# Democracy and Identity in the
# Danube Region (the Case of Romania and Hungary)

**Boryana Stancheva**[1]

**Abstract:** The paper aims at researching the interconnection between two key concepts in political sciences – "democracy" and "identity". The analysis is focused on the Danube Region as an example of a macro-regional construct in the multi-level governance system of the European Union. The author is working on a PhD dissertation dedicated to the democratic deficits in the European Union, with a specific focus on two of the newest member states – Hungary and Romania. Since both "democracy" and "identity" are notions that have not been defined by consent in the post-communist member states of the Union, the paper chooses to particularly examine their impact in Romania and Hungary by researching different information sources and statistical data. The paper has to examine the level of interdependency of the post-communist political identity of Hungary and Romania and the state of democracy and its institutions. The results have to be further discussed not only in the context of both countries' EU-membership, but also with a view to their belonging to the newly established Danube macro-region. The following paper and its results are part of the long-term PhD research of the author. The study will add value to the analysis of two fundamental notions in the theory of political and social sciences by trying to examine the level of their interconnection in two Danube countries.

**Keywords:** post-communist; multi-level governance; consent; political culture; participation

**JEL Classification:** Z18 - Public Policy

## 1. Introduction

Democracy as a concept has been discussed for about 2500 years – a period which is more than a sufficient for certain traditions to be established. In fact, during these twenty-five centuries of development democracy has not only been debated: it has also been praised, supported, practiced, attacked, rejected, re-thought and re-established.

However, the triumph of democracy has been witnessed during the last few decades of its more than two millennia old biography. The process of giving tribute to the unifying force of democracy in Europe dates back to the dark post-war period. The cataclysm that all Europeans had experienced and had shared the responsibility for made them re-consider one of their greatest achievements,

---

[1] PhD student, University of Ruse, European Studies and International Relations Department. Address: 8, Studentska St,. 7017 Rousse, Bulgaria, Tel.: +359 82 82 56 62, fax: +359 82 845 708. Corresponding author: bstancheva@uni-ruse.bg.

namely the democratic ideals. The idea of the European Union has been indeed formed on the solid foundation of everything that the democracy has achieved so far. On the eve of the third millennium of democratic evolution, practically all countries in Europe, regardless of the fact that they are EU members or not, had something in common – a democratic governance.

As an integral part of this changing world Europe is facing with a variety of challenges. United in diversity, it strives to guarantee the viability of values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Europe is building its image and its identity based on the sense of being the source where all these values emerged and evolved. Moreover, the foundation of the European Union is its democratic nature. Democracy is considered the first and most important condition for a successful application for membership. The added value of the international relations promoted by the Union can be found in the promotion and distribution of democratic values and principles. The diplomacy of the European Union puts democratic dialogue and cooperation first, whereas its foreign policy is very often regarded as a powerful instrument for fostering the process of democratization of the EU partners. Therefore, democracy and its values build the foundation of the evolving European identity, whose goal is to strengthen in a paradoxical way the European democracy.

Yet, the democratic power of the European Union is weakened by several factors that characterize the political, economic and social climate on the continent today. Europe is shaken by a continuous economic and euro crisis that proved to be difficult to be overcome. At stake is more than the financial stability of several countries – much more endangered is the solidarity and the political cohesion between all member states. Inevitably, the countries that are still in the waiting room of the Union can feel the impact of these turbulent events. In times of trouble the European countries have shown that they prefer to capsulate themselves within their national politics in an attempt to avoid the negative influence coming from outside. The ongoing crisis in Europe has however proved that this strategy is not a success story. Moreover, the political alienation at EU level has led to the rise of forgotten trends at national levels. As a result of his obsession with the economic troubles, Europe has allowed some countries to become unsafe places for democracy. These developments have illustrated the words of John F. Kennedy who said that "for as long as democracy fails to flourish in all countries, it cannot thrive in one alone".

