

"Citizens at the Center for a More Democratic Europe"

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1 . A new relationship between the EU and its citizens

General public's trust in the EU steadily eroded, reason for President Juncker to stress in his inaugural speech in 2014 that his Commission will be the " Last- chance" one.

The challenge still is how to better explain what's actually being done.

Citizens are to be able to better understand how the Union affects their daily lives, but more importantly, they also need to feel that they are fully part of the European project, whereas its unique richness lies in its unity and diversity.

Many efforts have been made in communication and information, both with limited success, notwithstanding suggested improvement, according to new public polls. The 'momentum' has therefore to be seized towards a new attitude, in line with the 'openness' outlined in the Treaty with a mindset of 'open government', appealing to citizens as an equal partner.

Democracy is about controversy, " a disempowered dialogue of emancipated people"(Habermas), but also accepting the conclusions of debates.

The perceived lack of control and influence are of real concern of the citizens, reason why the Commissions' work programme was focusing rightly on " delivering a Europe that protects, empowers and defends".

Tensions between freedom vs security and solidarity vs isolationism finds fertile soil for populism. Unions' delivery, democracy and destiny, strongly intertwined, are being questioned and need to earn a new legitimacy,

Upcoming elections in the past period were for Eurosceptic and Eurofobic parties a prospect for destruction of the European project, but this however did not happen. Continuing debate on the future of Europe is needed but isn't sufficient: acknowledgement, acceptance and emotional engagement together are to be in place to improve the legitimacy of the Union. A narrative – not propaganda- as a vision, to believe in, is needed.

2 . A citizens focused and – owned Europe

Growing complexity and interconnection between and within societies have become intrinsic characteristics of the modern world. Power is increasingly globalised, the state is no longer an exclusive actor in the system. Ensuring support in times of societal changes requires a clear, coherent and critical vision on the essentials of information, communication and dialogue as well of its limits. Not nationalising the successes and Europeanising the failures which leads to confusion for the citizens.

Outreach to citizens is related to the concept of 'community' in all contexts. The Union needs to add its own identity and shared values to existing local, regional and national notions of belonging which reflects the concept of multilevel citizenship.

Traditional representative democracy is now challenged by other forms of participatory and deliberative democracy. Social media also facilitate civic participation in the policy making process. Citizens aspire to have real, personal ownership and involvement as protagonists.

In a rapidly changing world, political inspiration and human centred practices are needed to shape and strengthen the values that are associated with Europe. The Unions' emphasis on peace, freedom, security, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, social justice and solidarity are the values that are common to all European states and communities. The role of education therefore is fundamental.

The Union form of cooperation remain the reference framework as a form of 'reasonable democracy'. Member states and the Union are not disconnected entities. The Union has to be described as " a polity of states and citizens" in which the citizens are entitled to participate both in the national democracies of their countries and in the common democracy of the EU, as part of multilevel and multi-actor governance, evidence- and place-based. I'm convinced that democratisation of the Union is the central pillar leading to more Europeanisation.

3 . Fostering new forms of Partnerships

The EU has to listen, liaise and act directly with the local level. The Union has to be where the citizens are, be present in every street and foster a new dialogue and partnership with the people on the ground, involving all actors of local civil society. The local context represents the most natural, most tangible and nearest circle of belonging where people face their daily challenges. Mayors, Eldermen and Councillors therefore have a vital role to play.

It also has to directly cooperate more and better with the regions. They indeed play a growing role in rethinking governance in the Union and its Member States and are important actors and intermediaries in the outreach to citizens, also essential to develop cross-border cooperation, an area where Europe's presence is tangibly felt. The aim should not be to build an alternative Europe of the Regions but rather form a Europe with the Regions.

4 .Systemic use of new communication technologies

Outreach, communication and dialogue between Europe and its citizens is largely embedded in our digital society and social media. Every citizen has the capacity not only to be the recipient, but also an active producer of information, leading to democratisation in information provision.

Citizens can only properly form their opinions and make rational decisions if they are duly informed ; therefore, media literacy is a prerequisite..

The Union has an important role to play in preserving media pluralism, transparency and objectivity leading to real digital democracy.

Citizens are also changing their communication habits: an effective communication model must be based on a joint-up approach, including multidirectional communication.

Focus has to be on the plurality of different social realities where the sender of the message and the receiver are to fit to those realities.

