

To save the EU from collapse, we must reinvent democracy

Written by Dr. Saqib Qureshi on 16 October 2019 in Opinion Plus
Opinion Plus

Dr. Saqib Qureshi explains why governments should look at what works in the private sector and use that to enhance the public sector.



Photo credit: Dr. Saqib Qureshi

Earlier this year, world-renowned investor and philanthropist George Soros warned that the European Union looks like the Soviet Union in 1991 – on the verge of collapse. He pointed to the rise of anti-EU forces across key member-states.

Thankfully, far-right parties did not win as much as was feared in May's European elections, but they did score major victories.

Rather than a rapid takeover, the rise of the far-right has acted as a 'spoiler' for the successful operation of meaningful democracy.

Political parties across the spectrum can no longer secure the majorities they need to sustain

mandates to deliver serious policies.

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Parliamentary institutions are close to deadlock, as politics has become paralysed by left-right polarisation.

If nothing new is done, the EU could face a perfect storm of economic disaster and political stalemate, unleashing a crisis of confidence that could grant anti-EU forces an unprecedented edge.

As I show in my upcoming book, "The Broken Contract", the underlying problem is that we now have less faith in our political systems than we've had in previous generations.

Popular dissatisfaction with government is growing. And this is because the way we are running our democracies goes against the grain of what a democracy is supposed to do.

"EU member-states can avert the worst by making their democracies less wasteful and more accountable. But to do so, we need to look at what works in the private sector and use that to enhance the public sector"

The state delivery of goods and services is all too often less effective and efficient than in the private sector. Then there is a body of state employees who stay in their jobs for life.

Civil servants, experts in paper-pushing and meetings for the sake of meetings, stick around for decades with little to no accountability.

Meanwhile, elected officials campaign on promises which their tiny office budget and party-controlled vote does not allow them to fulfil.

Vast swathes of state infrastructure are occupied with low performance deadwood who can't be fired.

But crisis is not inevitable. EU member-states can avert the worst by making their democracies less wasteful and more accountable.

But to do so, we need to look at what works in the private sector and use that to enhance the public sector.

Instead of being used by big platforms to accelerate data theft, governments can mobilise technology to significantly improve the quality and transparency of public services.

"We need new institutions and platforms to ensure that parliamentarians and political officials are in close, regular contact with voters"

Can you imagine, for example, how enlightening it would be to develop a tool that gives citizens the opportunity to directly express their fiscal spending priorities to government officials?

Such a tool might also be able to generate graphical predictions of the effect such allocations might have in the real world.

It would be an eye-opener to millions of EU citizens, giving them the opportunity to engage with their governments on national budgets and ensure investment is focused on what people actually want: healthcare, education, transport and beyond.

But we also need more fundamental reforms and productivity measures to keep civil servants on their toes.

Top performing civil servants should receive bonuses, while the lowest performers should either be given tools to improve or lose their jobs - that's right, we need to embrace performance in the civil service.

We need new institutions and platforms to ensure that parliamentarians and political officials are in close, regular contact with voters.

About the author

Dr. Saqib Qureshi is a senior business strategist and expert on democratic policy development who has advised governments in Canada, London, Washington DC and Dubai. His forthcoming book is *The Broken Contract: Making Our Democracies Efficient, Representative, and Accountable*.

He is the CEO of the top Toronto-based real estate firm Building Capital, and previously worked at HSBC Investment Bank and McKinsey & Co. He has written for *The Financial Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Entrepreneur*, *Euronews*, and *TRTWorld* and is also author of the award-winning book *Reconstructing Strategy: Dancing with the God of Objectivity*. He completed his undergraduate and PhD degrees at the London School of Economics (LSE).

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