Taking into consideration the complexity of the multi-level governance system of the European Union, we have to bear in mind that all multi-level processes are interconnected and interdependent. According to the dominant principle of subsidiarity, the lower the level of decision-making, the more democratic and legitimate it has to be. Consequently, the modern perception of political identity is

those of a multiple one – covering not only the vertical, but also the horizontal belongings of each individual. The concept of multiple identity refers by default to the notion of democracy because it guarantees the right of free self-determination, regardless whether it comes to persons, political or national constructions. The newly introduced by the European Commission macro-regional governance approach fits into this constellation, aiming to bring the decision-making process closer to the citizens, thus uniting national and subnational entities and identifying common problems.

As part of the European Union as well as the Danube macro-region the countries in Eastern Europe have to "synchronize" their democratic institutions and practices with the requirements of the shared vision for a multi-level, decentralized European democracy. Thus, the transition to democracy in the post-communist countries is marked by the specifics of the simultaneous transition from communist through post-communist to democratic identity. Several questions can be raised in this regard: did the ex-soviet countries build the relevant to their current and future aspirations democratic identity; if not, is it possible for a democracy to function properly when it is based on a post-communist, rather than on a democratic identity. This paper aims at researching the complex relationship between democracy and identity by examining case studies coming from two of the newest EU member-states, namely Hungary and Romania.

## 2. Democracy and Identity

Democracy can be best explained by its dynamics and variable nature. Ever since its emergence in Ancient Greece for around 2500 years democracy has been a subject of debates and discussions. A variety of descriptions can be found in the scientific literature but there is still no one generally accepted definition of the concept.

The democratic idea is too often equated with the meaning of the word democracy. The term derives from the Greek words „δήμος" – demos - people, и „κράτος" – kratos – power, rule. The literal translation of the Greek „δημοκρατία" is rule of the people, government by the people. This definition leads to at least two interpretations:

1. people have sovereign power and they can participate directly or indirectly in the governance;
2. people govern, i.e. there is a direct democracy as we know it in Ancient Greece.

After analyzing the etymological democracy it turns out that it does not define the criteria by which we can determine the degree of democracy, nor does specify the democratic values, institutions and practices that need to be validated. In this

regard, Giovanni Sartori argues that more important than the etymology is the meaning attributed to the concept of democracy. Furthermore, Rousseau points out that if we consider the term only in its literal meaning we will find out that a real democracy has never existed.

In 1863 the president of the USA Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as a "*government of the people, by the people, for the people*" (Sartori, 1992, p. 59). The Lincoln's formula is one of the most frequently cited definitions. However, in a more detailed analysis it shows the same weaknesses as the etymological interpretation of the concept.

Despite its imperfections it has to be noted that the etymological interpretation is of major importance in the context of the discussion about sources of power and legitimacy. The thesis that power belongs to people emphasizes on citizens as key actors in bottom-up governance which ensures the legitimacy of the government. It is therefore concluded that state and government have to act in order to achieve the public interest ("government for the people"). In other words, this means that for a functioning democracy the *demos* has to precede the *kratos* and not in a reverse order (Sartori, 1992).

In its early years democracy has been defined opposite to other types of government like tyranny and oligarchy. Ancient philosophers did not accept democracy in its pure form, but rather as an element of a complex government. Centuries later the constitutions of the English and Dutch republics highlighted that democratic laws in themselves are not a sufficient precondition to protect effectively the interests of the people – much more important is the civic engagement and the willingness to participate in the legislative process. Thus, their political culture put an emphasis on the concept of political equality which is one of the catalysts for the development of modern democracy. Another advocate of the idea of equal rights is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, states that "*everyone, regardless of gender, education, property status, has the right to express their will on various social issues*" (Crick, 2008, p. 29). Additionally to equal political participation Rousseau equates democracy and popular sovereignty. According to him, democracy is a synonym of sovereignty, whereas sovereignty is expressed by the law. Karl Popper led the debate on democracy in other direction, heading for the issue of accountability and control over the government. According to him, the discussion about the sources of power is of secondary importance because it is much more important to focus on how control is exercised. Therefore, Popper defines democracy as "*a system of institutions that allows the implementation of public control over the government and its replacement by the will of the governed, and enables them to carry out reforms without the use of violence, even against the will of the government*" (Yankov, 2001, p. 24). Sartori also emphasizes the importance of control in the democratic process. He argues that the transfer of power takes place in two

directions (bottom-up and top-down) and the role of democratic control is to maintain a balance between the both forms of empowerment (Sartori, 1992, p. 54).

