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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The rise of technocratic politics in the EU: the legacies of neoliberalism

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Abstract

Recent EU crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have exposed the shortcomings of the EU's institutional design as well as the resistance of the EU's economic governance to pluralism, advocating for an unmediated relationship between elites and citizens and disregarding traditional forms of accountability. They have also exposed tensions between EU economic governance and representative democracies, resulting in forms of anti-system politics and technopopulism, in both Western and Eastern European societies. This paper argues that these tensions result from the post-1970s transformations of the EU's political and economic governance, which aligned with a neoliberal trajectory that was normalised in the 1990s and in the post-Maastricht period. The historical trajectory leading to these conditions is relevant for understanding the common risks to representative democracies in the EU and inspires an analytical framework for examining cases from comparative perspectives in both Eastern and Western European societies. The framework identifies two key factors for further advancing EU studies: the legacy of EU economic governance since the 1970s and the weakening of party politics amidst the rise of the neoliberal doctrine.

Keywords EU economic governance · Neoliberalism · EU crisis · Pandemic · State transformation · Political parties

Introduction

Recent EU crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have exposed the shortcomings of the EU's institutional design (Stahl and Rosamond 2022) and the resistance of the EU's economic governance to reforms related to fiscal rules, responsible decision-making and the depoliticisation of economic policies on a national level (Crespy et al 2024). They have also exposed conflicts of sovereignty triggered by the

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EU's economic governance in both Western and Eastern European societies (Benoit and Hay, 2022; Bickerton et al. 2022; Tudzarovska and Rone, 2023). During the pandemic, differing institutionalisations of the principle of popular sovereignty have led to different responses, thus revealing how political authority is activated as an expression of popular will in times of emergency crisis in the EU (Bickerton et al 2022, p. 270). This also demonstrates that under the context of emergency politics (White 2019), the status quo of the crisis of democratic representation in the contemporary EU is far from being challenged. That being said, the EU's crises have also exposed how complex and unpredictable are the links between political, economic and societal problems in the EU, adding future risks to the EU integration project (Ansell et al 2021).

The risks have become more evident with the normalisation of anti-system politics (Hopkin 2020) and the use of the logic of technopopulism, i.e. the appeal to populism and technocracy (Bickerton and Accetti, 2021), now present in both Western and Eastern European societies (Tudzarovska 2024). However, the historical conditions that led to these occurrences have been analysed from the perspective either of populism or of democratic backsliding (often associated with Eastern Europe) or from the perspective of the EU's economic governance (associated with Western post-industrial societies). This paper aims to bridge this research gap and offer an analytical framework for studying these processes from a comparative perspective by identifying the key historical conditions that exposed the tensions between democratic representation and the EU's economic governance from the period of the 1970s onwards.

This paper identifies how the post-war corporate state in Western Europe was dismantled, the emergence of neoliberalism and the specific transformations in Eastern Europe met at the same point in the post-1989 period as part of the neoliberal doctrine. This set into motion the 'no other alternative' type of democratic legitimation and the rise of technocratic governance from the 1990s onwards alongside the rise of populism (Maier 2023). The rise of technocracy and populism also results from the transformation of nation-states into EU member states (Bickerton 2012) to the extent that, in the contemporary context, both Western and Eastern European societies are now exposed to similar political and social–economic challenges when facing technopopulism (Guasti and Buštíková, 2020) or anti-system politics (Hopkin 2020).

The conditions that led to the transformation of the EU's economic governance and the rise of technopopulism and anti-system politics are also related to the transformation of traditional party politics during the period of transition to neoliberalism. This article therefore offers a framework for analysing the rise of the economisation of politics in the EU, or the 'commodification' of capital for market purposes via political means (Polanyi 2001) or, in their absence, by means such as via bypassing national parliaments. The framework also allows for analysing the rise of anti-system political parties and technopopulists who devise their electoral strategies as a response to the existing tension between economic governance and citizens' representation within the EU. Thus, this paper aims to offer a new perspective on the common challenges present today in both Western and Eastern European societies and to encourage further research based on the identified factors.

