BRING BACK THE CITIZENS!
HOW TO REVIVE DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION
FOR A CITIZENS-LED EUROPE

FUTURELAB EUROPE, APRIL 2016
We, the fifth generation of Future Lab Europe are deeply worried about the future of Europe. The complexity of EU policy-making, the lack of appropriate responses to the multiple crises Europe is facing, the prevalence of national topics in the media and the public discourse, the inadequacy of our education systems to the challenges of today and tomorrow, as well as the growing distrust in our political system leaves us with no other choice but to call for radical changes. So far, the sense of urgency has been ignored by our politicians and representatives. We, as young Europeans, believe that these changes cannot happen without one crucial shift of paradigm: changing the face of democracy and turn it into a citizens-centred governance model.

Democracy cannot stay the same in a multi-level governance system. But one key principle should always be respected: citizens first! On this basis and with this manifesto, we encourage policy-makers, leaders and fellow citizens to rethink our political system with us and to put more effort into bringing back people to the democratic participation. In this publication, we outline the steps that we consider necessary for such a major rethink, in which the EU will play a central role. These include:

**FOSTER A TRULY EUROPEAN POLITICAL CULTURE**

1. Introduce the direct election of the President of the European Commission, enforcing the spitzenkandidat system, to create a direct connection between the European demos and the Commission President;
2. ‘Europeanise’ the European Parliament elections with transnational lists of candidates that all European citizens can vote for, regardless of their country of citizenship;
3. Turn back the “blame game”: national governments should work together with and not against the European institutions;

**LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY FOR A GENUINE EUROPEAN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY**

1. Use the information revolution to make Europe a pioneer in establishing a citizen-oriented governance model;
2. Explore and pilot technological approaches to bridge the gap between society and governance for a true participatory democracy;
3. Use the full potential of technologies to make the EU decision-making process more transparent and accessible to all;

**DEVELOP AND SCALE UP INSTRUMENTS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

1. Take stock of the lessons learnt from the introduction of direct democracy instruments at the EU level, such as the European Citizens’ Initiative and improve their functioning;
2. Invest in and support civil society movements so that they can be an important vector of information for making direct democracy tools more accessible;
ENCOURAGE EU MEMBER STATES TO INVEST IN EDUCATION TO PROMOTE INFORMED PARTICIPATION

1. Move away from traditional teaching methods and promote critical thinking, e-learning and collective work at schools so that children get the skills they need to make informed decisions for the common good in the future;
2. Make civic education a core subject of schools’ curriculum across all EU member states and invest in teaching the history, values and functioning of the EU;
3. Teach pupils about the importance of participatory democracy and being part of the process from early age. Teach them to agree, disagree and engage!

COMBAT CORRUPTION AND FIGHT FOR TRANSPARENCY TO RESTORE TRUST IN THE INSTITUTIONS

1. Adopt robust laws to protect and ensure European citizens’ legal right to access information;
2. Introduce effective protection mechanisms and adequate and independent follow-up to disclosures, including the creation of a pan-European whistle-blowers’ protection framework;
3. Introduce a common EU strategy on taxation and appropriate sanctions for tax havens and countries cooperating with them;

There is no doubt that reviving democracy in Europe requires joint efforts from all institutions and levels of governance. But if some are reluctant to cooperate, we believe that the EU should take the lead and thereby become a pioneer in creating a new form of democracy, where citizens get a chance to shape their own future. Not only will this benefit the European project by restoring citizens’ trust in the EU and its capacity to influence member states in realising the common good for all, but it will also turn Europe into a blueprint to follow on a global scale.

The common future of Europe is a matter of choice; to develop solutions that involve everybody’s opinion and serve everybody’s good. Make that choice with us!
The story of the European project began when old enemies started to work together, pursuing common interests through building a political and economic community based on shared values.

This project - which started as a common market for steel and coal in the Ruhr region - today enables Europeans to work, study, travel and live in any part of the continent, without needing to worry about whether Germany would annex Poland, Poland annexing Vilnius or Vilnius annexing itself. Members of the European Union (EU) have elevated themselves above the Hobbesian state of politics. This alone is an achievement of almost incomprehensible magnitude in a continent that until a few decades ago was burdened by continuous war and human suffering, but now manages to agree on the free movement of people, goods and services, as well as work together on a variety of policy areas.