The modern idea of democracy includes one additional aspect. European and U.S. Constitutions stipulate not only equality, but also the right to choose between various forms for direct or indirect civil participation in the legislative process of the relevant state. The sovereign power of the people is supplemented by individual rights and freedoms. Thus, the legal process not only establishes and protects individual rights, but limits them, obliging citizens to respect the rights of others. This is an important innovation of modern democracy. In his definition of democracy Ralf Dahrendorf focuses on the contribution of pluralistic civil society. According to the political scientist, an active civil society is a precondition for a well-functioning democracy. Determining democratic freedoms without effective control by various civil associations and organizations cannot guarantee protection from the so-called *"tyranny of the majority"*. Moreover, *"without real pluralism, democracy is caricatured to simply exercising the vote,"* says Dahrendorf (Yankov, 2001, p. 25).

Morris Duvergier considers democracy to be rather a universal principle, describing it as a "freedom for the people and for each part of the people" as formulated in the French Constitution of 1793. The modern point of view of Charles Taylor on the other hand concentrates on a strong collective identity as a precondition for the emergence of democracy. Robert Dahl differentiates between ideal and real democracy, whereas Giovanni Sartori classifies it into ideal democracy and real polyarchy.

After a brief overview of some of the attempts to define democracy it turned out that most of the theories have something in common. In general, modern democracy is characterized by the following features: representative government, universal civil rights and free elections, civil control over politics and government. Similarities can be found in the views of researchers on the inherent dangers belonging to the democratic regimes that could occur in the case of misinterpretation of the meaning of democracy.

Democracy and identity have their dynamic character in common. The re-thinking of identity and the formation of a new one is a long-lasting process and cannot be regarded as a static structure. According to Jenkins identity refers to the way in which individuals and communities differ from each other and shape accordingly their social relationships with other individuals and communities (Jenkins, 1996, p. 4). Moreover, Hall states that *"identities are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, that they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity"* and adds that *"identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude"* (Jenkins, 1996, p. n29). After the fall of the previous regimes and in times of re-shaping political boundaries, the new democracies in Europe faced the challenge to join different

communities in a short period of time, to establish new institutions and to adapt to the new realities. Meanwhile, it turned out that the relevant identity transformation could not be completed.

## 3. "New" Democracies and "Old" Identities

The analysis of the political developments in Hungary and Romania can lead to some useful conclusions about the way two disputable in Eastern Europe notions – democracy and identity – influence each other.

In the 80s of the 20th century **Hungary** was facing significant economic problems – almost all economic indicators testified a deep crisis characterized by high debt rates, need for further external financing, low productivity and export rates as well as outdated economic mechanisms. The negative demographic trends were seen as an additional aggravating factor that deepened the social crisis.

In the context of this deepening crisis the Hungarian society began to differentiate, thus moving away from the communist ideal of homogeneity and equality. It was obvious that Hungarian citizens raised voices against the inability of the ruling elite to avoid the expanding crisis. In contrast, politicians seemed to underestimate the civil dissatisfaction and "*spoke of symptoms and exaggerated public consciousness of crisis*" (Bayer, Band 22, p. 1). The climate offered opportunities for the so far powerless opposition to accumulate constructive energy and to strengthen its position. Under these circumstances, an alternative of the ruling party emerged – new elite that began to publicly oppose the power and to gradually gain the support of the large societal groups. Once the position of the government was questioned, that implied a questioned legitimacy and a need for transformation. Jyzsef Bayer argued that as a result a political pluralism emerged and issues such as free unions and free democratic deliberations were put on the public agenda. Finally, the Central Committee of the party approved the multi-party system and gave up its right to appoint people to the leading positions in the state. In October 1988 the party convened a Congress whose outcome put an end to the one-party system and practically dissolved the communist party. A new Hungarian Socialist Party was founded by former members but its role in the political life of the country was limited to the status of an equal competitor in free democratic elections.

