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What do our neighbouring countries think about the European Union?

The European Union is not primarily focusing on economic integration; political integration is becoming more and more important. This is certainly the view of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who sees a political union as a major opportunity for the long term economic and monetary union. Over the past few years, several treaties implied a shift from purely national budget decisions to decisions taken under European supervision. For example, the ‘fiscal treaty’, which came into force just recently.

A remarkable transition is the tendency for new agreements based on intergovernmental constructions, instead of making these agreements part of the *acquis communautaire*. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that political leaders want to keep up the ‘appearance’ of national sovereignty, and want to preserve the European powers within the hands of the European Council.

At the same time, it designates the need of being national accountable to national democratic institutions. The behaviour of political leaders is in line with the views of the European citizens. Ultimately, they have more trust in national mechanisms that sustain responsibility, rather than in European democracy, in which the European Parliament is to be held accountable before the European Commission.

The above-mentioned statement is an illustration of what the current experience is in the Netherlands. One may argue that the voice of a small member state like the Netherlands is probably better guaranteed in supranational treaties. This prevents large member states to dominate the communitarian decision making process. However, Dutch politicians and citizens firmly *choose* intergovernmental decision making over supranational supervision, even if this increases the risk of dominance by larger member states significantly. This will retain the feeling that the process of decision making is under control, which contributes to the legitimacy among both representatives and citizens. (Prime) Ministers seem to have faith that the political dilemma is worth the national sentiments among their people. Apparently, there is less confidence in supranational European democracy than in national democracy, regardless the risk of intergovernmental decision making.

Moreover, Dutch politicians and citizens think that further European political integration (*Europeanization*) will damage the parliamentary democracy even more, and there is no sufficient democratic legitimacy on the European level in return. This consequently hinders any furthering progress towards a political union.

The question is: what do other Member States think about this dilemma? Would they eventually give preference to their own democracy, but accept the intergovernmental dependency? Is there a similar hesitation considering giving up sovereignty? Do they have more faith in their national democracy than in a viable European democracy? Or have they given European democratic possibilities more thought as well as the conditions under which the European democracy could possibly flourish?

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These are the kind of questions the *Montesquieu Institute* and newspaper *Trouw* will put forward during four debate series in The Hague, the Netherlands. Traditionally, we confront someone active in the political field, with the arguments of a scientist. If possible, for the upcoming season we would like to welcome both a politician and a scientist from abroad, which will ensure the differentiation of perspectives on the topic. This will hopefully lead to a lively debate.

The ‘State of the European Democracy’ will be the fourth series of debates of the *Montesquieu Institute* and *Trouw*.

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