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**Sovereignty and Supranationalism in the Global Age: Rethinking Democratic
Legitimacy Through the EU’s Community Method**

By

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Preface

In an increasingly interconnected world, national sovereignty faces mounting pressure from global governance structures and supranational institutions. The Community Method of the EU, a pillar of its decision-making process, exemplifies both the potential and the pitfalls of supranational integration. While it has enabled effective coordination among member states, it has also led to a democratic deficit, where key decisions are made by non-elected institutions, often beyond the reach of citizens and national parliaments.

This policy brief explores the complex tension between sovereignty and supranationalism through the lens of the EU, offering broader reflections on how states can preserve democratic legitimacy while participating in global governance. It argues that institutional frameworks should be readjusted to enhance transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

Policy recommendations include structural reforms to the EU's institutional balance, strengthening participatory mechanisms like the European Citizens' Initiative, and international-level guidelines to safeguard national autonomy in multilateral cooperation. Reaffirming sovereignty and democracy must be a central priority if global governance needs to remain legitimate and sustainable.

Introduction

The notion of national sovereignty has long underpinned the international political system, guaranteeing states the authority to govern independently within their borders. Rooted in the Westphalian tradition and reaffirmed through post-war frameworks such as the UN Charter, sovereignty has historically been sought as a prerequisite for self-determination, democratic legitimacy, and national identity.

In the 21st century, however, globalization and interdependence have challenged traditional notions of state power. Supranational institutions, such as the European Union, the WTO, and the IMF, exert growing influence over domestic policies, often through legal, financial, or regulatory mechanisms. As states increasingly delegate authority on efficiency, security, or economic growth, questions arise regarding who governs, who participates, and whose interests prevail in this evolving global order.

The European Union (EU) provides a unique case study of this tension. Created to foster peace and economic cooperation among its members, the EU operates based on the Community Method, a model of supranational decision-making involving the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament. While designed to ensure efficiency and coordination, this model has faced mounting criticism for its democratic deficit, particularly its limited mechanisms for citizen participation and national parliamentary oversight.

This policy brief examines the implications of supranational governance through the lens of the EU, arguing that the erosion of sovereignty and the lack of democratic legitimacy are not isolated European concerns but part of a broader global governance crisis. Drawing from realist theory and neo-functionalism integration models, the analysis explores how institutional structures must evolve to maintain legitimacy in a deeply interconnected world. The aim is to offer actionable policy recommendations that protect sovereignty while enabling collective problem-solving beyond national borders.

Theoretical Foundations

The evolving architecture of global governance cannot be understood without reference to the major schools of international relations theory. Realism, one of the most enduring frameworks, emphasizes the primacy of sovereign states as rational actors pursuing power and national interest within an anarchic international system. In this view, sovereignty is both the legal and practical foundation of state authority, providing the basis for independent decision-making, diplomatic relations, and national security. Even amid interdependence, realists argue that the state remains the most reliable guarantor of democratic accountability and citizen protection.

Neo-functionalist framework, by contrast, seeks to explain the dynamics of regional integration, particularly in the European context. Originating in the post-World War II period, the theory posits that cooperation in one sector (e.g., coal and steel) creates pressures for deeper integration in others, known as *spillover*. This process results in the delegation of authority to supranational bodies, such as the European Commission, to manage common interests. According to neo-functionalists, institutions gain legitimacy through functional success rather than direct democratic input.

These two perspectives offer conflicting assumptions about the future of governance. Where realism warns against ceding democratic control to non-elected international actors, neo-functionalism assumes that such delegation is both necessary and beneficial for addressing transnational challenges. This clash is evident in the structure of the European Union, where supranational decision-making has often outpaced the democratic oversight provided by national parliaments and citizens.

The EU's Community Method illustrates this theoretical tension in practice. While it offers institutional efficiency and continuity, it also distances decision-making from public scrutiny, contributing to perceptions of a democratic deficit. As neo-functionalist integration continues, realist critiques of sovereignty erosion become more salient, particularly in times of crisis, such as during the eurozone bailout negotiations or the COVID-19 response.

Understanding this theoretical divide is essential for crafting reforms that balance the need for collective action with the democratic foundations of sovereign states. Without this balance, global and regional governance risk losing legitimacy in the eyes of the very publics they claim to serve.

The EU's Community Method - Strengths and Democratic Weaknesses

The Community Method is a hallmark of the European Union's institutional structure. It was designed to ensure coordinated action across member states by granting key roles to supranational bodies, most notably the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament. First introduced with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and later codified in the Treaty on European Union, this model became central to EU integration across areas such as economic governance, environmental regulation, and social policy.

