European Commission

REACHING OUT TO EU CITIZENS:

A NEW OPPORTUNITY

'About us, with us, for us'

A report by

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BACKGROUND

The President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, appointed Luc Van den Brande as Special Adviser on Outreach Towards Citizens. The Special Adviser's mandate included the preparation of a report on how to strengthen the ties between the European Union and its citizens.

This report is the result of meetings with experts in political communication and European affairs, as well as bilateral interviews with individuals and organisations in the area of civil participation and communication. The Special Adviser also held several meetings with staff responsible for communication within the European institutions.

The opinions expressed in this report are personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Commission or its President.

1. INTRODUCTION: A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND ITS CITIZENS

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Winning hearts and minds

The general public's trust in the European Union, as in other political institutions, has steadily eroded over the past decades, with a significant drop since the start of the financial and economic crisis in 2008. Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, acknowledged this worrying trend in his inaugural speech at the European Parliament in November 2014, when he set the tone for his 'last-chance Commission': 'Either we succeed in bringing the European citizens closer to Europe — or we will fail' ([1]). Now, more than ever, the Union must confront the cynics, the sceptics and the critics, and show that it is **delivering**.

Few would challenge the assertion that the EU is experiencing extraordinary times. The current developments are forcing policymakers to refocus not only on what the institutions can do to tangibly improve citizens' lives, but also on how to explain to the general public what is actually being done. Faced with Eurosceptic parties in many of the EU Member States, European citizens need to be able to better **understand** how the EU affects their daily lives; but more importantly, they also need to **feel** that they are fully part of the European project.

Many efforts have been made on communication and information over the years; the results of recent public polls suggest a significant improvement of the way the European project is perceived and strong expectations from its citizens ([2]). According to Standard Eurobarometer 87 conducted in May 2017, 68 % of the respondents feel that they are citizens of the EU and 56 % are optimistic about the future of the EU. The burden is therefore on the European Commission and the other EU institutions to seize this momentum and re-engage with the general public with a new approach — a new **attitude**, in line with the 'openness' outlined in Article 15(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union ([3]), acting with a mindset of 'open government', appealing to citizens as an equal partner.

For some, democracy is about **controversy**. It provides a vital arena for reasoned argument, plurality and debate, even to the extent of fostering conflictual debates over time. However, democracy is also about accepting the conclusions of such debates, as argued by Eric Dacheux, Professor of Communication at Blaise Pascal University, Clermont-Ferrand.

When 27 of the European Union's Member States adopted the so-called Bratislava Declaration in September 2016 ([4]), they presented a clear diagnosis of the reasons for the citizens' current disaffection regarding the EU: members of the general public are worried about what they perceive to be a lack of control and influence over what is going on around them; and they are concerned about global issues such as migration, terrorism, security and economic and social insecurity. The European Commission's 2017 work programme focusing on 'Delivering a Europe that protects, empowers and defends' is a direct response to these concerns.

Professor Mireille Delmas-Marty ([5]) of the Collège de France sees citizens' concerns as the result of tensions between the opposing poles of **freedom versus security** on the one hand, and of **solidarity versus isolationism** on the other.

These concerns have led to a loss of confidence in traditional political institutions, which include the European Union. Indeed, the 2014 European Parliament elections yielded strong results for populist parties. Populism finds fertile soil in claiming that there is a conflict between the so-called will of the people, which is denoted as pure and honest, and that of the elites, who are portrayed as corrupt and self-interested. Political analysis ([6]) of recent election results suggests that a significant proportion of voters worry deeply about the domestic effects of EU membership, as they perceive their lives to be in the hands of an 'alien' ruler. As a result, the Union's delivery, democracy and destiny — all of which are strongly interrelated — are being questioned like never before. The EU needs to redouble its efforts to earn renewed **legitimacy** in the eyes of the European electorate.

The unique richness of Europe, most people would recognise, lies in a combination of unity

and diversity. To sustain this uniqueness, the EU needs to urgently establish a continuous debate between the citizens and the Union's institutions, 'a disempowered dialogue of emancipated people', to quote the philosopher Jürgen Habermas ([7]).

This need received new impetus in 2016, with the referenda in the United Kingdom on Brexit and in the Netherlands on the Association Treaty between the EU and Ukraine. New concerns have also emerged following the outcome of the American presidential election of November 2016 and the positions taken by the new President on international trade and climate change. A meeting of populist leaders in Koblenz on 21 January 2017 seemed to increase the risk of a gradual dismantling of the European project, based on what was perceived by them as a 'positive' alignment of local, national and presidential elections, in Austria, the Netherlands, France, Italy and Germany, towards the end of 2016 and throughout 2017. Eurosceptic and Europhobic parties were confident that the level of popular discontent would trigger the destruction of the European project.

This, however, did not happen. A combination of the final outcome of several elections, most notably the French Presidential election, grass-roots movements ([8]), voter mobilisation and political initiatives, such as the European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe ([9]), has succeeded in countering these gloomy perspectives. A new political alignment convinced European leaders, as stated by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel on 28 May 2017, to 'take their fate back into their own hands'. The European Commission has organised more than 2 000 public events since the publication of the White Paper to open up the debate on the future of Europe to citizens, including over 120 citizens' dialogues and over 60 visits to national parliaments. On 13 September 2017 Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, in his annual State of the Union Address, committed to continuing the debate on the future of Europe up until the June 2019 elections to the European Parliament ([10]). He also expressed his support for the organisation of 'democratic conventions' in 2018, as proposed by France's President Emmanuel Macron ([11]).