To this end, the first part of this paper, building on previous studies in this field, offers a brief overview of the conditions leading to the rise of technocracy and the challenges of the political parties, followed by the second section, which analyses the historical roots of the conditions leading to the normalisation of neoliberalism in the EU's institutional framework. In the analytical section, this paper traces the conditions of Western post-industrial societies in the 1970s and the rise of the technocratic style of governance in the 1980–1990s. The third part of this analysis describes the conditions and transformations in Eastern Europe in the context of the EU integration project. In the fourth section, this paper discusses how both identified conditions merged into the same neoliberal approach in the post-1989 period, setting into motion the trajectory towards the present EU challenges. That section also presents evidence of these challenges in the EU member states; it is followed by the paper's conclusion. By analysing from a comparative perspective the rise of EU economic governance from the 1970s onwards in both Eastern and Western European societies (Stahl and Rosamond 2022; Hay 2004, Benoit and Hay 2022; Maier 2023; Bickerton 2012; Mair 2023, 1997; Sandbeck and Schneider 2014; Bieler 2002, 2013; Bieler et al 2019), this paper broadens the means of studying the EU and the common contemporary risks to representative democracies.

Technocracy, technopopulism and anti-system politics in the contemporary EU

Common symptoms of crisis in democratic representation include the rise of anti-system politics (Hopkin 2020) and of new political parties and leaders who make appeals to technocracy, populism or both, i.e. *technopopulism* as an alternative to traditional ways of doing politics (Bickerton and Accetti, 2021). Both alternatives are examples of an 'unmediated politics' between states and their citizens and evidence of the weak role of the traditional parties, national parliaments or trade unions in providing representation of the collective interest vis-à-vis the rise of the technocratic power (Caramani 2017).

The EU's recent crises exposed these already existing symptoms, evident from the EU debt crisis onwards. The debt crisis indeed revealed rifts in the political representation of the citizens' interests, justified by the use of technocratic governance as a way of addressing poor economic choices or past wrongdoings (Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020). It also revealed that the constraints imposed by the EU in the form of austerity measurements result not only from the relevant actors' responses but also from a long historical process of underwriting monetary integration, which has been left understudied, ignoring the authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies that underpinned European monetary integration (Schneider and Sandbeck 2019, p. 139). The circumvention of democratic institutions and of popular dissent (made possible by the insulation of executive and administrative state apparatuses) through transnational strategies and the establishment and maintenance of the euro as a supranational currency were part of the broader neoliberal strategy of the EU integration project, thus creating tensions in the institutionalisation of popular rule (Schneider and Sandbeck 2019, p.140).

The restructuring of the European integration project initiated in the 1970s and pushed through by bypassing democratic institutions or democratic control when necessary resulted in a constellation of new neoliberal institutional arrangements (Sandbeck and Schneider 2014, p. 852). This has also informed EU responses to crises or sovereign defaults in the form of neoliberal adjustment policies and has paved the way for the emergence of right-wing populist parties (Sandbeck and Schneider 2014, p. 865).

Furthermore, the emergence of populism and the establishment of anti-system politics exposed the link between states, the European integration project and the exercise of the principle of state sovereignty, which is inherent in the intractable contradictions of the EU project, both past and present (Sandbeck and Schneider 2014, p. 854). The contradictions arise from how the state was restructured so as to fit the neoliberal strategy. To 'protect' that strategy from the influence of popular forces as well as from parliaments and arenas of representative democracy, popular participation and contestation were undermined by concentrating power in executive apparatuses and drastically altering the strategic selectivity of the state (Schneider and Sandbeck 2019, p. 150). Reallocating decision-making powers to executives and non-majoritarian institutions was critical in insulating neoliberal policy-making from democratic contestation at the nation-state level, and this was also imperative for the rise of technocratic governance in the EU (Sánchez-Cuenca 2017, p. 353).

These interlinkages between the EU's institutional design, the rise of technocratic governance and the consolidation of neoliberalism in the 1990s were also predicated on the success of the new right in mobilising widespread perceptions of a crisis of overload and ungovernability. This paved the way for a neoliberal offensive informed narrative, to varying degrees, by monetarism, neo-monetarism and supply-side economics (Hay 2004, p.502). As a 'proper' response to societal problems and to manage the crisis, neoliberalism was institutionalised within the EU simultaneously with the EU's undergoing significant changes in the post-1989 period, during the time of the EU's enlargement to accommodate Central and Eastern European (CEE) post-communist states.