However, referencing Shakespeare, something is rotten in the state of Denmark, and across the rest of our continent. Democracy in Europe is facing significant challenges on a local, national and EU-level and is in profound need of a rethink. Political distrust is growing in every country, among all generations and at every level of governance. EU-friendly national governments are being threatened by Eurosceptic or straight out anti-EU forces. The 2015 elections in Spain, Poland, Finland and France have all shown a growing popularity of both left and right-wing parties that do not put particular value on deeper EU integration. On top of that, the last EU elections in May 2014 had the lowest ever turnout rate. Among young Europeans, often perceived as more EU-friendly than previous generations, the data is even more depressing. The electoral participation of the youngest segments of the electorate was about 30% below that of older voters. Europeans, regardless of age, do not bother to vote. When they do, it is increasingly to protest against the status quo of European affairs.

The signs of dissatisfaction have become increasingly well-embedded in our political system, raising a number of questions about the future of Europe:

- Why are European citizens turning their back on our political system and what needs to be done to give a new impetus to democracy in Europe?
- Is the EU as it is now compatible with participatory democracy?
- Is representative democracy the model to follow and can it be applied at every level of governance?

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These questions are not new - neither is the lack of credible responses from national capitals and Brussels. Policy-makers appear either unable or unwilling to develop practical, efficient policies that would address contemporary concerns and appease the European electorate. Instead, European citizens are witnessing more of the same: dysfunction and stagnation based on status quo complacency.

It is not only the EU that ought to be criticised. National governments must bear their part of the responsibility for the growing disconnect between our continent's democratic institutions and the populace of Europe. The whole point of a supranational political structure is to enable European states to face challenges together, in a better way than could be done alone. Once the symbiosis of political issues and the lack of responses has become a permanent feature across the EU, citizens' support for the European project will logically recede. As a supranational body deeply anchored in democratic values, we firmly believe that the EU has a role to play in reviving our democracies and ensuring that democratic principles are not put under strain on the EU territory. This is vital for democracy in Europe, and for the health of the European project itself.

This is even more important in the current context. The world is going through profound and rapid changes, and Europe is not an island. The EU is operating in a less and less stable economic and geopolitical environment, most apparent during the 2008 global economic meltdown, the continuing Russian violations of international law and in the current context of an emerging and possibly permanent pressure of a large-scale exodus towards Europe. These factors could threaten our democracies and the European project more rapidly than we think.

In unstable times, listening to and empowering the voice of young people is pivotal not merely to increase the democratic legitimacy of the status quo, but to revitalise the politics of Europe. We need the ideas, perspectives, analyses and passions of young Europeans in order to develop innovative and credible policies for the future. If the EU fails to bridge the gap between itself and European hearts and minds, it will not only have an issue of democratic legitimacy - it will probably not survive.

Europe is home to a variety of political cultures, and the EU is a project of enormous magnitude. It would be an impossible task to address all possible actions to strengthen its democracy in one publication. However, this paper concentrates on actions which are seen by FutureLabbers as the ones requiring the most attention. Our recommendations reflect, to a certain extent, the diversity of actions that should be undertaken by the EU. While some of these recommendations call on the EU to either act as a safeguard against practices and trends occurring within member states or to take the lead in promoting what should be considered to be the drivers of our democracies, others suggest ideas for increasing the democratic legitimacy of the EU itself. While the different contributions vary in approach and perspectives, they are all written by young Europeans who care about the future of democracy in Europe and the role the EU could play in this regard. We hope that our thoughts find their way into the minds of leaders and citizens alike.
ENOUGH WITH CONSENSUS!
A CALL FOR CHANGE IN THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL CULTURE

by András Varga

Reviving democracy for a citizens-led Europe requires first of all a change in the European political culture. The functioning and the quality of any democratic system is based on its political culture, which is nothing else but a set of tools, habits, methods, beliefs and attitudes towards and regarding politics. Citizens and voters’ attitudes and behaviours towards politics are affected by that system through the process of political socialisation. Hence, political culture influences levels of participation, levels of trust towards the institutions and public control over political leadership.
What kind of political culture is present at the national level?