But there is more to it than simply restoring a dialogue. The legitimacy of the Union cannot simply depend on a mere **acknowledgement** of the Union by its people, nor its **acceptance** by them. It must also be based on a degree of **emotional engagement** with the Union by Europeans. Legitimacy can only be sustained as a virtual cohesive force if it comes from people's hearts, as well as their minds.

Winning the hearts and minds of citizens is understandably a constant struggle for politicians. However, when times are tough, rabble-rousers and brokers of fear and anger tend to come to the fore, especially when there is no effective counter-action by political leaders offering reason for hope and confidence. This is where the Union can and should play a more prominent role. As public bodies, the EU institutions' own efforts at communication tend to be mostly rational, based on unemotional facts and figures, and avoid the use of emotive imagery. It is clear that the 'rational' advantages of the Union can be presented as successes: the disappearance of wearisome customs procedures for trade between Member States, the absence of internal border checkpoints, the ability of young people within and outside the EU to engage in successful student exchanges and the mobile telephony roaming regulation. But these achievements alone will not succeed in changing people's attitudes. Nor does the arguably more emotive and significant observation that 'the Union means no more war in Europe' speak to Europeans with as much force as it once did. As President Juncker said in Maastricht in December 2016 ([12]), 'We cannot explain the … European project simply by going back to history… We want to convince younger people that the EU is a must today … We have to explain European history in perspective: What is Europe today and what will Europe be tomorrow?'

Any political endeavour needs a solid emotional basis to survive and thrive. Providing an electorate with comprehensive facts and figures is certainly vital, but they cannot by themselves instil public emotion.

This means devising a narrative — not propaganda — that would meet the double objective of helping the European public gain confidence in 'their'

Europe and conveying hope for the future. After all, the EU is known worldwide as an entity that safeguards the rights of citizens through the rule of law, and that is something we can all be proud of. The citizens and the institutions of the European Union have every reason to be bold and to talk more about how best to design the future and give Europeans a vision to believe in.

It is worth recalling that the European project, as an economic and political endeavour, is still very much in its childhood. But only an awareness of clear future perspectives can provide the necessary confidence in the Union's future.

This report aims to provide a contribution to this important debate. After designing the framework for a more citizen-focused Europe, it will elaborate on two key instruments to build new bridges with the citizens — partnerships and the new media. It will then address one of the main target groups needed to achieve this new ambition: Europe's youth. The paper will end with a set of concrete recommendations and communication guidelines.

2. A CITIZEN-FOCUSED AND CITIZEN-OWNED EUROPE

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2.1. Citizens' participation

Growing complexity and interconnection between and within societies have become intrinsic characteristics of the modern world. They impact on dialogue with citizens and shape the outreach tools used. While power is increasingly globalised, the state is no longer an exclusive actor in the system, despite attempts to return to national solutions, as the recent migration and refugee crisis illustrates. This leads to multiple identities, different duties and rights, diverse tasks and varied roles for citizens. But this fragmentation can also cause uncertainty and confusion.

Ensuring public support in times of societal change requires a clear, coherent and critical vision of the essentials of information, communication and dialogue, as well as of the limits of each of these components. The ongoing and radical process of transformation needs therefore to be put into a proper context. Citizens' concerns about identity, citizenship, governance, borders, democracy and dialogue need clear and tangible answers.

As a project that has a daily impact and influence on the lives of 500 million people, the EU must place citizens at the centre of its political action. This implies the need for a more global and flexible approach to information and communication, and more effective and focused cooperation among EU institutions and other levels of governance.

Outreach to citizens is related to the concept of 'community', which embraces the local, regional, national and international contexts that individuals live in to create a common public space, within which individuals can act together on a values-based foundation. The Union, in this context, needs to add its own identity and shared values to existing regional and national notions of belonging which reflect the concept of multilevel citizenship. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty provide exactly that [13].

The new societal and communicational framework also affects the way of doing politics. Traditional representative democracy (i.e. parliamentary government) is now challenged by other forms of democratic expression, namely participatory and deliberative democracy [14].

Social media also facilitate civic participation in the policymaking process, while new methods of public governance are being implemented by various public authorities that attempt to integrate citizens' know-how into the decision-making process, including through social media platforms.

In addition to their representation by elected politicians, citizens aspire more and more to have real, personal ownership of, and involvement in, the various public spheres. In order to regain trust, citizens need to feel that they are the protagonists of policymaking and not just the passive recipients.

The Lisbon Treaty's preamble calls for **enhancing the legitimacy of the Union**. New instruments, such as the citizens' initiative [15], were created to enhance participative democracy at European level. But despite the Treaties' clear commitment, as underlined in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) on participatory democracy and Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) on civil dialogues, the Union's institutions appear to be slow in fully embracing these opportunities [16]. One area where they have done so effectively is in the regular citizens' dialogues organised throughout the EU by the European Commission.

There is equally a need to engage more with Member States in developing a European vision. To paraphrase Jean-Claude Juncker in his 2016 State of the Union Address [17], it is essential to stop **nationalising** the successes and **Europeanising** the failures of the EU. A fairer collaboration between the Member States' national authorities and the EU institutions is needed in their communication with the public.

Finally, the general public also needs a clearer picture of the limits of the Union's capacities. The Union cannot be blamed for everything, just as it cannot be expected to take care of every aspect of daily life. The EU is not involved in all decisions, despite the rhetoric of its detractors. The Union is responsible for the activities that fall within its competences, and how it acts on them is largely

determined by the Member States. Enhancing effective outreach and ownership by citizens requires, on the one hand, that citizens understand the different levels of responsibility and the fundamentals of EU competences and, on the other, that people are given the capacity to decide their future priorities themselves, by providing them with the tools and faculty of choice.