Under this method, the European Commission holds the exclusive right of legislative initiative, acting as a technocratic and politically independent body meant to represent the interests of the Union as a whole. The Council, composed of ministers from member states, acts as a co-legislator, typically through qualified majority voting, while the European Parliament, although directly elected, has historically held a more limited legislative and oversight role.

Proponents of the Community Method argue that it has enhanced the efficiency and consistency of EU policymaking, especially in technically complex or economically interconnected domains. It avoids the deadlocks of purely intergovernmental decision-making and enables the Union to speak with one voice on international issues. This method has also ensured continuity in long-term policy objectives, especially during institutional crises or leadership transitions.

However, this model has also given rise to widespread concern over the EU's democratic legitimacy. Critics highlight the limited role of citizens and national parliaments in shaping EU legislation, and the dominance of non-elected bodies in the policymaking process. The European Commission, despite being composed of politically appointed officials, acts as both initiator and enforcer of legislation, raising concerns about accountability and institutional opacity.

The Lisbon Treaty sought to address this deficit by expanding the powers of the European Parliament and introducing the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). However, the ECI remains non-binding and largely symbolic, as the Commission retains full discretion over whether to act on public proposals. Studies suggest that such mechanisms have had minimal impact on policy outcomes, limiting their democratic value.

Furthermore, during the eurozone crisis, key decisions affecting millions of citizens, such as austerity measures, fiscal rules, and bailouts, were negotiated behind closed doors by the Eurogroup and the European Council, with limited parliamentary scrutiny or public debate. This governance style has contributed to public disillusionment, especially in southern European states, where national governments were perceived as powerless against supranational constraints.

Although the Community Method provides a structured framework for integration, it inherently requires a trade-off between efficiency and democratic legitimacy. The tendency to prioritize technocratic decision-making over participatory governance risks alienating citizens and weakening public trust in the European project.

The challenge, therefore, lies in preserving the advantages of supranational coordination while strengthening the democratic foundations of EU governance. Without meaningful reforms, the Union may continue to face resistance from within, undermining

both its cohesion and its global standing.

Sovereignty in the Global Age

Beyond the European Union, similar dynamics are unfolding across the global governance landscape. Institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and powerful multinational corporations increasingly shape economic, social, and even environmental policies, often bypassing traditional democratic structures within nation-states.

As states delegate decision-making to supranational or transnational bodies, their ability to act independently, a core element of sovereignty, is weakened. Realists argue that this erosion undermines not only external autonomy but also internal democratic legitimacy, as unelected actors gain influence over domestic agendas. In many developing countries, IMF-backed structural adjustment programs have restructured economies without broad public input, often leading to social unrest and inequality.

Globalization, though often celebrated for its economic benefits, such as increased trade, innovation, and access to technology, also carries political and cultural costs. The standardization of policies, the dominance of major economies, and the spread of Western consumer values risk erasing national identities and reducing cultural diversity. Countries with weaker economies or limited international clout may find themselves compelled to adopt policies not aligned with their societal needs or democratic priorities.

The European Union, despite its internal complexities, reflects these tensions in a regionalized form. Its centralized decision-making structures mirror those of global institutions and raise similar questions: To what extent can citizens influence decisions? How transparent are supranational processes? What safeguards exist to preserve national autonomy in global systems?

While the EU has attempted to institutionalize participation (e.g., through the European Parliament or the Citizens' Initiative), other global bodies lack even these basic mechanisms of inclusion and oversight. For example, decisions taken by the WTO appellate body or IMF conditionality agreements often take precedence over national legislation, despite limited or no domestic consultation.

The result is a widening gap between global power and democratic control. Citizens may feel that decisions affecting their lives are made “elsewhere,” leading to political alienation, rise of populist movements, or even withdrawal from international agreements. This is especially visible in the EU, where referendums, protest votes, and public skepticism signal deep concerns about sovereignty and legitimacy.

To address this democratic deficit, scholars and policymakers increasingly call for a new governance paradigm, one that reconciles global interdependence with democratic participation. This means not only improving transparency and accountability within supranational institutions, but also creating space for national parliaments, civil society, and citizens to shape transnational decisions. Sovereignty, in this vision, is not abandoned but redefined. States retain their right to self-determination while engaging in international cooperation that is both inclusive and legitimate. Without such balance, the governance of the future may be efficient, but democratically hollow.