Today, citizens and voters’ primary forum for political socialisation lies within national politics, which is mostly dominated by conflicts. Debates on policies or other political issues are the means through which citizens can get involved. Clashes between different positions are or can be considered as the daily routine of national politics, wherein political parties and actors stand for various solutions. Thanks to the different policy proposals of the parties, citizens are able to find the most suitable political organisations for themselves and political responsibility can be easily assessed by voters, especially for parties who take part in governance. In the case of a one-party-government, the situation is relatively simple; the party is evaluated by the results of its previous terms in the next elections. In case of a government coalition, the political responsibility is less clear and the evaluation is more difficult for the voters. However, through the conflicts and the debates during electoral campaigns the different positions become obvious. Moreover, when the positions of the various actors are well and easily defined, the responsiveness and political responsibility of the whole system is more likely to get enhanced as parties and leaders can be punished or rewarded for their actions. In other words, this system grants control to the voters over the decision-makers as they can assess the achievements of their representatives. All in all, political conflicts are well embedded in national political systems and are generally accepted by the voters.

What kind of political culture is the European one?

The character of the political culture at the European level is significantly different from the national one. At least 29 different political cultures can be identified in the EU; one for each member state and a European one as well. Contrary to national politics, the ‘soul’ of European politics can be described as a consensus-oriented, depoliticised political culture, resulting from the history of the European integration process. The whole decision-making of the EU is based on a huge, long and continuous negotiation system trying to integrate and satisfy as many actors as possible through formal and informal ways. The main goal to find the most consensus-oriented solution, rather than the most effective one, making its functioning “often costly and ineffective in the end.”

Furthermore, in the functioning of the EU, different actors’ positions cannot be identified so simply – except in the case of Eurosceptic voices – due to the consensus-oriented political culture. Political divides that exist at the national level are not relevant and decisions are mostly taken in a political-free, expert-dominated way. In this context, the voters’ voice is not important due to their lack of technical knowledge. When the opinions of the people seem irrelevant, their trust and interest wane as well.

Another shortcoming of this kind of political culture is the lack of transparency and clarity when it comes to the political responsibility of the actors involved in decision-making. When a lot of actors take part in this process, assessing actors’ outcomes on the basis of their decisions becomes particularly difficult for citizens.

3 Ibidem.
4 The concept of political responsibility refers to the connection between decision-makers and citizens. An institution can be considered politically responsible when it is subject to public control via political tools, such as elections or other evaluation methods. For instance, a government is always politically responsible, while a central bank is not.
A call for change in the European political culture: Stepping up efforts towards more politicisation

Without any clear political divides and with decisions being made on the basis of a consensus created by experts, the people who bear responsibility remain in the shadows, causing the system to lack responsiveness. To remedy this, the conflictual character of politics has to be introduced at the EU level too; in the decision-making process the different political positions have to be underlined and presented stronger, offering clear choices to the voters and encouraging a higher level of participation.

Some steps have already been taken in that direction during the last election of the European Parliament (EP), which brought important changes with respect to the politicisation of the campaign. The introduction of party candidates – also called *spitzenkandidaten* - for the top job of the Commission can be considered as the first meaningful attempt to make the political system of the EU more responsive. The idea behind such a change was to have a Commission President who represents the vote of EU citizens and the composition of the EP. The results of the EP elections had already been taken into consideration in the past when choosing the Commission President but deciding upon the ‘colour’\(^5\) is less important than presenting candidates during the campaign. The direct election of the Commission President was therefore an important step to politicise the institution.

Yet, this novelty in the system did not bring the expected results. While it should have led to higher popular interest, the turnout in the 2014 EP elections was in line with the continuously declining trend of electoral participation; the overall turnout was slightly lower than in 2009 (2009: 42.97%; 2014: 42.61%). However, despite the lack of immediate impact, the long-term benefits of such a novelty should not be underestimated. Thanks to the candidate-system and through the direct election of the Commission President, citizens should now be able to post-evaluate the performance of the College of Commissioners at the next EP elections. In addition, the institution of the *spitzenkandidaten* has also increased the legitimacy of the Commission President and given him more political space for manoeuvre. The creation of this direct channel between the European demos and the leader of the Commission can therefore establish a new relation of responsibility and control that brings the institutional framework towards a more politicised one. But familiarising EU citizens with such changes and making them understand what they are voting for takes time. In other words, the effect of introducing such changes cannot be seen overnight and further efforts are needed to consolidate the politicisation of the EU’s political system, in particular through the creation of transnational lists of candidates for the next elections.