2.2. A values-based Union

In a rapidly changing world, political inspiration and human-centred practices are needed to shape and strengthen the values that are associated with 'Europe'. Europe must be considered not only as a socioeconomic endeavour but also as a community of destiny, life, purpose, responsibility and multicultural learning, as well as a meeting place of multiple identities. The Union's mission today is to redefine its post-war concept and social order in the context of a globalising world. It is no longer possible for the EU to be explained in terms of the traditional, so-called Westphalian system of isolated responsibility of Member States. The Member States as pillars of the Union's project are at the same time part of a common European space; 'splace' as the cross-fertilisation between 'place' and 'space.

To respond to the challenges of globalisation and increasing complexity, the role of education is therefore fundamental. Indeed, learning to live together with our differences and diversity is becoming the central dimension of active citizenship.

In moments of political turmoil and risks on the global world scene, EU leaders should be less restrained in defending the set of values that are embedded in the Treaties, namely to protect, guarantee and empower. These principles are not restricted to European citizens alone, but should also continue to influence the future world organisation with their emphasis on peace, freedom, security, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, social justice and solidarity. Commission President Juncker recently underlined the importance of these foundations of the Union in his September 2017 State of the Union Address, stating that these values are the EU's compass [18]. We need therefore to focus on the values that are common to all European states and communities, as provided for by the Treaties [19]. These include respecting cultural traditions and varied expressions, involving citizens in political life and fostering the welfare and wellbeing of the people.

2.3. Enhancing the democratic process

Finally, in addition to the intrinsic values of the EU project, the European Union's form of cooperation — which is unique and anchored in the rule of law — must remain the reference framework for international cooperation: it is only through European cooperation that Member States can improve their security, prosperity, well-being and stability, and indeed consolidate their democratic processes. In other words, it is in the national interest to cooperate on the European level because the Member States and the EU are not disconnected entities.

The opponents of the Union exploit the mantra that a vote against Europe is a vote for democracy. It is this type of statement and strategy that managed to put the very existence and future of the EU at stake. It is therefore a matter of high priority for the Union to reaffirm that the terms 'Europe' and 'democracy' are not opposed to each other, but rather are closely intertwined. As recalled in the theory of democratic integration [20], the Lisbon Treaty allows for the EU to be described as a **'polity of states and citizens, in which the citizens are entitled to participate both in the national democracies of the countries and in the common democracy of the Union'**. In other words, it is the citizens themselves who are, ultimately, the owners of EU democracy, leading to Europeanisation through democratisation.

In this respect, a new kind of political thinking is needed, as was accurately expressed in 2014 by the Charter for Multi-Level Governance of the Committee of the Regions [21], which refers to the principles of **togetherness, partnership, awareness of interdependence, multi-actor community, efficiency, subsidiarity, transparency and sharing of best practices**, enabling the development of **a transparent, open and inclusive policymaking process, promoting participation and partnership,**

respecting subsidiarity and proportionality in policymaking and ensuring maximum fundamental rights protection at all levels of governance to strengthen institutional capacity building and investing in policy learning among all levels of governance.

Following the adoption of the Charter for Multi-Level Governance, the concept of evidence-based and place-based multilevel/multiactor governance has gained increasing importance as a policy tool in managing diversity and cross-border challenges [22].

In order to enhance this new perspective of citizens' ownership of the European project, two main instruments are proposed: a new generation of partnerships and a systematic use of new communication technologies.

3. FOSTERING NEW FORMS OF PARTNERSHIPS

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While the task of building new bridges between Europe and its citizens is a matter for all institutions and offers partnership opportunities to a large range of organisations, this report will focus on two levels which represent a specific connection to most EU citizens, namely the local and regional levels. Other partnership opportunities offered by the EU institutions are examined under Section 6.2.

3.1. Listen to and liaise directly with the local level

To close the perceived gap with its citizens, the European Union needs to be where its citizens are: in local communities, rural areas and larger cities. It must trigger and foster a new dialogue directly with the people, and bring Europe onto every street. For the European Union, the local context represents the natural, most tangible and nearest circle of belonging. This is the place where people live, work, pursue opportunities, experience good and bad times and are socially connected and culturally active. It is the place where people face their daily challenges.

However, no one is truly only 'local'; everyone is simultaneously also part of an interconnected world which is both local and European. Mayors and councillors therefore have a vital role to play.

In order to reconnect with grass-roots level organisations, the EU needs to fully recognise and exploit the know-how of civil society representatives. They are the ones who often define new solutions, as was evidenced recently by the Covenant of Mayors on climate change [23]. Grass-roots organisations have been particularly vocal in recent months in defending European values and enhancing the social dimension of the European project in times of growing inequality and external threats [24]. **'Pulse of Europe'** is a good example of this mobilisation.

3.2. A Europe with the regions

Beyond the grass-roots level, regions also play a growing role in rethinking governance in the Union and its Member States. With their solid socioeconomic base and common cultural identity, they offer the right scale for policy orientations and adequate delivery in many policy areas, as they are important actors and intermediaries in the outreach to citizens. Regions also play an important role in cross-border cooperation, an area where Europe's presence is tangibly felt.

The long-standing responsibility and (co-)management of regions in European regional policy and the EU's Structural Funds has also enhanced the role of regions.