On 23th October 1989 the new constitution was proclaimed and entered into force. It stipulated that Hungary was a republic that guaranteed the rights of citizens and the multi-party system, prohibited the exercise of a monopoly power, proclaimed the freedom of religion and of economic competition as well as the equality of private properties. In terms of the institutional structure, the Hungarian constitution empowered the parliament to represent people and to hold the government accountable. Last, but not least, a Constitutional Court was set up with the main

goal to guarantee the democratic freedom and principles of division of powers stipulated in the new basic law of the republic.

To draw a conclusion, it is evident that the transition from totalitarian regime to democratic system in Hungary took place gradually, over several stages, peacefully and relatively carefully. The change has been prepared within almost a decade and for that reason it cannot be defined as revolutionary or unexpected. This brief retrospective review gives an insight into the process of forming the foundations of the Hungarian democracy.

After the change of the political system in Hungary, the accession to the European Union became the main objective of the foreign policy of the country. The political dynamics in the years after the fall of the communist regime was characterized by a consensus – not only at political, but also at civil level – about the European perspective of Hungary. It was therefore agreed upon the strategic priorities of the governance – building democracy, establishing market economy and fostering the rule of law aiming at meeting the Copenhagen criteria on political, economic and legal approximation issues and transferring the regulations of *acquis communautaire*.

Hungary acquired a full-fledged membership on $1^{st}$ May 2004. The country joined the Union together with nine countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary entered the European home, based principally on common values, with the confident of being one of the most democratic among the ex-authoritarian regimes in this part of the continent. This sense of distinction was reinforced by the fact that Hungary was the third newly joined member state appointed to host the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. This credit given by the European partners in combination with the first success stories of the membership at domestic level were undermined by the crisis of democracy that broke out in the eve of the celebrations of the 7-year presence in the EU.

2010 marked another turning point in recent history of Hungary. The beginning of the new decade coincided with the schedule for conducting the $6^{th}$ free general elections that are the main attribute of a functioning democracy. The result of the first round of the elections was that the conservative party Fidesz has managed to win the absolute majority of seats in the parliament and was able to form a new government on its own. The victory parade of Fidesz and its leader Victor Orban continued in the second election round when the union between him and the Christian Democratic People's Party won 263 of the 386 seats and got a two-thirds majority that in practice is required when the constitution and other fundamental laws have to be amended. After the first round Fidesz has already acquired the right to form the next government of the country, but the majority after the second round allowed it to pass legislation without negotiating for support with the representatives of the opposition. Moreover, Fidesz became the first non-coalition government in post-communist Hungary.

The first half of 2011 was expected as the first challenge not only for the new Orban's government, but also for Hungary as a new member state of the European Union. In the period between January and June Hungary was scheduled to host the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. This responsibility in terms of shaping the agenda and managing the related complex processes was considered to be a significant test for the Hungarian democracy.

The success of the long-awaited presidency and its ambitious program that included visions for growth and employment, strengthening Europe and focusing on the future EU enlargement was threatened by a reform concerning the media sector. Under the spotlight was the new media law which targeted at the fourth power. The law came into force on 1$^{st}$ January and coincided with the start of the rotating presidency. By passing the new media law the government succeeded in establishing several widely criticized reforms.

The controversial law passed in a crucial period in the post-communist Hungarian history was followed by a wide range of critical reactions in whole Europe. Christoph Steegmans, spokesman of one of the leading figures in the EU, namely the German chancellor Angela Merkel, said that "as a future president of the European Union Hungary naturally has a special responsibility for the image of the European Union as a whole" (The Economist, 2012).