5 . Youth, intergenerational solidarity and education

Young people are key communication partners who will advocate alternative models of governance and need a new narrative whereby intergenerational solidarity has also to have its place.

In today's complex and multicultural societies, education at all levels is facing the critical challenge of reflecting and guiding the pluralities that are present within European societies, communities and cultures, for life together in dialogue.

A broadly defined European studies curriculum for all stages of formal, non- formal en informal education is needed, following the success of the Erasmus+ programmes and, more recently, the European Solidarity Corps.

6 . Proposals

6 . 1. Participatory democracy : implementing Treaty Opportunities

Horizontal dialogue

Several interesting initiatives have been launched recently in this area which could serve as pilots for more global action. The promotion of horizontal civil dialogue at European level is very welcome and has to be improved, also digitally.

Vertical civil dialogue

The vertical civil dialogue with representative associations and civil society has to be enforced and opened up as widely as possible : the fragmentary , lobbyist- dominated character needs to be replaced and opened up to include input from the general public with a clearly bottom-up agenda; quality has to take the lead over quantity; a single online " eleven-two-tool platform" has to be installed.

EU Citizens' initiative

The actual ECI largely failed and needs significant changes. The recently proposed revision by the Commission gives a partly answer to the critics, by eliminating unnecessary barriers encountered so far.

But it has to go further to perform better and 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 EC should start to deal with unsuccessful but interesting ECI's, while giving serious ECI's, successful ones in particular, a chance to become partners in the vertical dialogue.

Dialogue on European values

This dialogue has to be opened to the members of all accredited convictions and organisations and has to diversify the dialogue also to a genuinely open and European one, also away from Brussels, connected to communities and citizens.

Delegated acts

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 legislative 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 elections represented a significant step forward in improving legitimation 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 election of a single President.

Furthermore, the election of Members of the European Parliament has to be organised in an EU-wide electoral constituency.

6 . 2. 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; a new generation of partnership agreements is necessary to succeed in doing so. A set of proposals also passes in review some of the current actions implemented by the Commission.

European Parliament

The low turnout at the last European Parliament elections in 2014 remains of great concern. The EP, as a real parliament, has a crucial role to play during election campaigns as well as in the course of the ensuing mandate.

As a result it has a special opportunity to interact from a bottom- up perspective with citizens, who are the source of its legitimacy. 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 EP 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 EP and the EC, also to be open to citizens participating remotely via internet or through social media.

European Council

The times seem right to challenge the false dichotomy between 'Europe' and 'democracy'. An intolerable situation has gradually developed in which Member States argue that the Union 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.

With due recognition of their respective competences and in full respect of the subsidiarity principle, all institutions must work together to eliminate these contradictions. A renewed dialogue between the Council and the other institutions has to consolidate the Union both internally as at international level.

European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions plays an important role connecting the Union with its citizens. Regional and local representatives are able to voice local citizens' concerns directly to the political assembly on the one hand and to explain and disseminate Europe's goals and achievements on the other.

It could thus gradually evolve towards becoming a reflection chamber of the Council on territorial issues.

Results in the mean time 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.

European Economic and Social Committee

As the main institutional bridge between Europe and the civil society, the EESC ensures that European policies and legislation tie in better with the economic and social situations on the ground.

More contacts and improved partnerships with the wide range of actors represented in the EESC need to be considered. No new outreach strategy can be fully successful without their active involvement.

European political parties

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

European Commission

Representations in the Member States

The EC representations have an increasingly important place at the national level, being the extension and hub of the EC.

Their scope already been widened, they should be more intensively used, connecting in their daily work with national, regional and local authorities, social partners, academics, researchers, journalists, media, business, cultural actors in order to relay EU priorities and feed the domestic debates. Well-known cultural and sports personalities could be asked to serve as Union ambassadors.

Europe Direct Information Centres (EDIC's)

EDIC's, as the first contact point for citizens, play an essential role as important partners for interacting with them and connecting them with the EU.

More coherence in action and narrative would be needed, in order to enable them to better interlink and co- create stories with their local communities and their existing platforms and agencies, by providing local colour to Unions policies and making full use of digital tools.

Improved cooperation between EDIC's 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, regional and local politicians as well with senior Commission officials; with 333 citizens' dialogues in 145 towns between January 2015 and September 2017 and dialogues on the Future of Europe from March 2017 on, the Commission reached out to 34 million Europeans through media and social media coverage.