Based on these considerations, the aim should not be to build an alternative 'Europe **of** the regions', but rather to form a 'Europe **with** the regions', as part of a multilevel governance concept based on mutual responsibility and partnership.

Finally, following the multilevel governance paradigm, regions should also be encouraged to fully associate cities and other local authorities, including socioeconomic partners at regional level, in designing and implementing regional partnership agreements on EU affairs.

4. SYSTEMATIC USE OF NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

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Outreach, communication and dialogue between Europe and its citizens is largely embedded in our digital society and social media. New technologies, and especially social media, empower citizens to express themselves directly and give a voice to people all over Europe. When implementing a communication strategy, it is necessary to take into account these radical changes.

Technology platforms and systems are evolving in such a way that every citizen today has the capacity to become not only a passive **recipient**, but also an active **producer** of information, with the ability to directly influence the information landscape and to communicate ideas to decision-makers in real time. This represents a real democratisation in information provision, with an unprecedented capacity for citizens to produce and consume content. But it also has more negative aspects, as demonstrated by the rise of fake news, 'alternative facts' and myths.

A side effect of these developments is that the traditional media, which are suffering from the economic consequences of the staggering diversification of communication channels, are increasingly on the lookout for more sensationalist topics to keep audience numbers up. Many professional organisations in the media sector agree that there has been a drop in the quality and trustworthiness of traditional media [25], paving the way for extremist and populist trends. As a scientific study confirms, **'the rise of populism in Europe can be traced through online behaviour …'** [26].

This evolution calls for new types of vigilance, where institutions and individuals alike have a role to play.

4.1. Media and democracy

All democratic theory proceeds from the assumption that citizens can only properly form their opinions and make rational decisions if they are duly **informed** about the matter at hand [27]. It is clear that the media themselves have an important role in providing political information, especially when it comes to EU policies. Broadcasters and other media are crucial for keeping the other powers in check. Public broadcasters were created to guarantee political pluralism in European societies; it is now important to make this model compatible with the new media landscape.

As regards media literacy, including at the European level [28], there are serious concerns about the capacity of the majority of the population to find, access, understand and evaluate the flow of online information. A significant part of the population does not interact online at all and does not make use of the possibilities to (co-)create content.

The Union has an important role to play, therefore, in preserving media pluralism, transparency and objectivity, as stated in Article 11(2) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and in fostering access to and use of IT tools by all citizens. While the quality of the message content remains a prerequisite, and despite the fact that traditional channels of information remain largely in use, digital democracy can contribute to enabling, engaging and empowering citizens. It makes democracy more representative, participatory and deliberative. This will be a huge challenge for the generations to come.

4.2. Changing communication habits

Citizens are also changing their communication consumption habits. In this area there is also, undoubtedly, a growing generational gap. While traditional mass media (television, radio and newspapers) are still the main information source for those aged 55 and over, there has been a significant rise in the use of online social networks, which constitute the main information source for those under the age of 40. The trend in favour of the latter is growing fast [29]. Citizens recognise the political utility of social networks, but also criticise the unreliability of the information they contain.

Outreach, communication and dialogue between Europe and its citizens is largely embedded in our digital society and the social media where quality content remains a prerequisite. The importance of

big data has to be acknowledged in order to collect and use data properly.

Digital democracy contributes ever increasingly to enabling, engaging and empowering citizens. It makes democracy more representative, participatory and deliberative. Using information and communication technologies helps to improve transparency, identify new communication channels, create more potential and give room to new forms and means of expression. In this context, an effective communication model must be based on a joined-up approach, including multidirectional communication. The central actor needs to link up with all stakeholders and use the tools that the wider public uses. By listening to citizens, this collaborative approach can help make it clear that the EU institutions are open and transparent. Crowdsourcing may also help increase the dissemination of knowledge to the wider population. In this context, it is crucial to ensure a fast capacity for reaction. Indeed, social media enables the quick spread of information — including fake news. Therefore, public institutions are expected to react in a nearly instant mode to an ever-increasing number of complex issues.

It is, however, important to draw attention to the misuse of e-democracy, which can become a destructive instrument in the hands of anti-democratic forces. The European institutions need to develop their strategies around four main concepts — transparency, integrity, participation and collaboration — if they are to ensure that

citizens do not feel that their contributions have no effect or that they are not listened to.

The communication strategy of the EU institutions needs to take account of these trends, and to fully acknowledge the plurality of social realities in Europe. The entity sending out a message needs to fully understand the social reality and expectations of the receiving entity, and adapt the content and format accordingly.

As a consequence, the following elements should be taken into account when deploying new communication activities that focus on fostering dialogue between the Union and its citizens.

- Clarity to be ensured by the sender (who is sending the message?).

- Is it a message from the EU or from a Member State? (They often contradict each other).

- Respect of the three components of the identity phenomenon: **identity of memory, identity of action** and **identity of projection**. A positive balance between the three elements needs to be pursued.

- Reference, in addressing messages to citizens, to the fundamentals of society: why?, when?, where? and how?

- Finally, tailoring messages to the specific interests of various target groups and, in particular, European youth.

5. YOUTH, INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND EDUCATION

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More than 40 % of Europeans are under the age of 35. Young people remain, more than ever, key communication and dialogue partners. They usually tend to be more 'Euro-critical' than 'Eurosceptic' and are often aware of the advantages of the Union, but may well advocate alternative models of EU governance. The 'Generation What?' report commissioned by the European Broadcasting Union ([30]) in 2016 shows that trust, fairness and support for their abilities make young people optimistic about the future and strengthen their confidence. Their sense of solidarity and commitment focuses far more on social activities than on politics. A new narrative and a new scale of values are necessary to mobilise these young adults in support of the European process.