Creation of long-term European goals with a stronger political character

Strengthening the political character of the decision-making and different policy positions in the EU will not be enough to regain the public’s trust. Long-term goals and visions of the EU have to be created, articulated and defended in the face of Eurosceptic forces. The blame game has to end; the integration forces have to hold their ground and promote their achievements to justify their existence towards EU citizens. When the conflictual political culture of national politics clashes with the consensus-oriented one of the EU, the average voter will choose the former one. Yet, the EU cannot be seen as a weak political organisation *vis-à-vis* the member states. To facilitate this move towards a stronger political position of the EU, more responsive institutions based on input legitimacy,\(^6\) i.e. those who engage with citizens, need to be established.

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\(^5\) In the case of the previous EP elections, the political colour of the President and the Vice Presidents of the Commission was decided upon the results of the elections, but not the exact person.

\(^6\) Input legitimacy can be described as government by the people and it is also called participative legitimacy. For more on this point, see Bekkers V., Edwards A., (2007): Legitimacy and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Assessing Governance Practices in Bekkers et al. – Governance and the Democratic Deficit, pp. 35-61.
As already mentioned earlier, the active behaviour of citizens is not a relevant factor in the political culture at EU level, and the EU governance is mostly based on output and throughput legitimacy, i.e. focusing on the results achieved by the system instead of the process leading to these results. But if the EU is serious about bridging the gap between EU citizens and the European project, people should be granted the possibility of getting more involved with EU politics, a process that could be supported by the emergence of clear political lines among the different actors and parties. However, modifying the functioning of the EP elections will not be enough to create a new political culture or alter the existing one. To achieve this goal, the EU will have to introduce several mechanisms simultaneously.

First, transparency of decision-making in the Council of the EU should be strengthened. By making the political position on each individual member state more transparent and better known, national governments will also become assessed by their national electorate not only on their position on national matters but also on European ones, which could intensify the debate on EU policies in national media. This goal can be achieved by the live broadcasting of the Council meetings, just like in the case of the EP plenary sessions.

Second, the creation of a European political arena is also required, via the tools of web 2.0 or any other method. As argued in the following chapter, using the web 2.0 and new technologies to expand citizens’ possibilities to influence decision-making while feeding their input directly into EU policy-making could not only bring about a EU agora for political debate, but also help address EU democracy’s current sicknesses.

Third, some kind of public election should be created for the President of the European Council as well. Although the scope of the president’s powers is a matter of discussion, some kind of popular control is required. The direct election of the European Summits’ leader would enhance his/her space for manoeuvre and the level of legitimacy of the whole institution.

All these changes would be significant steps towards facilitating the participation of citizens in the EU decision-making process and better engaging them in the future direction of the European project. This would therefore increase the input-legitimacy of the EU, which is critically missing at the moment. These changes should help the creation of a more responsive political culture at the European level on the longer term.

7 The throughput and output forms of legitimacy can be described as government of, and government for the people. For more on this point, see Bellamy R. (2011): Democracy without democracy? Can the EU’s democratic ‘outputs’ be separated from the democratic ‘inputs’ provided by competitive parties and majority rule?. In Ed. M. Peter – Political Representation and the European Union Governance; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group; 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abdingon, Oxon, OX144RN.
A gap has come to be, separating people from governance. The time when policy was openly discussed in public forums and when whoever had something to say had the opportunity to do so is over; this powerful method has succumbed to its own success. Open discussion and collaborative decision making was no longer possible as nations grew and opinions were too numerous to allow for everyone to be heard in the decision-making process. Instead, representatives were elected, which was a first step to creating the gap distancing people from governance. This system, with its intrinsic flaws, has survived nearly untouched for decades, while all other sectors of society have and are being challenged at an accelerated pace. The advent of the information revolution has become a driving force for change in all sectors yet governance remains a long overdue exception.
Technology as a tool for political participation

Confronted with two opposite trends – declining party membership, voter turnout and public interest on the one hand and rising individualisation and consumer citizenship on the other – and the new tools offered by technologic developments, the times are ripe for a rethink of the fundamentals of standard Schumpeterian democracy, where civic participation is limited to voting for leaders or representatives.