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. They are 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 field of interest and activity, 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 Centers would also be beneficial as 'one- stop-shops', while redirecting citizens and organisations to the more specialised EU networks operating in their region.

6.3. Communication guidelines

- 1 . Develop a global strategy to improve coordination between EU institutions and Member States when communicating on European matters. A real mobilisation at all levels is necessary to reverse nationalistic tendencies; it is important to identify the opportunities for joint communication actions and to ensure their consistency across different policy field, while recalling that ' coordination' does not mean ' centralisation'.
- 2 . Give a new impetus to the European integration project by articulating a new narrative; the general public expect a clear context for decisions, vision and tangible delivery, better explaining the goals and the choices.
- 3 . The EU institutions should collectively agree on the means : inspire creativity and emotion, focusing on the essence, keeping it simple and getting as close as possible to people's day-to-day concerns.
- 4 . Explain better the cost of the non- Europe and the importance of political stability.
- 5 . Stimulate public debate and true dialogue about European topics, not just giving information on facts : citizens need to feel that they are welcome to take an active part in the policy making process, owning the European project. A new generation of citizen's dialogues should be launched involving all kind of personalities from the cultural, artistic and sporting worlds, bottom- up.
- 6 . Be continuously proactive and less defensive and accept criticisms.
- 7 . Establish a new media strategy.
- 8 . Develop and implement new ways of working with the media in order to foster in depth debates on European issues and ensure that the EU's position is heard and to avoid that EU's topics being limited in specialised pages , instead of being treated as national or regional items.
- 9 . Streamline and simplify the communication activities of the networks and Agencies of the Union.
- 10 . Carry out more proactive communication actions making full use of the opportunities offered by social media to support digital democracy while increasingly limiting printed 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 education.
- 15 . Focus on communicating with young people; 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

- 1 . Create a permanent discussion platform between the EC and citizens' representatives and install a single online "Article 11" platform.
- 2 . Develop a White Paper on Citizenship.
- 3 . Develop newx means of participative democracy based on the experiences of the G-1000 platform and concept of 'deliberative democracy'; the objective is to involve 'non- organised citizens ' as well as organised movements belonging to different groups of 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 to build a future together; such assemblies could be organised in different Member states or regions, and also as transregional ones. The outcome of these debates should be voiced in and connected to the European Parliament where regular " question- time " sessions should be organised for citizens in the European Parliament, as described above.
- 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 insitutions , to cover not only insitutional networking, but also an obligation to spontaneously provide all information to each other and develop a common dialogue, communication and outreach with the 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; 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 ara.
- 8 . Create a European Foundation supported by the EU, Member States, companies and private persons in order to develop 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 Solidarit Corps for exchange and voluntary actions in the area of culture and cultural heritage, 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 structural dialogue with young people in the context of policies cooperation in the youth field, post 2018; the Commission should take fully in account the joint recommendations of the resolution.
- 12 . Launch a ' Buses4Peace ' initiative, directed at schools, with the aim of enhancing knowledge of the history of wars and peace in Europe.

13 . Develop an overall communication campaign for citizens, emphasising the existing means at their disposal to express their voice on EU affairs, making full use of social media, enhancing young peoples' participation.

14 . Based on the Erasmus+ experience, promote new schemes to facilitate exchanges and networks among other socio- economic 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

The European Union has recently gone through a major identity crisis. Due to a number of converging factors, negative predictions on a break down of the European project have not become reality. With a certain degree of caution, the European idea seems, on the contrary, to have gathered new momentum. The moment seems opportune to directly address the real causes of Euroscepticism, place new responsibilities on EU leaders, compel them to achieve positive results and to identify new means to empower EU citizens by turning them into actors with a common endeavour. To recapture the trust of the public, urgent commitment and action based on four complementary axes is needed :

1 . Set up policies that respond to the concerns of the citizens; people do not only expect facts , they also want to be involved in making choices and acting swiftly and effectively whenever political and societal events occur.

2 . Implement real, meaningful participatory democracy, providing citizens, in a sense of ownership, with the possibility to become protagonists of political action within the Union, which could be achieved through new forms of partnership agreements, particularly at local and regional levels.

3 . Develop an enhanced media strategy and fully exploit new communication tools to enable citizens to better access and create content.

4 . 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.