The European Broadcasting Union study ([31]) also shows that millennials — those born between 1980 and 2000 — tend to adhere to new job values that differ from those of previous generations. Public administrations need to be aware of this. For millennials, career progression, financial incentives, training opportunities and flexible work arrangements are important attributes when considering a potential job ([32]).

The referendum on membership of the EU that was held in the United Kingdom on 23 June 2016 provides an excellent example of how young people today position themselves with respect to the European Union ([33]). For the older generations, Europe was the point of arrival; for millennials, Europe is the point of departure, since it is all they have ever known. Special attention to young people's considerations and concerns does not, however, remove the need for communication strategies that favour intergenerational solidarity.

5.1. Education in a multicultural context

In today's complex and multicultural societies, education at all levels, from primary schools to lifelong learning institutions, is facing the critical challenge of reflecting and guiding the plurality that is present within European societies, communities and cultures, faced with a radically changing sociocultural context.

Education has the responsibility to respond all at once to the challenges of globalism and complexity, cultural disintegration, the dispersion and fragmentation of both knowledge and communication channels, and the unequal distribution of opportunities throughout European societies.

Education should better prepare people of different backgrounds and of varying talents for a life together **in dialogue**. Education has a key role to play in our rapidly evolving societies. The social role of education should be fully addressed in the current discussion on the future of Europe.

5.2. Promoting the European dimension in citizenship education

As already mentioned, the intertwining of globalisation and Europeanisation has many policy consequences, and produces different lines of thought and action which need to be taken into account in developing new forms of dialogue with citizens. Education about how to engage in dialogue needs to be improved; any kind of education system needs to transmit and shape the value systems of the society in which it is embedded, and actively contribute to the new EU dialogue.

The EU should promote a broadly defined European studies curriculum for all stages of informal, non-formal and formal education, following the success of the Erasmus+ programme and, more recently, the European Solidarity Corps ([34]). The EU should also strengthen its lifelong learning agenda to foster active and responsible **European Union citizenship**. An inclusive Europe-oriented education, covering responsible citizenship, multiple identities and citizens' dialogue, also needs to consider differentiated narratives, curriculum content and sociocultural relevance ([35]).

6. PROPOSALS

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6.1. Participatory democracy: implementing Treaty opportunities

The Treaty of Lisbon introduced the concept of European participatory democracy. The first set of proposals aims to address more of the possibilities offered by the Treaty and to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the Union.

Horizontal civil dialogue (Article 11(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU))

Treaty provision: 'The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.'

The promotion of horizontal civil dialogue at European level is very welcome and is long overdue. This is all the more relevant given that young people prefer more activity-related and issue-related politics. Several interesting initiatives have been launched recently in this area which could serve as pilots for more global action. These include the 'My Europe…Tomorrow' initiative, launched by the European Economic and Social Committee; the 'Eleven-One-Austria Project' ([36]), run by the Austrian Institute for European Law and Policy together with the University of Graz; and the 'REIsearch' project and 'Futurium' open-source tool, developed internally within the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology.

The vertical civil dialogue (Article 11(2) TEU)

Treaty provision: 'The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.'

The vertical civil dialogue (VCD) has to be enforced and opened up as widely as possible. The fragmentary, lobbyist-dominated character of vertical civil dialogue needs to be replaced and opened up to include input from the general public. Agenda-setting needs to be clearly bottom-up, letting citizens co-decide in a reformed model that builds consensus from below.

It is important that quality take the lead over quantity and that the Commission initiate a 'dialogue regime' where the European institutions focus on delivering on substance rather than concentrating on procedures ([37]).

To win citizens' backing for the European project through wider participation, it is also recommended that a single online 'eleven-two-tool' platform be installed.

EU citizens' initiative (Article 11(4) TEU)

Treaty provision: 'Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties.'

The European citizens' initiative (ECI) needs significant changes. Its reform should be seen as a window of opportunity to eliminate the unnecessary barriers and hurdles encountered so far. In September 2017 the European Commission proposed a revision of the initiative to make it more accessible, user-friendly and easier for organisers and supporters to use ([38]).

The ECI mechanism needs to change if it is to perform better in the future. It should be a platform of direct exchange between the citizens and 'their' Commission, creating a single handling entity, preferably run by an outsourced body. The European Commission should start to deal with unsuccessful but interesting ECIs, while giving serious ECIs, successful ones in particular, a chance to become partners in the vertical dialogue.

Data requirements should be reduced at regional and local levels, while citizens' committees should be given legal status, thus eliminating non-productive administrative burdens and increasing general awareness and knowledge of the ECI.

Dialogue on European values (Article 17(3) TFEU)

Treaty provision: 'Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with … churches and [philosophical and non-confessional] organisations.'

This dialogue has to be opened up to the members of all accredited organisations. It also has to diversify the dialogue away from a Brussels-based dialogue to a genuinely open and European one. The current setting needs enriching and opening up to turn it into a broad and fruitful public dialogue, connected to communities and citizens.

Delegated acts (Article 290(1) TFEU)

Treaty provision: 'A legislative act may delegate to the Commission the power to adopt non-legislative acts of general application to supplement or amend certain non-essential elements of the legislative act.

The objectives, content, scope and duration of the delegation of power shall be explicitly defined in the legislative acts. The essential elements of an area shall be reserved for the legislative act and accordingly shall not be the subject of a delegation of power.'