Technology has the necessary characteristics to enable a transition from a system based on output legitimacy – where democracy is judged in terms of the effectiveness of the policy outcomes for the people – to one based on input legitimacy – wherein democracy is judged in terms of the governors’ responsiveness to citizens’ concerns as a result of participation by and representativeness of the people.

With the advent of technology in recent history, an opportunity arises to revolutionise and revise democracy in Europe and bring citizenry much closer to policy-makers, introducing effective input-democracy mechanisms. Legitimate democracy, as conceived in the public forums in ancient Greece, has its foundations on the pillars of transparency, accountability, participation and inclusiveness. Mobile communications and the internet today have the power to harness these pillars and once again democratise governance for the benefit of all.

The challenge is not to ensure that people participate but to create a model where people feel compelled to participate because they can see a clear outcome and direction shaped by them, the electorate. This will legitimise and incentivise people to participate because it will be transparent and its effect noticeably obvious. Better solutions to problems will result from a diverse pool of perspectives, instead of the current
The potential of technology in a multi-level democracy

Digital technologies can prove useful at different levels of governance and help re-connect citizens with their representatives in several ways. In other words, the application of technology can vary according to the reality of each governance level and be adjusted to different objectives. This idea is based on the acceptance that democratic participation, in a multi-level governance system, cannot occur in the same way at each level of governance. It has to be adapted to the challenges and reality of each of them.

The local level is the easiest level of governance where participative democracy can be fostered. Decision-making is often concentrated on factual and straight-forward questions whose outcomes are easily identifiable and predictable. The limited number of citizens represented in a local constituency also facilitates the practical implementation of participatory processes. Hence, several cities have already made use of participatory democracy, some with the support of technologies. Examples in the area of government include the Wellington City Council, which uses such tools to inform the public on policies.

However, it is time to use technologies for purposes that go beyond mere information sharing and extend their use to collaborative decision-making. To do so, a platform should be set up that enables the creation of a virtual public forum, where anyone can start a discussion on a topic in a systematic manner, and bring in experts to guide the process and share diverse perspectives. Just as a myriad of commercial platforms with hundreds of millions of users exist today, so can such a platform be conceived to harness the strengths of the internet and improve the status quo in an equitable and transparent manner. Ideas can be developed together and anyone willing can propose a course of action. People would have the option to agree, abstain, disagree, and more importantly, provide their reasoning so anyone can see how others feel and why. This way, collaboratively, proposals that work for everyone can be developed. Clear deadlines can be implemented to ensure every decision gets a clear result. With the willingness from the governance sector, this can start shaping and informing policy in ways never seen before.

Beyond the local level, a number of open-source web-based platforms for proposition development and decision-making have been conceived and are being used in a number of settings and in a multitude of languages. For instance, it has been used successfully by the Occupy Wall Street Movement around the world for facilitating general assembly meetings in order to give everyone in the group a voice, despite participants not being able to physically attend meetings. Likewise, protesters from around the world have started using such platforms to organise mass demonstrations, such as in Brazil, Turkey, and Taiwan in recent years. Larger and small companies have also implemented such systems internally and externally to increase stakeholder participation and transparency. Furthermore, the fast-growing political party Podemos in Spain owns much of its success to the implementation of technology to make the decision-making process as inclusive and transparent as possible.

European politics has made, so far, little use of communication technologies, limiting the political debate to national boundaries. This is clearly a large, untapped potential as new communication technologies can play a key role in addressing the often denounced EU’s legitimacy deficit. In addition, the EU offers fertile ground for rethinking democracy and democratic practice as it is a sui generis political animal, in which experimentation with new political forms of input democracy is not only possible but also ongoing. While it is easy to argue that the EU has been preoccupied with output democracy more than with input democracy (the Single Market is certainly the most notable example of a top-down, output democracy project), there are several examples that demonstrate the EU’s efforts in finding new ways of feeding citizens’ input in its policy-making. The introduction of the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) with the Lisbon Treaty is an example of these efforts. Unfortunately, if we let the results of these citizens-led efforts speak for themselves, the ECI, as it is, was set up to fail from the beginning. None of the ECIs have obtained their goals, and so have not led to a concrete legislative proposal (see chapter 3 on the ECI). This again underlines the need for an improved methodology to bring approaches closer to input-based, direct democracy. More specifically, several tools based on new technologies can be developed to increase what is – as already underlined in Chapter 1 - critically missing at the EU level.