If the adoption of the media law at the end of 2010 raised a wave of criticism and concerns about the application of fundamental democratic principles, the amendment of the Constitution put the whole democratic system in Hungary in question. The new Constitution came into force on the first anniversary of the media law – on 1$^{st}$ January 2012. Concerns were raised because of the short terms in which it was introduced as well as of the lack of consultation with other parliamentary represented political parties. The government could afford it because it relied on the two-thirds majority in the parliament gained after the electoral victory in 2010. Just because of the precedential majority the legitimacy of the law seemed to be guaranteed. In a report about the state of democracy in Hungary the Norwegian Helsinki Committee described the procedure as an "*ad hoc and speedy manner*" of introducing the changes in the Basic Law of the country (Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2012, p. 1).

Hungary was the only post-communist country that did not adopt a new Constitution after the collapse of the Soviet Union. That was one of the reasons why Orban's party had already declared its ambition to amend the Constitution in its political platform. It was not surprising that the new government quickly decided to put this intention into practice. The ruling party has therefore presented its constitutional reform as a final break with the communist heritage of the country. Opponents of the government recognized this argumentation as a populist approach. On 21$^{st}$ March 2011 a draft for a new Constitution was submitted to the Parliament, while the existing text of the Basic Law was declared void. As follow

up of his rhetoric about revolution, Viktor Orban and his team introduced the draft of the Constitution as "*Easter Constitution*", thus referring to the revival and rebirth of Hungary.

If we can say that the democratic crisis in Hungary that has always performed as an excellent student was surprising for Europe, even if it was alarming, the situation in the neighbor country **Romania** was not so unexpected. Indeed, there are a lot of similarities between both countries. However, Hungary has been regarded as a special case in Central and Eastern Europe, whereas Romania was lagging behind.

In fact, Romania did not welcome the democracy in the way a European country is expected to do it. Exactly two centuries after the French Revolution that marked a significant step towards the rise of the democracy in Europe, the Romanians had conducted their own revolution. The Romanian Revolution of 1989 ended the communist regime and led to the execution of its dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. The transformation happened "in a snap" because all revolutionary actions lasted more than a week.

A brief overview of the political events in Romania since the end of the Ceausescu era leads us to the conclusions that the country has been governed under the circumstances of an extended revolution characterized by political instability, too frequent change of power, premature mandates, various affairs with political participation, no firmly established political values and positions, political nomadism as well as populism. The culmination of this extended revolution was reached in the summer of 2012 when the current Prime Minister Victor Ponta began a power struggle with his opponent occupying the presidential post. As a result Mr. Ponta has crossed some acceptable limits by changing officials on key positions, by trying to influence the work of the judiciary or even by ignoring it. The plot of this ridiculous from a European point of view drama was based on the main objective to remove the President who belongs to the opposition and to have the whole state apparatus under control. Finally, the Prime Minister did not succeed to implement his entire plan because the low interest of the Romanians in the outcome of the impeachment referendum has blocked the power triumph strategy of the Premier. With this, the people of Romania have voted a double no-confidence: on the one hand against the Prime Minister by contributing to the failure of his plan; on the other hand, against the President who received almost 9 million votes in favour for his suspension.

Even though the struggle has not changed the status quo in Romania so far, it has brought to the surface some very serious concerns. First of all, Ponta has illustrated that the democracy is not safe even within the European Union and it can be easily challenged without having any mechanisms to prevent aggressive attacks. Secondly, the political crisis has shown that the power in Romania is more than transferred powers from the sovereign to the representatives. In the case of Romania the democratic institutions as such give way to clashes promoting

personal or party interests. Moreover, this has turned out to be symptomatic for the Romanian democracy which is a reason for deep concerns.

The President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso was among the first that has condemned the Romanian government for undermining trust in the rule of law. Mr. Barroso underlined that a well-functioning judicial system and respect for democratic institutions and the rule of law are crucial for every member state of the European Union. In a statement published on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2012 Barroso claimed that "*exceptional events in Romania have been a major source of concern for the Commission and for the European Union*" and added that these developments "*have shaken our trust*" (Barroso, 2012).