Policy Recommendations

Rebalancing the Institutional Framework of the European Union

To address the structural origins of the EU’s democratic deficit, the institutional balance between supranational and intergovernmental actors must be recalibrated. The European Commission’s monopoly on legislative initiative, while originally conceived to safeguard cohesion, should now be counterbalanced. A reformed model must integrate binding mechanisms for citizen-initiated legislation. If a European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) not only meets the signature thresholds but also secures formal backing from at least five national parliaments, the Commission should be obliged to table it as a legislative proposal.

The European Parliament (EP), the only directly elected institution, must also acquire enhanced legislative powers in underrepresented domains such as digital governance, external border policy, and fiscal oversight. Elevating its agenda-setting authority would fortify both accountability and political engagement.

Simultaneously, national parliaments should be equipped with more robust subsidiarity tools. The underutilized “yellow” and “orange” card mechanisms (Article 12 TEU) should be expanded into a potential “red card” procedure, allowing a qualified

number of parliaments to temporarily suspend EU proposals deemed incompatible with democratic or constitutional principles.

To ensure transparency in executive-level decision-making, public disclosure of Council and Eurogroup proceedings, including meeting summaries and impact assessments, should become standard practice. This would facilitate public scrutiny and reduce opacity in intergovernmental bargaining.

Embedding Participatory Democracy in EU Governance

Democratic legitimacy must rest not only on institutional reform but also on deepening civic participation and democratic culture. The European Citizens' Initiative must evolve into a binding participatory mechanism. Each successful initiative should receive a formal, reasonable response from the Commission within 90 days. Additionally, the creation of a dedicated policy support office within the Commission would provide legal and procedural guidance to citizen groups.

Public deliberation should be further institutionalized. Each ECI response must be accompanied by open stakeholder forums and civil society consultations, bridging the gap between bottom-up initiatives and technocratic governance. The EU should also invest in digital participation platforms, enabling real-time citizen feedback throughout the policy cycle and hosting mini publics on complex legislation. Crucially, the EU should lead the promotion of civic education across member states. This includes integrating democratic literacy in school curricula, organizing EU democracy weeks, and supporting youth-led civic networks.

Democratic Principles for Global Governance and Sovereignty

The EU's internal legitimacy challenges echo those facing global governance structures, where policymaking often bypasses democratic control. To ensure democratic accountability beyond the EU, the EU and its partners should advocate for the establishment of a UN-based Charter on Democratic Governance. This framework would articulate minimum democratic standards, transparency, reviewability, and participation, for all regional and international organizations.

Furthermore, the creation of Global Parliamentary Assemblies or structured civil

society oversight bodies could introduce advisory scrutiny in international negotiations and agreements. These assemblies should have observer status and formal access to deliberate procedures. At the national level, governments should institutionalize Sovereignty Impact Assessments, standardized evaluations of how international agreements affect constitutional autonomy, social rights, and domestic policy discretion. These assessments should be tabled in national parliaments before ratification.

Finally, sovereignty must be redefined as participatory autonomy, the capacity of states to engage in global structures without sacrificing their democratic foundations. This reframing allows for adaptive, democratic governance that aligns international cooperation with local legitimacy.

Conclusion

The democratic deficit of the European Union is neither an abstract academic concern nor a peripheral flaw in its institutional design. It is a structural challenge that affects the Union's legitimacy, responsiveness, and capacity to generate trust among its citizens. As this policy brief has shown, the roots of this democratic gap lie in an asymmetrical distribution of power, technocratic insulation, and underutilized participatory instruments. At the same time, globalization and the rise of supranational governance have complicated the sovereignty-democracy nexus, further distancing citizens from decision-making areas that profoundly affect their lives.

Addressing this multifaceted crisis requires a dual strategy: institutional rebalancing within the EU and normative democratization at the global level. From strengthening the legislative role of the European Parliament and national parliaments to embedding binding participatory mechanisms like a reformed European Citizens' Initiative, this brief outlines actionable reforms that can re-anchor the EU in democratic legitimacy. Moreover, the proposal for Sovereignty Impact Assessments and a UN Charter on Democratic Governance responds to broader international concerns about accountability in an increasingly interconnected world.

However, a critical research gap remains insufficiently explored: how other regional governance frameworks manage the tension between democratic legitimacy and supranational authority. This brief calls for comparative research on democratic legitimacy

across regional governance frameworks. Examining how entities such as ASEAN, the African Union, or Mercosur balance national sovereignty and supranational rulemaking may uncover innovative models of democratic accountability. Such an inquiry could help illuminate shared tensions, and possible solutions, faced by governance systems navigating the intersection of integration and legitimacy in the 21st century.



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