In this period, the contestability or the need for democratic economic governance was also normalised, which reflects the problem of disaffection and disengagement from the supply side (Hay 2004, p. 503). This paper therefore suggests looking to this origin as a starting point for analysing the common challenges currently present in Western and Eastern European societies as a reflection of the process of disengagement and disenfranchisement in the contemporary way of doing politics and of the consequent rise of anti-system politics and technopopulism. Technocracy is indeed a challenge to democratic legitimacy, precisely due to the dislodging of the traditional political parties and their parliamentary functions in favour of 'technocratism' (Caramani 2017, p. 61). These key challenges are linked to the historical process of state restructuring as part of the EU integration project as discussed in the next section.

Political parties and the neoliberal project

An important consideration for understanding the factors behind the present challenges is the ability of traditional parties to adapt to the new type of governance or, as Peter Mair has said, to adapt to the new reality when 'the age of party democracy has passed' (Mair 2023, p. 1). The traditional parties have indeed played an important role in the normalisation of the EU's neoliberal ideological project. On the one side, the parties have contributed to the transformation of the EU's institutional design by retreating from democratic control and depoliticising and de-democratising economic policy-making (Hay 2004, p. 502). On the other, their adjustment to external circumstances and the pressure of globalisation has remained inadequate (Mair 2023). This has created a conundrum in which the technocrats are finding suitable means to legitimise their power, without necessarily adhering to the normative principles of legitimacy, such as the accountability traditionally expected of political parties and their members in national parliaments.

The transfer of mandates to non-majoritarian bodies to respond to societal problems (Majone 1994) has locked in this conundrum. Indeed, once the independence of the European Central Bank (ECB) became a global norm and was made a requirement for membership in the European single currency—an idea introduced in the 1970s—macroeconomic policy-making was further pushed towards the use of expertise, which has bound the hands of profligate governments and kept policy decisions outside the reach of politics (Bickerton 2022; Maier 2023).

This analytical essay aims to integrate these aspects into an analytical framework and to offer a new perspective on the linkages between the EU's neoliberal project, the rise of technocracy and the dismantling of traditional party politics, which represent a crisis to representative democracies. This paper builds on previous accounts of EU economic governance since the 1980 and 1990s (Stahl and Rosamond 2022), which have already identified the relationship between states and markets in post-war liberal thinking and considered the transference of economic policy-making from the nation-state (Hay 2004). Moreover, similar patterns are now recognised in both Western post-industrial societies and Eastern post-communist states formerly 'characterised' by central economic planning. By tracing how the very different transformations of Western and Eastern European states converged in the same neoliberal trajectory and market-driven policy-making as suggested by Rune Møller Stahl and Ben Rosamond (2022, p. 629), this paper reveals the deeper roots and processes of the neoliberal turn of the 1970 and 1980s. It also examines the trajectory of the gradual economisation of politics (Polanyi 2001) in the absence of proper democratic control by the state (Bieler 2002, 2013, Bieler et al 2019) as part of the neoliberal paradigm (Hay 2004).

Technocracy, the institutionalisation of popular will and the corporate logic of doing politics

As already discussed, the economisation of politics (Polanyi 2001) and the absence of responsible democratic control exercised by political parties in national

parliaments are closely linked to the rise of technocracy and populism in the contemporary EU. Both developments are telling in regard to the EU's ideological project and the state restructuring within the EU. If the challenge related to populist leaders is that they will take decisions 'on behalf of all', then the challenge of technocracy is the questionable legitimacy of having the power to determine the allocation of values made by experts and technical elites based on their knowledge rather than in the interest of the whole society or on the basis of popular will (Bertsou and Caramani 2020, p. 3). Technocracy, like populism, is anti-pluralist in the sense that it does not allow the interest of the parties to prevail over the interest of the whole. As a consequence, it is anti-partisan (Bertsou and Caramani 2020, p. 7).

That being said, the economisation of politics is also connected to how the popular will is institutionalised in the EU, a matter inherited from tensions in the concept of sovereignty itself as well as resulting from the struggle of national party systems to translate social and political conflicts into partisan disagreements regulated by the rhythm of electoral competition (Bickerton et al 2022, p. 259). According to Bickerton et al (2022), 'any such abstract principle needs a legitimate institutionalisation of the principle of popular rule if it is to function as a basis for governing'. Placing experts and not 'the people' in the position of a sovereign also raises the question of where ultimate authority resides within a polity and, as such, is central to views on the EU's democratic deficit (Bickerton and Accetti, 2021, p. 33–39). This means that when parties and parliaments do not provide such expertise, the nature of representative democracies is challenged by the rise of technocrats, who also serve as guardians of free markets (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2020, p. 45).

