illusory, or anyway very indirect. Murray Edelman formulated this in a very good way saying that “It is therefore political actions that chiefly shape men’s political wants and ‘knowledge’, not the other way around”²⁰. In many cases equally illusory are the control functions of civil society since the different aims and values of different organizations effectively neutralize their real impact on political decisions.

Members of the political elite and the public have at their disposal a conceptual apparatus which may be used both to design political conceptions and to receive them by the public in a process of social communication. However, such conceptual apparatuses may only appear to be the same in both instances and in reality refer to different discourses. The effectiveness of the link between civil society and “the communicative structure” of society assumed in Habermas’s idea of a deliberative democracy may be very misleading.²¹ All institutional innovations in the realm of politics – including the very idea of the European Union – have to be described not only in the language of international treaties but also in language that can be understood by all participants of a common discourse. Usually, when innovations come into being such language already exists. But the authors of those innovations – who, most often are the members of a political elite – consciously or unconsciously modify the meanings of traditional concepts and step by step change the whole discourse. Those changes - however - are not so obvious to the rest of society, that is to the “masses” or “public”. In effect, **the elite -masses divide has been reflected also in the mode of participation in a political discourse.** Depending on the context the political elite may adopt different strategies in its communication with the public: it may either attempt to disclose conceptual modifications or to camouflage them. Also, there is no lack of examples of such uses of political language in which traditional meanings are alternately used with new ones, more adequate to the changed political reality, if such a practice proves to be instrumental for supporting certain arguments. Cases of such behaviour make the division mentioned above, that is division between those who create the discourse and those who are only its users(participants), only more evident.

Involuntarily, the whole system of education also contributes to this state of affairs. Education has to refer to certain canons of knowledge which are very resistant to change, and their modification usually requires a long process which inevitably lags behind social or

political change. Transmission and internalisation of the meanings of basic elements of political language, and in effect of a certain discourse, goes on in a continuous process of socialization. Therefore, people face political reality, including European integration, with the help of conceptual instruments created in the past for completely different theoretical and practical aims. During the centuries, with the help of those instruments, historical events important for the group have been apprehended, framing the mode of perception of significant areas of social life and a structure of values that have been transmitted from the generation to generation. The current process of European integration has no reference neither in individual experience nor in the collective memory of the European societies. This does not mean, however, that it has not been apprehended conceptually. As Murray Edelman expresses it: “People read their own meanings into situations that are unclear or provocative of emotions”²². Of course, those meanings have their own genealogy and unwillingly locate new political events and institutions in the familiar contexts known from the past. Hence European integration discourse is far from being a common communication framework for all Europeans. In other words, this may be the most difficult barrier for the emergence of a European public sphere, that is “a network for communicating information and points of view”²³. New EU citizens from Central Europe have certainly quite a different experience from those in Western Europe. Experience of political and cultural domination and exclusion cannot leave their integration discourse intact and no doubt contributes also to the previously mentioned ambivalence in evaluating democracy.

Analysing social perception of European integration one cannot overestimate the significance of reflection devoted to discourse. Laclau points out accurately, that “ there is a proliferation of ‘floating signifiers’ in society, and political competition can be seen as attempts by rival political forces to partially fix those signifiers to particular signifying configurations. Discursive struggles about the ways of fixing the meaning of a signifier like ‘democracy’, for instance, are central to explain the political semantics of our contemporary political world”²⁴. Therefore, the significance of studies of European integration discourse becomes especially evident when its crucial concepts are made the subject of such studies. I am talking about the concepts organizing the whole discourse. About those which determine the very nature of formulated messages and the conceptions involved. The consent to changes in social and political reality, or its absence, depends greatly on the understanding of such concepts. There is no doubt that the concept of democracy is one of them. Reflection on the European integration discourse urge us to ask whether the concept of democracy is indeed the one that we should refer to when discussing fundamental issues of European integration. I

believe it is not. We need to organize European integration discourse around other concepts that are able to stimulate public support for necessary institutional reforms of the Union. For instance such concepts as “solidarity” or “security”. Of course, “democracy” would remain a part of this discourse gaining slowly an adequate meaning which would make any complains about democracy deficit unsubstantiated.

¹ Propozycja nowej nazwy dla Unii Europejskiej (A proposal of a new name for the EU), www.onet.pl, 4.09.2005

² Amartya Sen, Democracy as a universal value, in: Larry Diamond and marc F.Plattner (eds.), *The Global Divergence of Democracies*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2001, pp. 3 – 17

³ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989

⁴ Walter Bryce Gallie, *Essentially Contested Concepts*, in: Max Black, *The Importance of Language*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1962, pp.121 - 146

⁵ William E. Connolly, *The Terms of political Discourse*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1983, p.3

⁶ Teun A. Van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as Structure and Process*, Sage Publications, London 1997, pp.23-25. See also: Jonathan Potter, *Representing reality. Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction*, Sage Publications, London 1996, p.105

⁷ Ernesto Laclau, *Discourse in: Robert E. Goodin i Philip Pettit (eds.), A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford-Cambridge, Mass. 1995, p.431.

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- ⁸ William E. Connolly, *The Terms of political Discourse*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1983, p.1
- ⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1972, pp.21-30
- ¹⁰ *ibidem*, p. 21
- ¹¹ Ernesto Laclau, *op.cit.*, p.435
- ¹² Thomas Diez, *Speaking „Europe”: the politics of integration discourse*, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, no.4, 1999, pp.598-613, and *Europe as a Discursive Battleground. Discourse Analysis and European Integration Studies*, in *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2001, vol.36 (1), Sage Publications
- ¹³ Simon Hix, *The Political System of the European Union*, MacMillan Press Ltd., London 1999, s.14-16
- ¹⁴ Józef Niżnik, *"Przedmiot poznania w naukach społecznych" (Object of Knowledge in Social Sciences)*, PWN, Warszawa 1979, s.106
- ¹⁵ Terence Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse. Political Theory and Critical Conceptual History*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, s.14
- ¹⁶ *ibidem*, s.82
- ¹⁷ Heimo Schwilk, *Duchowy fundament Europy (Spiritual foundations of Europe)*, *Rzeczpospolita*, nr.244/1997, 18-19 X
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Andrew Moravcsik, *In Defense of the ‘Democratic Deficit’: Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union*, *JCMS* 2002, Volume 40, number 4, pp.603-24
- ¹⁹ Liesbet Hooghe, *Europe Divided? Elites vs. Public Opinion on European Integration*, Institute for Advanced Studies, Political Science Series, Vienna 2003
- ²⁰ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1985, p.172
- ²¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, translated by William Rehg, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1996, p.329-387
- ²² Murray Edelman, *op.cit.* p. 30
- ²³ Jürgen Habermas, *op.cit.*, p.360
- ²⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *op.cit.*,p. 435