In fact, the EU had limited possibilities to supervise democracy, even though it is a value that has laid the foundation of the organization. Furthermore, in areas like judiciary or media freedom the EU had no powers to intervene. In the case of Romania there is still the hope that democracy can help itself to be safeguarded: the fatigue of the ordinary citizens with the power struggle and party accusations and their desire to join the Schengen area could be strong messages for a Prime Minister who wants to win the next elections and to gain legitimacy in its own country, especially in a moment when he lacks it in the international context.

## 4. Conclusion

A lot of things have happened recently throughout Europe. Constant challenges to the various EU freedoms, like for example the rise of nationalism, Euro-sceptism, populism, even radicalism or the threats to the free movement of citizens seem to flourish in the context of a contemporary economic crisis. Beginning to develop slowly from the national electoral agendas, such phenomena can easily and very rapidly put the achievements of the European integration in question. What is even worse, they contribute to the rise of mistrust between the different member states and their leaders.

What Hungary and Romania have in common, however, is the inclination towards authoritarian power and the disrespect for fundamental democratic principles: the rule of law and the separation of powers. The Hungarian contribution to the list of threats to democracy in Europe contains in the so-called "*tyranny of the majority*" – the democratic crisis in Hungary has practically shown how the democratically elected majority can misuse the democracy and try to transform it into authoritarian regime. Romania has added one more problem, namely the populism. The rise of the populism is dangerous for democracy because it put the clash between political alternatives in the background and emphasizes on the scandals instead. Thus, the one opponent is classified as plagiarist, while the other is announced to be a former member of the communist elite. Therefore, a political environment that has such a structure is a good place for two parallel processes to develop: depoliticization of

the political competition on the one hand and politicization of independent organs and structures, like banks, courts etc., on the other hand. The former leads to the focusing on the ethics of politicians and their personal relations and qualities. Consequently, the politics turns into a personal conflict.

The developments both in Hungary and in Romania has shown that democratic achievements are not irreversible and that the principles of the rule of law, of liberty as well as the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which according to Article 6 of the Treaty on EU lay the foundations of the Union, are not protected for violations. It is obvious that as the Guardian of the Treaties, the European Commission should act as a Guardian of democracy too. The institution has to react immediately to democratic violations of any type. The same applies to the European Parliament as the only European institution that represents the interests of the citizens. Breaches of the EU law or of the traditional democratic values could not remain unaddressed otherwise the trend will continue to spread across Europe, as the case with the two neighbor countries has shown.

25 years after the fall of the communist regimes across Europe, almost all of the former non-democratic countries have joined the democratic *par excellence* European Union. Still, it turns out that they haven't completed their transition from post-communist to fully democratic governance systems. Even though all democratic institutions and practices have been set up, it can be assumed that in this case it is rather a question of updating political culture and identity to the new realities.

## 5. References

Bayer, J. The process of political system change in Hungary. *Schriftenreihe des Europa Institutes Budapest*, Vol. 22, pp.171 - 185.

Crick, B. (2008). *Демокрацията/Democracy.* Sofia: "Zahari Stoyanov" Publishing House.

Jenkins, R. (1996). *Social Identity.* London: Routledge.

Barroso, Jose Manuel (2012). *Statement by President Barroso following the adoption of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism Reports for Romania and Bulgaria.* Retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-12-565_en.htm, date: 18.07.2012.

Norwegian Helsinki Committee (2012). Democracy at stake. The Orban's government Constitutional revolution. *Report*, No. 1.

Sartori, G. (1992). *Теория на демокрацията. Книга 1, Съвременната дискусия/Theory of democracy, Book 1, The current discussion.* Sofia: Centre for the Study of Democracy.

The Economist (2012). *Hungary's media law. All eyes on Orban.* Retrieved from http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2010/12/hungarys_media_law, date: August 2012.

Yankov, G. et al. (2001). *Политология/Political studies.* Sofia: University Publishing House.