The protection of free markets from political interference is also inherent in the EU's ideological project. This requires institutional means to stop democratic politics from undermining capitalism. In this sense, the idea of non-majoritarian institutions beyond the state making rules and monitoring them has served that purpose (Majone 1994). In this regard, technocrats, as actors, increasingly proactively enact and legitimise programmes of sociopolitical transformation in the age of the crisis of distrust in political parties. They also reconfigure state institutions and evoke the dynamics of the personalisation of politics (Cozzolino et al, 2024, pp. 3–9). These phenomena are closely linked to the crises of party government and representative democracy and speak to the rise of technocracy in the EU from the 1970s onwards.

The EU and the dismantling of the corporate state: the 1970s

The challenge to political legitimacy posed by technocracy and anti-system politics can be traced back to the rise of the corporate state in the 1970s. The fragmentation and disorganisation of the citizens' interests', along with the corporate logic of the institutionalisation of politics, were driven by the logic of neoliberalism since the late 1970s, which introduced a doctrine for the emancipation of individual personality (Maier 1981). As Charles S. Maier (1981, p. 28) has stated, much of today's uneasiness about 'corporatism' as later experienced in neoliberal societies is merely a continuation of the legacy of

the ambiguous acceptance of this doctrine. The encouragement of technocratic governance at the expense of collective decision-making is a consequence of this doctrine's acceptance. It happened during the period of transition from Keynesian to the neoliberal form of governance in the 1970s, and it established a trajectory for exploring new avenues for political responsiveness, policy outcomes and governance procedures in the quest for *output legitimacy* (Schmidt 2020).

It has also transformed EU economic governance by encouraging a tendency to institutionalise non-majoritarian bodies and depoliticise policy-making in response to the global development of economic ideas (Stahl and Rosamond 2022, p. 628; Drahokoupil et al 2008). This implied a politicisation of economic expertise in line with the rise of the global governance established at Bretton Woods, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. State administration and bureaucracy were seen as burdens and obstacles to the advancement of these neoliberal objectives. In France, even in the early 1960s, bureaucratic actors showed an identified tendency to hoard information, leading to political systems overloaded with 'participants and demands' and irresponsible bureaucratic responses to the demands of the 'materialistic work-oriented public-spirited values' (Maier 2023, p. 224). With state apparatuses coming under pressure to address the demands of the emerging new types of economic and political governance in the globalised context, the recruitment of experts since the 1970s was seen 'as representations or claims to representation, a wisdom or knowledge that transcended any identification with a political party' (Maier 2023, p. 240).

From the 1970s onwards, this new method of *governability* has been seen as an alternative to the state's weak capacity to hold in check the 'demands' of social groups. The 1970s were also characterised by worldwide economic recession, a falling rate of profit and exhausted national class compromises between trade unions and employers' associations (Bieler 2013, p. 176). As a result of an emphasis on serving the interests of elites, social struggles were frequently reduced to institutional arrangements while the (re-)production of social power relations was ignored (Wigger and Horn 2014, p. 3). Consequently, state intervention in the political–economic governance of post-industrial societies was seen as less effective than corporate governance, and the mobilised economic elites claimed that their scientific independence and authority enabled adaptation to the new corporatist agendas without state enforcement (Maier 2023, p. 241).

These were early signs of the weakening of the traditional parties' role and of their inability to resist the process of dismantling 'the traditional bonds of the social class', leading to the further breakdown of organisational discipline within the parties in favour of mass demands and participation (Beer 1982; Maier 2023, p. 243; Mair 2023). The rationale of proposing non-partisan ideas to be instrumentalised by their patrons has also led experts to the realm of democratic institutions and led actors to pursue legitimacy and justify the use of power. This kind of general delegitimisation of the authority of party politicians and parties as organisations was already taking place in Western societies at the beginning of the 1980s, with Britain as a leading example (Hay 2004). Moreover, with technocracy removed from public scrutiny or control, its use was further normalised as discussed in the next section.

