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The Specificity of the European Union's Political System

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ESSAYS

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THE SPECIFICITY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

1. The present stage of the European Union's development

The European Union is a special kind of organization in which features of the statist political system and traits of an extended international organization are blended. Its specificity is variously conceptualised in the literature (cf. Burges 2000; Gasteiger 2002; Giddens 2009; Łastawski 2008a; Rosamond 2000; Sidjanski 2000). One of successful attempts at conceptualising the Union's specificity has been presented by Jan Zielonka, writing that „the Union is becoming something that resembles a neo-medieval empire with polycentric system of governance, shared sovereignty, blurred borders, many overlapping jurisdictions, pronounced cultural and economic diversity" (cf. Zielonka 2007: 5).

The most characteristic features of the European Union include (cf. Łastawski 2004: 158):

– its gradual growth from sectoral communities to an extended community;

– an elaborate system of *acquis communautaire* (common European law);

– the creation of supranational Union's institutions: the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, the European Central Bank;

– developing common policies of the Union (in agriculture, trade, transport);

– extending platforms of integration from the original customs union to the lifting of internal border barriers, introduction of common currency and ever tighter coordination of foreign affairs policies;

– reinforcing internal communal ties and linkages between the European Union and its Member States;

– a gradual formation of common identity.

The process of development of the European Union clashes with diversified state interests and grudging attitudes of some politicians. Even the leading European federationist, Denis de Rougemont, wrote that the uniting of Europe will not be done just like that, as a result of some mechanical process or because such a direction has been determined by the «course of History». Neither will it be an attainment of a dictator: enterprises such as those of Napoleon's or Hitler's have been written down for long. Therefore, its uniting will be neither spontaneous nor unavoidable or imposed from above, it may only be a result of choice and will – identically as it is the case with democracy – of a certain majority of its residents who will inspire and lead a minority, but not by means of violence but by means of persuasion (cf. Rougemont de 1995: 68).

The contemporary European Union has emerged out of gradual activities, through the „spilling over" of integration processes. The tightening of co-operation in one area has triggered as a rule – although not automatically – tightening of collaboration in further areas. The competences of the nation-states have been gradually transferred to the level of common objectives. Legal acts that have been elaborated by the EU differ from the nature of relations developing between the particular nations of the Community. The transfer of decision-making from the state governmental level to the level of supranational structures has expanded the competences of the Community organs (of the Commission, the European Parliament, various committees etc.). A system of regular meetings of the heads of states and governments has been developed in the framework of the European Council, new members have been admitted to the European Union and new treaty provisions have been created. The states have been granted co-participation in the Union's decision-making but at the same time they have transferred some of their sovereign competences on the supranational level. A new identity and so called pooled (shared) sovereignty overlap with the sovereignty of the Member States – as argued by Anna Zielińska--Głębocka (cf. Zielińska-Głębocka 1999: 17).

The inclusion of ever new areas in the integration processes has increased the role of the Community institutions and the Community functionaries: parliamentarians, top officials, judges, financiers and lobbying groups of economic, sectoral or trade union character. Gradually, the adjustment of national actors and institutions to the Communi-

ty requirements has been progressing. Clashes between diverse national interests are softened by institutional and legal frames of the integration process. The Union combines in an unusual manner the law of its Member States, the Community law and international law (cf. Guérot 2001: 28–34).

Inter-state activities continue to take place in the EU, mainly in the sphere of the common foreign affairs and security policies as well as by advancing the area of freedom, security and justice. The Member States develop their co-operation as far as combating illegal immigration, counteracting terrorism and combating racism and xenophobia. Also, they collaborate within forums of many international organizations and conferences.

The European Union ever more visibly merges its supranational competencies with coordinating operations that have an inter-state character; it elaborates joint methods to resolve developmental controversies by means bargaining. It is best at resolving various economic problems, worse at issues of justice and security or problems of foreign affairs and security policies. The Member States are unwilling to yield areas such as taxation, security and culture to the Community regulations. Their overwhelming majority are NATO members – this organization coordinates their political-military dimensions.