A first tool could consist of a centralised platform where the main legislative laws are debated, and political groups of the EP can clearly position themselves in favour or against such laws. While some Members of the European Parliament (MEP) are already making use of new communication technologies such as social media to communicate with their electorates and/or also gather citizens’ inputs on specific issues,² such a platform would be innovative in the sense that all information on ongoing legislation will be centralised and delivered in multiple languages. Therefore, citizens will have the possibility to get a clear understanding of the nature of the initiatives suggested by the European Commission as well as of the position taken by political groups. Furthermore, such a platform would also include a participative section where citizens can raise their questions and enter in direct contact with their representatives. Such a tool would be useful in many aspects. This would both help politicise EU policies and help citizens understand the EU legislative process and what is at stake on the policy agenda. Therefore, it would contribute to the educating of EU citizens on the functioning of the EU, while adjusting the current political jargon and making the information easily accessible. In the same manner, this would resolve the perceived secrecy that the EU maintains in its activities, creating a transparent system through which citizens can regain their trust. As a result, there could be the emergence of a genuine EU-wide political culture, by fostering transnational debates, encouraging a direct exchange of ideas among European citizens, and making in the end the viewpoint of a Bulgarian citizen more understandable for his/her French peer. In the end, a European identity could emerge.

Second, such a platform could be useful in organising European transnational elections and political campaigns. This idea was first put forward by British Liberal Andrew Duff in 2011 when, thanks to his initiative, the European Parliament’s Constitutional Affairs Committee proposed to set aside 25 seats for candidates elected through Europe-wide lists presented by the European political parties. Duff argued that a radical change in electoral procedure will increase turnout, enhance the European dimension of the election campaigns, personalise the election campaign and galvanise the development of the European political parties. Introducing transnational lists, in fact, would also alter the concept of representation as it is now at EU level: MEPs from the transnational list would represent citizens and parties and not states, moving to a post-national Europe. An online platform could be key in organising European transnational elections: people could easily follow candidates’ opinions and ideas through the internet, independently of their location, possibly even feeding their ideas into the campaigns.

The need for addressing some limitations

Of course, there are many limitations to acknowledge and it is important to mention that there are still many obstacles to overcome. One possible problem is the issue with voting anonymity and security, raising potential concerns. Another issue is that of equitable access to internet and technology; in order for people to participate they need reliable internet and the adequate technology, whether it is a smart phone a desktop PC or any other communication device. Although the level of connectedness in Europe is high, this needs to be addressed at the European level to ensure equal access to participation for all. Discussions at the national level are already taking place to determine whether access to internet should be a citizen’s right. Also, the European Commission is undertaking some important actions to complete the Digital Single Market and therefore ensure connectedness for all. Another difficulty is to make people understand the importance of voting. In many

²See for instance the video blog of the French MEP Guillaume Balas, calling on citizens to provide him with inputs in the drafting of its parliamentary report on social dumping, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31VxuzHKi1Y
countries, people are not used to participate as most of them are used to rely on a political system that does not take their voice into consideration. Beyond the level of participation, a bigger challenge is to ensure that people have sufficient knowledge to provide informed inputs, to be able to understand trade-offs and to suggest sound policy proposals. It is where the quality of democracy comes into play and where civic education becomes so important (see chapter 4 on civic education).

The need for a dynamic, inclusive, transparent and scalable solution in the area of governance is long overdue. The need remains to further explore on innovative approaches in order to scale them and integrate them into the current government system. Young people’s role in the information revolution – enabling a movement to put people’s voices at the forefront of decision-making – could be enhanced through this. The reality is that in a complex system filled with bureaucracy it is difficult to innovate and bring about drastic change. It would take visionary leaders, and increasing pressure from civil society, to bring such profound changes to the fore. Europe is a pioneer in many areas of societal innovation, serving as an example across the world throughout history, and should therefore put some effort into exploring this area. By addressing both local, national and European matters, citizens would have the opportunity to shape their future in real time and not have it done by someone else unaccountable to them. This would be a small, but necessary piece of the puzzle for a struggle to change the face of democracy, turning it into a citizens-oriented governance model and making Europe a blueprint to follow on a global scale.
The potential of technologies for a truly participatory democracy
- Explore and pilot technological approaches to bridge the gap between society and governance and improve democracy;
- Scale technological solutions that work at the European level;