The economisation of politics and normalisation of neoliberalism: the 1980s

The use of technocracy as a rational choice for efficient solutions to political problems has its own trajectory. The economisation of politics or commodification of resources—labour, land and money—by the (mis)use of political means served the aim of the 'self-regulating' market to seize various elements of social life, even if that 'self-regulation' was fictional (Polanyi 2001). Karl Polanyi rightly saw the subordination of the human or social purposes of governance to the logic of an impersonal market mechanism as the deepest flaw in market liberalisation (Polanyi 2001, p. 76). Specifically, one condition for success in pursuing the neoliberal doctrine was expressed in the mantra that democratic politics should not extend to economic affairs (Brittan 1975, p. 149). In post-war Europe, the working class and its trade unions and political parties were recognised as a threat to the accumulation of capital or as undermining foreign credit, and in this regard, trade unions were seen as a threat to the parallel expansion of the monetary demand and the market-driven ideology (Polanyi 2001, p. 200). It was also expected that union leaders would have a greater voice in general economic policy-making and greater powers vis-à-vis their membership, developing a strategy that aimed to bring organised labour under control by involving its leaders in the management of capitalism as part of a technocratic elite (Goldthorpe 1987, p. 390). This would have provided an effective basis for stabilising capitalism or a progressive transition to socialism (Goldthorpe 1987, p. 392), but events took a different turn (Andry 2022). By the end of the 1970s, a political and economic context obtained in which collective decisions were seen as too complex to be decided by a competitive, vote-seeking process (Brittan 1975, p. 147). In this way, the crisis of the post-war Keynesian consensus in the 1970s was resolved via a denationalisation of macroeconomic policy in Western Europe, with European integration as a central part of this process (Bickerton 2012, p. 125). The objective of currency stability through the introduction of a fixed exchange rate was central to the shift from the post-war Keynesian consensus to the adoption of the European Monetary System in 1979.

By the mid-1980s, the left could no longer put a brake on these rapid transformations and assumed the role of institutional adversary on behalf of capitalist modernisation (Maier 2023, p. 268). In this context, the EU's economic governance set the trajectory for the monetary unleash of the governmental potentials, and this meant 'turning toward the market, slimming welfare and bureaucracy and clearing the way for the financiers and industrial leaders who *spoke capital*' (Maier 2023, p. 267).

It also meant that states' commitments to the new monetary union and the wider macroeconomic agenda of price stability, budgetary austerity and reforms of public-sector institutions escaped criticism and public debate in national parliaments (Bieler 2002, 575–597). In Sweden, for example, the Swedish Social Democratic Party's original decision in favour of EU membership was incompatible with neutrality but prevented any debate on membership between 1987 and 1990 (Bieler 2002, p. 585). Its later decision to join EU, made in the parliament on 26 October 1990 and evoking general surprise in the trade unions, was a result of renewed pressure on the Swedish krona and rumours in

mid-October of an imminent currency devaluation (Bieler 2002, p. 585). In the late 1980s, Austria's economic–political model was also restructured with the justification that it served the social purpose of enabling EU membership (Bieler 2002, p. 583). Neither criticism of the neoliberal economics of EU membership nor any alternative to accession was accepted by the broader citizenry (Bieler 2002, p. 584).

In the post-1989 period, the CEE countries also embraced the opportunity for EU membership, led by cadre elites within state institutions. At the same time, a culture of secrecy was growing in both West and East, not only as a legacy of the Cold War but also due to the need to classify information to avoid scrutiny of decision-making. Shaping public opinion in this regard become a new mode of creative exploration by political leaders, exacerbating the detachment of representatives from the represented. As Jonathan White notes, 'Democracy was made in the shadow of secrecy, with political parties increasingly turned to private forecasting as a way to evaluate their election prospects. The new surveillance methods encouraged party elites to be ever more attentive to swings of opinion and even more mindful of keeping their activities in line lest they should damage the party's prospects' (White 2024, p. 124). Nevertheless, the neoliberal restructuring in CEE as an underlying rationale within the process of EU enlargement strengthened the hegemony of neoliberalism within the EU (Bieler 2002, p. 592), and this was a sufficient objective.

Convergence towards the same goal: neoliberal doctrine in the post-1989 period

The post-Cold War era has brought a legacy of the past, the fall of the communist regime and the integration of the Eastern European societies into the EU. This also meant the building of a new type of statehood tied to globalisation and the neoliberal doctrine, which also involved protecting markets from political meddling by tying the hands of national legislatures (Bickerton 2022, p. 70). This brought the domination of the executive over legislatures and empowered elites to implement privatisation without interference from national legislatures or democratic control. As a result of this loss of alternatives to corporatist institutional inheritances, the traditional parties loosened their hold (Roberts 2010). The merging of political authoritarianism and economic liberalism has also created support for 'the strength of anti-communism' in the post-Cold War (Conway 2020, p. 8). Moreover, the long-term transformation of the logic of 'authoritarian liberalism' in Europe (Wilkinson 2021), formalised in the Maastricht Treaty, aligned with the CEE countries' new trajectory at the same time. In this new type of state and statehood, divided between the expectations of the market and the control of the citizen's democratic representatives, new parties and new populist leaders have found a fertile ground to institutionalise the citizens' growing resentment towards these tensions between economic governance and representation, albeit under different conditions as discussed in the next section.