The Union is characterised by a system of common values that have been shaped over centuries; this system influences beliefs and attitudes cherished by societies in the Continent, and especially those of their political elites. They share common goals and principles of conduct as well as common legal norms and ever more developed organizational structures. Bonds between peoples of the communities slowly take shape as well. Still, in the area of creating common defense structures, regulating taxation issues and collaboration between special services, and most of all – as far as changes in the consciousness of the many millions of the citizens inhabiting the 27 Member States, characterised by different sizes, influences and ideological orientations, the Union still needs to resolve many problems.

2. The application of the systems approach to analyses of the European Union's operations

Analyses of the political system of the European Union in conjunction with political systems of its Member States could be

conducted by means of the systems approach since the integration issues have an interdisciplinary nature. The Union is a complex system comprising many elements connected by various interactions and exhibiting diversified forces and reciprocal impacts. The systems approach places facts and phenomena within a framework of larger wholes that are constituted by integrated arrangements together with their idiosyncratic features and mutual relations. The political systems of the Member States form the basis of the Union's political system. The systems approach eliminates the traditional division into the whole and its parts; it indicates that within the framework of the EU the states interact with one another in many different ways. The basic feature of any political system is its abality to survive (to continue to exist) and to maintain its homeostasis (cf. Sztompka 1975: 85–87), that is a balance between its internal state and the state of its external environment.

The statist structures of the EU are engaged in dynamic relations with the Community structures. The societies of the European states are determined by socio-cultural systems, organizations, ideologies and lobbying groups – individual citizens have little influence on the choices made. The European system's nature is complex and multi-faceted, which is evidenced both in its theoretical underpinnings and practical operations. Cultures get diffused, which has an impact on the complex multi-system reality of the European Union and of its Member States. As far as many issues are concerned, they are also linked with the multi-system of the contemporary world.

Procedures of systemic explanations should combine genealogical, structural and functional approaches (cf. Łastawski 2008b: 182–184). In the case of the systems approach, Andrzej Antoszewski recommends a multi-dimensional analysis that would include: the dimension of socio-cultural background, the dimension of institutional arrangements and characteristic features of political competition (cf. Antoszewski 2004: 84–87).

3. Political systems of the EU Member States

The particular EU Member States have more developed and more consolidated political systems than the Union's political system that is still in *statu nascendi*, being to a large degree dependent on contents transferred by the particular Member States onto the Community level.

The specific features of the Member States' political systems include:

– their strong impact on the exercise of political power in the country;

– their relative independence resulting from their roles, functions and tasks;

– their dependence on socio-economic and cultural structures of society;

– their political and legal norms which are clearly systemically regulated;

– their political impact on societies owing to their capacity to make decisions concerning all citizens residing within the given state's territory.

The statist political system differs from other systems by its real involvement in conflicts between forces, needs, interests and forms of consciousness of society. It is characterised by a possibility to develop various power operations (*działań władczych*) as states tend to maximise realisation of their pre-planned objectives.

The operation of the statist political system may be considerably influenced by mass information, leaderships of religious organizations, secret services, transnational corporations, the mafia etc. (cf. Pietraś 1998: 80–91).

The advancement of European integration is accompanied by gradual „Europeanization" of the national actors and institutions (cf. Zielińska-Głębocka 1999: 20). Owing to this, the share of national institutions in the whole body of the Union's decision-making increases and the states' political systems are getting ever clearly „adjusted" to the overall Community logic of action. The institutions of the states' political systems and the European Union's political system co-operate in ever more complex ways.

4. The political system of the European Union

The political system of the European Union has developed gradually. In the period of the European Coal and Steel Community, which had a sectoral character, the High Authority of ECSC was the top organ of the Community. Since the 1970s, a major role has been played by the European Council that consists of the heads of states and governments

of the Member States. With expanding and tightening integrative ties, more institutions of the Union's political system have been created.

The European Union exercises competences that have been transferred to the Community level by its Member States. On this basis, the Union's rules of action are elaborated since, as Anthony Giddens puts it, the implementation of the Community tasks is strongly dependent upon the national political will (cf. Giddens 2009: 202). At the same time, the Union influences the political institutions, legal systems, administrations, the area of justice, political parties and interest groups in its Member States.