Equal access to all citizens in the decision-making
- Scale grassroots engagement as much as possible so that people learn how to engage;
- Ensure that technology-backed direct democracy goes hand in hand with education programmes to ensure European citizens’ civic and technological literacy;
- Invest in the Digital Single Market so that all European citizens can benefit from a high level of connectedness;

Technological solutions for increased input-legitimacy at the EU level
- Create a centralised platform where the main legislative laws are debated in multiple languages;
- Use such a platform to politicise the debate on EU policies and organise European transnational elections.
EXISTING DIRECT DEMOCRACY TOOLS IN THE EU: THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS’ INITIATIVE AS AN IMPROVABLE EFFORT

by Simona Pronckutė

Direct democracy gives citizens an extraordinary opportunity to participate in the legislation process and grants them a maximum of political self-determination. Today the concept of direct democracy primarily refers to popular voting on specific issues and citizen empowerment. The Direct Democracy Navigator categorises the following instruments as tools of direct democracy: (i) Initiatives (citizen-initiated and veto-initiatives); (ii) Obligatory or mandatory referendums; (iii) Plebiscites. At the EU level, the preamble of the Lisbon Treaty stipulates the fundamental goal of promoting European democracy by providing the EU citizens with the opportunity to participate in the development of the EU, in order to “enhance the efficiency and democratic legitimacy of the Union.” The Lisbon Treaty also recognises various forms of democratic participation in the EU and the importance of direct democracy. More specifically, article 11.4 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) gives EU citizens the opportunity to invite the European Commission to make a legislative proposal with the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI). Theoretically, the ECI can be defined as an important instrument of direct democracy, aiming to increase the EU’s legitimacy and foster the participation of European citizens at the European level. Nevertheless, a lot can be done to improve its impact on the quality of European democracy. This article argues that its shortcomings should serve as a learning tool to further improve instruments of direct democracy at the EU level.
The European Citizens’ Initiative: Some inherent challenges

There are a few questions related to the use and the impact of the ECI that have been raised by various civil society actors and that are linked to the more general question of why the EU is facing major challenges when it comes to developing such an instrument. In other words: Are instruments of direct democracy suited for our European democratic system and needed to increase the EU's legitimacy?

A first difficulty is linked to the fact that citizens’ participation cannot be imposed by the EU or any other political actors. The ECI is defined as “a new political right for citizens as well as a unique and innovative agenda-setting tool for participatory democracy in the European Union”. Making participatory democracy a reality and using the full potential of the ECI depends therefore on citizens’ willingness, interest and active involvement on voluntary basis.

Secondly, the ECIs are organised and run by civil society organisations, whose existence is highly dependent on national or European donors. Civil society movements play a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge, not only about the ECI but also about how the decision-making process works at the European level and the division of competences between EU institutions and member states. The quality of the information provided is therefore fundamental in determining whether an ECI will be successful or not. Carrying out an ECI is a complex undertaking and requires a solid knowledge of the EU decision-making process, so the support of civil society movements is key to address these challenges.

That being said, more than four years after its entry into force (1 April 2012), there have been significant measures taken to remove obstacles, both legal and technical, and encourage EU citizens to organise new ECIs. The question is whether these measures have been sufficient to ensure the success of this instrument and have set the foundation on which direct democracy in Europe could be further built.
European Citizens’ Initiative: paving the way towards a new form of direct democracy in the EU?

Four years have passed since the introduction of the ECI and it is now possible to take stock of its implementation, identifying problems and possible solutions.

Two main issues prevented its success: people’s lack of knowledge about the existence of this initiative (over six million statements of support have been collected so far, amounting to approximately 1% of the EU population), and the mismatch between the issues addressed by the different ECIs and the reality of the EU decision-making process. Graphs number 1 and 2 below indicate the number of ECIs that have been rejected because of the Commission did not have the relevant competencies, as well as the declining number of ECIs registered over time. In addition to this declining number, it is worth noting that among the 36 officially registered ECIs since 2012, only three initiatives – ‘Right to Water’, ‘One of us’ and ‘Stop vivisection’ – have collected the required number of signatures (i.e. at least one million signatures coming from seven different member states) to be taken into consideration by the European Commission. In other words, only about 10% of the registered initiatives reached the one-million-threshold.