The specifics of Eastern Europe and the new neoliberal trajectory

A common feature of the traditional political parties' loss of legitimacy in the Western and Eastern European contexts is their loss of adaptation and control as Peter Mair has put it and of their ability to frame the terms of reference by which politics is understood (Mair 1997 p. 274). As a result, the parties have become less grounded within societies and more capital-intensive organisations, increasingly exposed to the influence of professional consultants, marketing experts and campaigners (Mair 1997, p. 11; Mair 2023). The changes in party democracy in Western Europe since the late 1960 and 1970s have been identified by several indicators: 'the waning of party identification, the erosion of traditional cleavages, increasing partisan de-alignment, rising levels of electoral volatility, declining party memberships and deteriorating relationships between parties and collateral organisations' (Mair 2023).

This sort of transformation also took place in the post-communist states in Eastern Europe, specifically in the post-1989 period of the 'triple transition' towards identity building—nationhood, politics—constitution-making and democratisation, and changes to economic policies or allocation of resources as Offe and Adler (1991) observe. In this historical moment, political power and states' assets were divided in the context of the post-communist transition. The former communist state party, very much linked to the functioning of the state administration, was accompanied by the extraordinary interconnection of the political and economic spheres (Kitschelt 2003).

During the post-1989 period of political and economic transformation in Eastern Europe, party systems faced several challenges. As Peter Mair has shown (1997), the first difference from the old regimes was that the new party systems emerged in the wake of the democratisation process without any effective bond to the civil society. Thus, the Communist parties had firm roots in some elements of the society but were different than previously in scope or organisation. The second difference was related to the *freezing* of the party system, based on Rokkan's theory (Lipset, S. and Rokkan, S., 1967). In the context of Eastern Europe, this process took place in a traversed-reversible process as compared to the established democracies in Western Europe (Mair 1997). It required four stages of transformation: formal incorporation of strata, mobilisation, activation and the process of politicisation. The third significant difference, according to Mair, was the context of party competition and the cleavage structures, which, with fractious elites being discouraged from setting up their organisation, did not provide for the stabilisation of the electorates. In a similar vein, Anna Grzymala-Busse (2002) argues that the transformation of the parties depended on the 'portable skills' they acquired based on their organisational practices under communism. Under these conditions of party politics in Eastern Europe, the constitution-makers in the new democracies '[found] themselves obliged to restructure the political system and establish competition procedures in a context in which mass politics was already established' (Mair 1997, p. 181).

It was also expected that this transformation would break the connection with 'the people' as represented uniquely by the Communist party in its role

as 'vanguard', which once exercised dual authority as a source for legitimation (Beetham 1993). The historical dynamics in Western Europe, the emergence of post-industrialisation and especially the legacy of the post-war period had already laid the groundwork for transforming this sort of dual legitimacy (Judt 2005). What happened instead is that during the EU enlargement process, the citizens' role of surveillance of the state was further removed from public scrutiny (Grabbe 2006; Malova and Haughton 2002; Bickerton 2012). The state restructuring in Western societies as part of the EU neoliberal integration project also involved the dismantling of democratic institutions and the weakening of democratic control over macroeconomic transformations.

Control over economic policies gradually passed to the EU supranational level. At the same time, EU instruments such as the European Semester were introduced as tools for surveillance to be exercised through the national parliaments, although the European Semester was shown to be unfit for its purpose (Sandbeck and Schneider 2014, p. 852). Moreover, the political parties were ill prepared to exercise control over new macroeconomic policies or to add substance to national democratic politics (Crouch 2020). In CEE, however, state elites were in favour of neoliberal restructuring via EU membership and embraced the idea of regaining control over capital at a higher level (Bieler 2002, p. 575). These factors later provided an opening to populist politicians and parties as well as to technocratic governance as discussed in the comparative analysis of the next section.