Article 290 of the TFEU allows the EU legislator to delegate to the Commission the power to adopt non-legislative acts of general application that supplement or amend certain non-essential elements of a legislative act. These delegated acts are of great importance for the implementation and the daily governance of many important policy areas. Results on the ground often depend on the right knowledge and understanding of the consequence of delegated acts.

The transparency of and communication about these delegated acts should be improved, to better inform the general public.

Deepening democratic representation at European level

Initiating the 'Spitzenkandidaten' process during the last European Parliament elections represented a significant step forward in improving citizens' legitimisation of the nomination of the President of the European Commission, but additional steps are needed to develop this further.

The process could be extended to result in the direct election of a single President of the European Union. It could be the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission or the President of a new functional constellation.

The election of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) on the basis of Member State-determined constituencies has been regularly questioned. An EU-wide electoral constituency should be created for the election of MEPs.

6.2. Setting up partnership agreements: improving the existing instruments of the EU institutions for enhancing outreach

Communication of EU affairs must not be the responsibility of the European institutions alone; it must be shared across all other levels of governance — national, local and regional. A new generation of partnership agreements is necessary to succeed in doing so. This set of proposals also passes in review some of the current actions as implemented by the Commission.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament has a crucial role to play during European election campaigns as well as in the course of the ensuing mandate. The campaigns offer a unique opportunity to have dialogue on, debate and discuss EU issues with the general public, to address their concerns, anxieties and expectations, to listen to their criticisms and to present the added value, ambitions and achievements of the European project. The mandate provides the opportunity to deliver on the promises made during the campaign.

The low turnout (42.6 % of the eligible EU-wide electorate) at the last European Parliament elections in 2014 remains, however, a great concern. Greater focus should be given to analysing why almost 60 % of eligible voters chose not to participate in the election. In the run-up to the forthcoming elections in 2019, more engagement is undoubtedly needed by organisations at local, regional and national levels, as well as from civil society as a whole, to campaign for Europe together.

The European Parliament has become a real parliament: not a mere 'echo chamber' for EU citizens, but a co-legislator in Union-wide policies. As a result, the European Parliament has a special opportunity to interact from a bottom-up perspective with citizens, who are the source of its legitimacy, and to better explain its role and achievements in more accessible terms. This should be organised in cooperation with the other institutions and with national, regional and local representatives. Common debates and events would have a positive role to play in this regard.

The European Parliament should open its doors to citizens on a regular basis in order to provide them with the opportunity to directly submit their proposals and concerns to a joint plenary session with Members of the European Parliament and Members of the European Commission. These sessions should also be open to citizens participating remotely via the internet or through social media.

The European Parliament's 'European Citizen's Prize', honouring committed Europeans, deserves to be highlighted and fully supported.

EUROPEAN COUNCIL

As mentioned earlier in this report, the time seems right to challenge the false dichotomy between 'Europe' and 'democracy'. An intolerable situation has gradually developed in which Member States argue that the EU does not fulfil its mission, while they themselves obstruct its decisions. This lack of basic coherence leads to confusion and breeds mistrust among the general public.

All institutions must work together to eliminate the contradiction between the Union's responsibilities and ambitions on the one hand, and those of the Member States on the other, with due recognition of their respective competences, and in full respect of the subsidiarity principle, where the Union deals with the large issues and does not focus unnecessarily on the smaller ones, to be dealt with at national, regional or local level.

The lessons from the 2016 referenda, the European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe and recent developments on the international scene provide new scope for a renewed dialogue between the Council and the other institutions, in order to consolidate the Union both internally and at international level.

EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

The European Committee of the Regions plays an important role in connecting the Union with its citizens at the two levels that citizens feel the greatest connection with: the local and the regional levels. On the one hand, regional and local representatives are able to voice local citizens' concerns directly to the political assembly. They are best placed to relay their daily experience and local expertise, given that they are directly confronted with the challenges and concerns of the citizens. These include economic problems, job creation, social wellbeing, the environment and security. On the other hand, being interinstitutionally connected, regional and local representatives have a unique opportunity to explain and disseminate Europe's goals and achievements at the local level. The Committee of the Regions is ideally placed to ensure respect for subsidiarity and to connect the Union with its people [39]. It could thus gradually evolve towards becoming a reflection chamber of the Council on territorial issues.

The European Committee of the Regions' 2015-2019 communication strategy aims to better connect Europe with its citizens and to improve the dialogue and interaction directly, including through the use of digital tools, between the regional and the local level and all European institutions. Several priorities have been developed and concrete actions proposed, giving a key role to the Committee's Members as committed and engaged players. Results can only be expected once the interaction with the other EU institutions becomes two-way — not just in terms of interinstitutional networking, but particularly in terms of interinstitutional partnership. Enhancing common communication on cohesion policy might serve as a good example.

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

As the main institutional bridge between Europe and civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) ensures that European policies and legislation tie in better with the economic and social situations on the ground, thereby promoting the development of a more participatory European Union and enhancing the role of civil society.

More contacts and improved partnerships with the wide range of actors represented in the EESC — based on the concept of multiactor governance — need to be considered, in order to help develop proposals that will benefit citizens and civil society. These partners include entrepreneurial associations; trade unions; socioeconomic bodies and networks; cultural, environmental and social networks and organisations; NGOs; and think tanks. No new outreach strategy can be fully successful without their involvement.