The political system of the EU has been defined in its basic treaties, international agreements and diverse acts of secondary law. This system is co-constituted by (cf. Wojtaszczyk 2000: 12–16; Wessels 2008):

– all Member States,

– acts of *acquis communautaire*,

– the Union's common institutions, e.g. the European Commission,

– those Union's institutions that have an international character, e.g. the Council of the European Union,

– top Union's officials,

– its nascent political party system (party groups within the European Parliament),

– diverse interest groups, domestic and common.

The political system of the European Union is characterised by its clear specificity of operations. Although the names of its many institutions resemble the states' institutions, the former perform different functions. Also, there are those of the Union's institutions that function under names different than those of the states' institutions (e.g. the Council of the EU). The Union does not have a single authority, its separate territory or citizenship independent of the citizenships of its Member States (cf. Szczerski 2003: 38). The authority of the EU is exercised by top-down community decisions and agreements and by seeking compromise solutions in the inter-governmental arena. Its final decisions are influenced both by the states (especially the most influential ones) and the common institutions, representations and lobbying groups. Its territorial scope increases with subsequent enlargements but the Union's citizenship is only a complement to the citizenships of the particular Member States.

In the political system of the European Union a conciliatory method of exercising power dominates. The operating rules of its institutions

are shaped both by the national and community legal orders. In the Union's political system we can see operations that tend towards its federalization as well as more loose, confederative (inter-governmental) ones. The need to conclude joint agreements and to overcome national interests is constant.

Within the political system of the European Union, many institutions have been created that have different characteristics. The most important position is occupied by the main organs: the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the two courts: the Court of Justice and the Court of Auditors. After the Union's common currency was introduced, the European Central Bank has also become a very important institution. In 2009 the Lisbon Treaty introduced two new common institutions: the President of the European Union and its High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (cf. Barcz 2008: 75–79).

An important role is played in the Union system by special committees: Socio-Economic Committee, Committee of the Regions, Economic and Financial Committee (ECOFIN), Coordination Committee and Science and Technology Committee. Also, there are other special institutions such as: the European Investment Bank and a numerous group of specialist agencies, such as: the European Space Agency, the European Defense Agency, the European Agency Managing Co-operation of Operations in the External Borders of the Member States (FRONTEX), the European Police Office (Europol) or the European Environment Agency.

In the decion-making structure of the Council of the European Union an important place is occupied by its extended General Secretariat that plays the role of its „coordinating brain". The operations of the Council of the EU are closely related to the system of rotating presidencies of the Member States and that of the standing committees (COREPER I , COREPER II) that are co-created by embassies of the Member States at the EU. The Council of the EU closely collaborates with: the Political and Security Committee, the Military Committee and the Military Headquarters. To connect more tightly the co-legislative organ (the European Parliament) and the executive organ (the European Commission) within the EU political system, an office of High Commissioner of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has been created that combines functions of the deputy president of the European Commission and the president of the Foreign Affairs Council

that is a body consisting of ministers for foreign affairs of the Member States.

Within the framework of the European Union's political system, operations of those various institutions overlap. In the decision-making process, a practice of negotiating a common position by top officials of the three main institutions – the Council (the legislative organ), the European Parliament (the co-legislative organ) and the European Commission (the initiating and executive organ) has been elaborated. However, many other institutions co-operate within the structure designed for negotiating decisions, which makes up the community model of the EU.

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As far as political future of the European Union is concerned, opinions vary. Alongside the integration processes, various conceptions of the Community's future development continue to appear: further integration at diferrentiated speeds, the „hard core" and „enhanced co-operation (cf. Zielińska-Głębocka 2001: 50–64). The idea of gradual („step by step") development of the integration accompanied by overlapping national and Community issues has garnered most support. There also emerge some clear-cut federative proposals such as the one presented publicly in 2000 by the German Minister for Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer (cf. Fischer 2000: 100–108) or the one articulated in 2007 by the former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (cf. Verhofstadt 2007: 53–82). By contrast, in some Member States (especially in Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries) the need to renationalise EU policies has been voiced.

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