Contemporary European politics: same patterns, different societies

The consequences of this institutionalisation of technocratic governance and the normalisation of neoliberalism are visible in the contemporary context of both Western and Eastern European societies. During the pandemic, French President Macron used external expertise to implement health measures, justified by the need for speed and efficiency, in the absence of proper public scrutiny, bypassing the state health services (Tudzarovska 2024). In the case of the Czech Republic, then Prime Minister Andrej Babis implemented similar strategies, which he had already explored in the period of the post-EU debt crisis by establishing his party ANO in 2012 under the justification of having to solve 'the people's' economic problems, which the former post-communist establishment had failed to address (Guasti and Buštíková, 2020). Babis won the elections by attracting neither left- nor right-wing voters by promising 'excessive welfare spending, increase in the minimum wage, a significant increase in pensions and free public transport (Guasti and Buštíková, 2022, p. 4). During the first three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, Babis' government implemented the greatest increase in public debt among EU member states. This was another example of a new political leader combining populism with technocracy by legitimising their direct, unmediated, relationship with 'the people' (Guasti and Buštíková, 2022, p. 468).

During the debt crisis, this sort of exercise of power had meant marginalising the socialist perspective and supporting elites to pursue austerity policies in the absence of effective parliamentary surveillance at a time when a fictional 'self-regulating'

market needed to be protected. During the pandemic crisis, it meant the condemnation by populist leaders such as Babis of the structural deficit of the past and the lack of public investments in health care (Zulianello and Guasti 2023, p. 11), resulting in a new business logic of doing things differently and 'solving people's' problems without jeopardising political or financial gains. In the case of Hungary, Viktor Orbán introduced unlimited emergency powers by violating FIDESZ's illiberal Fundamental Law using the context of the pandemic. The other V4 populist leaders used similar strategies by fusing their authoritarian style of governance with plebiscitarianism using the rationale of the wrongdoings of the 'post-1989' traditional party establishment (Guasti and Buštíková, 2022).

These strategies to justify appeals to populism and technocracy are neither new nor limited to the pandemic crisis, however. The cases of Italy, France and Greece also reflect the rise of populist leaders and technocrats, or technopopulist that has been evident from the EU debt crisis onwards. In Greece, then Prime Minister George Papandreou tried, but failed, to hold a referendum on the bailout terms; after that failure, he was replaced by Lucas Papademos, an American-trained technocrat and economist and former vice president of the ECB. In 2011, Papademos, a non-party member without official affiliation, pursued the austerity measures demanded by creditors in exchange for a rescue package deal worth €130 billion, approved by the Eurozone finance ministers, which led to large-scale protests and riots in Athens. Promising to end the austerity programmes, Alexis Tsipras, then leader of the Syriza party, used the crisis to mobilise voters against the interim government and the rescue package. In his speeches, he criticised the signed deal for not being passed by a 'popular mandate' and for being forced on 'the people'. In France, President Emmanuel Macron, also a former banker, has used external expertise from global management consulting firm McKinsey in his electoral campaigns to solve the 'people's problems' (Tudzarovska 2024, p. 12).

Technopopulism has also gained strength in Italy, starting from the emergence of Silvio Berlusconi with his personal 'business' competencies in the 1990s. The Five Star Movement (M5S) initially emerged as an anti-establishment movement founded not by a politician but by a comedian, Beppe Grillo, with the promise of fighting the mainstream Italian political parties. The M5S and Grillo demanded a return of 'monetary sovereignty', and in doing so Grillo, representing neither left nor right, appealed directly to 'the people' to solve their problems. During the EU financial crisis, then Prime Minister Mario Draghi also acted in a technocratic manner, uniting all the Italian political parties, from the left to the far right, to pursue austerity measurements. The technopopulist logic also came in handy for current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni during her election campaign in 2023, appealing to the entire ideological spectrum when necessary. In the case of the UK, populists such as Dominic Cummings also regularly embraced the language of science and expertise as evident during the pandemic under Boris Johnson's government. This also showed the merits and dangers of technocratic interventionism, bypassing the role of public health authorities before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (White 2024, p. 3).