European political parties have also to fully play their role and to be more prominently involved in connecting with the grass-roots organisations operating at the national and regional levels.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Representations in the Member States

The European Commission's representations play an increasingly important role at national level, being the extension and hub of the European Commission in their respective countries. Representations, the scope of which has already been widened, should be more extensively used, connecting in their daily work with national, regional and local authorities, social partners, academics, researchers, journalists, businesses, cultural actors and the media, in order to relay EU priorities and feed the domestic debate. Their outreach could be improved by involving a broader network of high-level experts from different spheres, including from the Commission's specialised services.

Well-known cultural and sports personalities could be asked to serve as Union ambassadors.

Europe Direct Information Centres (EDICs)

The over 500 EDICs across the European Union play an essential role as important partners for interacting with citizens and connecting them with the EU. As the first contact point for citizens, their proactive role in communicating the Union's ambitions and achievements should be improved. They have an important role to play in enhancing the 'Dialogue on Europe and Europe in dialogue' mission set out in this report.

More coherence in action and narrative would, however, be needed, in order to enable them to better interlink and co-create stories with their local and regional communities and their existing platforms and agencies, by providing local colour to Union policies and making full use of digital tools. Improved cooperation between the EDICs and the European Committee of the Regions should be fostered.

Citizens' dialogues

Citizens' dialogues provide citizens with an opportunity to have discussions with decision-makers, including the Members of the European Commission and other European, national and regional politicians, as well as with senior Commission officials. Between January 2015 and September 2017, the European Commission held 333 citizens' dialogues in 145 towns throughout the EU. With the citizens' dialogues to debate on the Future of Europe, held between March and September 2017, the Commission has potentially reached out to 34 million Europeans through media and social media coverage.

Citizens' dialogues are a significant initiative to help the EU connect with its citizens. They give an opportunity for Commissioners and Commission representatives to be active in the Member States and to experience Europe 'in situ'. It is important that they connect, as much as possible, with the lives of the general public.

Citizens' dialogues can, however, only be useful if they are conceived as a two-way exercise, enabling citizens to fully engage in the debate and bringing them onto the podium.

The citizens' dialogues need to be continued and their frequency increased. Their audiences should not be limited to the 'usual attendees', but rather actively widened to include local people and stakeholders.

European networks

European networks have flourished over the years, adding great value to the Union's activities, as well as connecting and serving people in their fields of interest and activity.

Their services, expertise, value creation, communication and governance provide an important supportive role to the EU institutions and to citizens.

Effective interactive platforms include citizens' and educational networks, but overlaps in their activities have sometimes resulted in a lack of coherence in their actions.

National websites could be developed to streamline and reinforce cooperation between existing networks, by using a single brand and a single back office. A more clearly defined role for the Europe Direct Centres would also be beneficial. These should become the central focal points on EU information (EU 'one-stop shops'), while at the same time redirecting citizens and organisations to the more specialised EU networks operating in their region.

6.3. Communication guidelines

This set of proposals provides the EU institutions with guidelines that could inspire new avenues to increase the impact of their current communication action, either by better targeting the audience or by developing new communication instruments.

1. Develop a global strategy to improve coordination between EU institutions and Member States when communicating on European matters. A real mobilisation at the level of Member States, regions and local communities is necessary to reverse the current nationalistic tendencies. It is important to identify the opportunities for joint communication actions and to ensure their consistency across different policy fields, while recalling that 'coordination' does not mean 'centralisation'.

2. Give a new impetus to the European integration project by articulating a new narrative following the debate on the Bratislava Declaration, linked to values and political aspirations. While technicalities and the processes of decision-making are important for the inner circle, the general public expects a clear context for decisions, vision and tangible delivery. A more political Commission must better explain its choices and the goals of its decision-making.

3. The EU institutions should collectively agree on the means to inspire creativity and emotion when communicating with citizens, while focusing on the essence, keeping it simple and getting as close as possible to people's day-to-day concerns.

4. Explain clearly the cost of a 'disunited Europe' and the importance of political stability.

5. Stimulate public debate and true dialogue about European topics: citizens must 'own' the European project — their project — and they need to feel that they are welcome to take an active part in the policymaking process. A new generation of citizens' dialogues should be launched involving personalities from the cultural, artistic and sporting worlds, as culture and sport are the most visible and evident instruments for creating a common belonging. Complement the top-down communication by bottom-up and decentralised communication, giving maximum priority to interaction and co-creation, and acknowledging that Europe is about dialogue and not just about giving information on facts.

6. Be continuously proactive and less defensive, and accept criticisms with openness. Invest in 'networked communication' and be where the citizens are.

7. Establish a new media strategy, bearing in mind that neither television nor social media can on their own reverse the loss of popularity of the Union, which is caused by reduced engagement by the general public that can only partly be explained by an information deficit.

8. Develop and implement new ways of working with the media, fully respecting its autonomy, in order to foster in-depth debates on European issues and ensure that the EU's position is

heard. Work with the media to avoid coverage of EU topics being limited to specialised pages, instead of being treated as national or regional items.

9. Streamline and simplify the communication activities of the networks set up by the Union.

10. Carry out more proactive communication actions to encourage citizens' participation in public consultations. Make full use of the opportunities offered by social media to support digital democracy, while drastically limiting print communication.

11. Emphasise the diverse identities and cultures of EU citizens by respecting and using their respective languages.

12. Develop more effective intergenerational communication.

13. Mobilise Erasmus alumni and other university students to speak about European affairs.

14. Make full use of the educational potential of communication.

15. Focus on communicating with young people to increase their understanding of European issues. Explain the historical context in which the European project was initiated. Increase their awareness of the fact that the past is part of their future.