The case of the Netherlands also confirms the 'normalisation' of disengagement in political contests and of policies that are neither left nor right wing, showing

how modern parties are used as instruments for individual ambitions rather than for collective interest. Recent studies have identified increasing support among Europeans for being governed by experts rather than elected politicians. Several studies (e.g. Bertsou and Caramani, 2022; Bertsou and Pastorella 2017) indicate that a significant portion of the citizenry in European countries prefer that experts rather than politicians make decisions or plan policies. Experts with no partisan affiliation in governments are commonly referred to as 'technocrats', and the nomination of Mario Draghi, the former president of the ECB, as the new prime minister of Italy (2021–2022) is a prime example of such a profile entering the government. A recent study shows that technocratic ministers are often appointed to signal credibility in a government's economic policies, which is especially valuable during economic recessions or when governments are perceived as corrupt or incompetent in managing the country's economy (Pilet et al 2023, p. 2). The study also shows that the proliferation of technocratic ministers is intertwined with the long-standing legitimacy crisis of traditional political parties and that the strength of populist parties in government is the most significant predictor of technocratic appointments in European countries (Pilet et al 2023, p. 3).

Conclusion

This article has revisited the relationship between the EU's institutional design and technocratic governance in the contemporary EU as well as the conditions leading to tensions between EU economic governance and the crisis of representation, which has remained underexplored to date from a comparative perspective. In the conundrum created by the normalisation of neoliberalism in the EU's institutional design, technopopulism and anti-system politics are gaining strength in both Eastern and Western European societies. To date, there has been a tendency to analyse these occurrences from separate perspectives. By contrast, this article suggests that the EU's crises, including the pandemic, have exposed common patterns visible in the contemporary way of doing politics in the EU, which require multiple analytical lenses to interpret.

This article discussed the historical evolution of the EU's ideological neoliberal shifts and the struggle of political parties to resist the neoliberal state transformations from the 1970s onwards. This required further analysis of the EU's political and economic governance government and the linkages between its institutional design and the EU's democratic deficit (Stahl and Rosamond 2022). The EU's neoliberal trajectory was informed by the dismantling of the corporate state in the 1970s as well as by the Maastricht Treaty's rules and the imposition of austerity as a function of ideological commitments, developments whose origins date back to post-war Europe. On this path, the relations between citizens and states were undermined as a result of the states' reconstruction to fit the market logic, leading to the emergence of executive elites and away from democratic control by political parties in national parliaments. This has paved the way for popular movements and popular parties in both Western and Eastern European societies. Moreover, the crisis of party politics is aligned with the EU's economic

governance in different ways, especially in the institutionalisation of popular rule, which is a common challenge in both understanding technocracy and populism and determining who has the final authority. This is creating ongoing tensions in democratic representation and governance.

This article has traced the structural deepening of the EU's economic neoliberalism within the EU integration project from the 1970s onwards. Despite the differences between Western and Eastern European societies, the new changes that shifted the final authority from domestic politics to non-majoritarian institutions (in service of the neoliberal logic) were seized upon as a source of momentum in the 1990s and institutionalised in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. This has created a conundrum exploited by newly emerged political parties, lacking the capacity to take control, adapt or develop roots with the societies and their electorates.

The neoliberal ideology has become more dominant and has created new opportunities for justifying the use of experts at the expense of party politics. The reliance on technocrats and the infiltration of external expertise into economic policy weaken the role of political parties as intermediaries between diverse segments of society and state institutional capacities. This has advanced the rise of populist parties, populist leaders and anti-system politics in the EU, representing the decline of traditional party democracy and revealing the institutional phenomenon of the European integration process and the EU's neoliberal economic governance.

This development also reflects the neoliberal ideas of depoliticisation and the transfer of final authority to non-elected experts and non-majoritarian institutions. The EU's ideological projects create crises, mitigate them and then return to the status quo of crises of democratic representation. This article argues that the EU's institutional design is a condition for triggering technopopulist logic within EU member states and exposes the struggle of the political parties to organise and represent the collective interest of the citizens.

This paper offers an analytical framework for examining the complex political and economic transformations in Western and Eastern European states, which aligned on the same neoliberal trajectory in the post-1989 period in a way that exposes the legacy of the EU's historical ideological project and the common challenges now faced as a result of how politics are done. This article demonstrates the interlinkage between the dismantling of social intermediation between political parties and citizens from the 1970s onwards and the transformation of the political economy in Europe, thus suggesting further avenues for theoretical and empirical research. Analysing the symptoms of the rise of anti-system politics and technopopulism from a comparative perspective offers further ways to advance the analysis.

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Data Availability Sequence data that support the findings of this study deposited https://asep-analytika.lib.cas.cz/publikace/asep/sou-z

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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