6.4. General recommendations

The final set of proposals includes recommendations beyond the single field of communication. These recommendations range from encouraging bottom-up, decentralised 'citizens' assemblies' (which would encourage reflection and debate in order to engage and take ownership of the future of Europe), to promoting new schemes facilitating exchanges and networks, based on the 'Erasmus+ ' experience.

1. Create a permanent discussion platform between the European Commission and citizens' representatives and install a single online 'Article 11' platform.

2. Develop a White Paper on EU citizenship.

3. Develop new means of participative democracy, based on the experiences of the G-1000 platform for democratic innovation ([40]) and the concept of 'deliberative democracy'. The objective is to involve 'non-organised citizens', as well as organised movements belonging to different groups in society, in order to discuss essential societal issues, and enable them to develop proposals that can be brought into the public sphere and submitted to public authorities for further development. Bottom-up, decentralised 'citizens' assemblies' under different forms could be encouraged and sustained as a collective process of reflection on the values that consolidate a community and the reasons for building a future together. Such assemblies could be organised in different Member States or regions, and also as transregional ones, with a view to bringing citizens' proposals together. The outcome of these debates should be voiced in and connected to the European Parliament. Regular European citizens' 'question-time' sessions should be organised for citizens in the European Parliament, as described in Section 6.2.

4. Launch a Covenant of Cities and Regions for Europe coupled with an online platform supported by grassroots movements.

5. Conclude a functional cooperation agreement between the European Committee of the Regions and all other European institutions, to cover not only interinstitutional networking, but also an obligation to spontaneously provide all information to each other, and to develop a common dialogue, communication and outreach with citizens.

6. Encourage and sustain town hall debates 'reflecting and talking about Europe'.

7. Provide national and regional parliaments with the possibility to show a 'green card' for legislative proposals put forward by citizens. In addition to the yellow and orange cards, which are already in place, the 'green card' would compel the Commission, following a proposal submitted by one third of the national and regional parliaments, to examine the proposal for EU action in any given policy area.

8. Create a European Foundation, supported by the EU, Member States, companies and private persons, in order to develop a better understanding between the EU and its citizens, to foster exchanges and to organise competitions, debates and colloquia between young people.

9. Cooperate closely with the European Festival Association to develop placements under the European Solidarity Corps for exchanges and voluntary actions in the areas of culture and cultural heritage, to be developed in the context of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018.

10. Launch a European training programme for regional and local journalists.

11. Implement the Council resolution on the structured dialogue and the future development of the dialogue with young people in the context of policies for European cooperation in the youth field, post 2018 ([41]), in order to enable all young people to engage in a diverse, connected and inclusive Europe. The Commission should take into account the joint recommendations set out in the resolution, including those concerning: 'Young people under pressure: building resilience and self-confidence'; 'Beyond fear and intolerance — Experience diversity'; 'Towards an education system that realises young people's potential'; 'Fostering young people's engagement in society in particular for vulnerable groups'; and 'Rebuilding the trust of young people in the European project'.

12. Launch a 'Buses4Peace' initiative, directed at schools, with the aim of enhancing knowledge of the history of wars and peace in Europe; research the impact of the cultural heritage of war in contemporary Europe; and explore new methods to promote the knowledge of the cultural heritage of war.

13. Develop an overall communication campaign for citizens, emphasising the existing means at their disposal to express their voice on EU affairs, encouraging citizens' participation in public consultations on the EU and making full use of social media to enhance young people's participation.

14. Based on the 'Erasmus+' experience, promote new schemes to facilitate exchanges and networks among other socioeconomic groups, and develop similar schemes for local politicians.

15. Promote a broadly defined European studies curriculum for all stages of education, from primary school onwards.

7. CONCLUSION

7. CONCLUSION

The European Union has recently gone through a major identity crisis, marked, since the turn of the decade, by significant economic challenges, mounting Euroscepticism and extremism and unprecedented signs of popular mistrust in the European project.

The results of the 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom were met by many with a feeling of sadness and incredulity, but by others with a realistic hope that the European project would break down altogether. Due to a number of converging factors, combining political and citizens' mobilisation, these negative predictions have not become reality. The European idea seems, on the contrary, to have gathered new momentum. These recent positive developments need to be nuanced with a certain degree of caution. They place new responsibilities on EU leaders and compel them to achieve positive results. The moment seems opportune to directly address the real causes of Euroscepticism and to identify practical new means to empower EU citizens, by turning them into actors with a common endeavour. To recapture the trust of the public, urgent action based on four complementary axes is proposed.

- Set up policies that respond to the concerns of citizens. In this sense, the European Commission's 2017 work programme — 'Delivering a Europe that delivers, protects, empowers and defends' — is a concrete example of the much-needed response to popular concerns. People do not only expect **facts**; they also want to be involved in making **choices** that they can discuss and subsequently act upon. The Union should not only fulfil its regulatory duties to its full capacity, it should also be seen to be acting swiftly and effectively whenever political and societal events occur.

- Implement real, meaningful participatory democracy, providing citizens with the possibility to become protagonists of political action within the Union. This participation, which could be achieved through new forms of partnership agreements, particularly at local and regional levels, would increase the sense of ownership by citizens of the project as a whole.

- Fully exploit new communication tools as a means to enable citizens to better access and create content, including on EU matters that directly concern their daily lives.

- Finally, define a new approach to young people as a priority target audience, by developing a values-based narrative to attract the interest of younger generations and provide them with the tools to become the new leaders of the European project.

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