Furthermore, it is important to note that none of these ECIs has managed to initiate substantial legislative activity. When it comes to starting the legislative procedure, it all depends on the European Commission’s willingness to act. As the written answers to the initiators have shown, in none of these cases the Commission saw the necessity of legal changes.

Leaving all these problems unaddressed might lead to worrisome consequences and threaten both the future success of the ECI and of direct democracy in Europe. The ECI organisers and their supporters might feel that they have very limited power to participate in the EU decision-making process and take further action. For instance, six citizens’ committees of rejected initiatives brought proceedings before the General Court against Commission decisions.

That being said, it is also important to recognise that despite the absence of any legislative changes, EU institutions, including the Commission, have taken initiatives to address citizens’ concerns. For example, in the case of the ECI ‘Right to Water’, the Commission replied that the “EU’s past and current actions reflect a clear recognition of the importance of water as a public good that is essential to the full enjoyment of life and all human rights and the Commission is committed to take concrete steps and work on a number of new actions in areas that are of direct relevance to the initiative and its goals.” Thus, according to the organisers, “the Initiative set an important precedent and put water rights firmly on the European political agenda”. MEPs also urged the Commission to act on the ‘Right to Water’ initiative. As a result, the Environment, Public Health and Food Security Committee (ENVI) of the European Parliament adopted European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) MEP Lynn Boylan’s ‘Report on the follow-up to the European Citizens’ Initiative Right2Water’, which was regarded as “a strong pledge to the universal human right to clean water and sanitation”.

Graph 1: Number of ECIs rejected because of missing competency of the Commission

Graph 2: Number of ECIs registered over time

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6 Bruno Kaufmann, ECI Day 2015 at the EESC, 13 April 2015, Brussels
significant efforts have also been made by the Commission, the EP and civil society organisations to improve and facilitate the use of the ECI. For instance, the Commission and various European organisations assist citizens in examining an initiative before the official submission, follow-up with ECIs organisers, and give a better understanding of the obstacles that prevented previous initiatives from collecting the required level of support.13 The Commission has also been making a lot of efforts to encourage member states to simplify and harmonise their personal data requirements.

On the side of the EP, several MEPs have already adopted a few ideas on how to improve the process. In a plenary vote on 28 October 2015, a convincing majority of 527 MEPs (out of 663) approved a resolution suggesting the following measures: (i) raise the importance of public awareness of the ECI, (ii) simplify the use of the instrument to be simple, clear, user-friendly, (iii) consider the Parliament as a decision-maker and find a way to engage the organisations in a dialogue with the MEPS, (iv) provide financial support for ECIs from existing EU budgets via European programmes or to establish a physical and online ‘one-stop shop’.14 This ‘one-stop shop’ ‘should offer ECI organisers legal advice, access to detailed information on requirements to run an ECI campaign, and should improve dialogue between ECIs and the institutions throughout the campaign.’15

Furthermore, the EP adopted, in November 2014, an ECI budget line for 2016 (a total of €1.5 million). It is the first time that the ‘Europe for Citizens’ programme will dedicate a special budget line for the ECI in order to develop a ‘one-stop-shop’ in each member state and cover communication, administration and implementation costs.16 It sent a positive signal and will help member states to get more active in the use and support of the ECI. Furthermore, this resolution addressed the major issues that the ECI has been facing and might potentially steer the ECI in the right direction.

16 ECI Support Centre, ECI Watch, November 2015
Conclusion

Clearly, an ECI requires significant efforts to ensure its success. The consequences of its failure on the other hand would be detrimental. In a recent interview, György Schöpflin, a member of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the EP, highlighted that “any time an initiative is rejected, it creates a million Eurosceptics”. Thus, any ECI rejection or unsuccessful implementation cases are likely to create frustration and disappointment among EU citizens, particularly the initiative takers, or even to tarnish the image of democracy in Europe.

That being said, it should be recognised that many ECIs succeeded to foster public debates on different issues, both at the national and European levels. The most prominent example is the self-organised ECI entitled ‘Stop TTIP’. The proposed initiative was rejected because it “fell outside the framework of the Commission’s powers to submit a proposal for a legal act of the Union for the purpose of implementing the Treaties, within the meaning of Article 4(2)(b) of the Regulation”.\(^{17}\) Despite the rejection of the Commission to register the campaign as an ECI in 2013, the campaigners successfully collected, within one year, more signatures (3,284,289) than for any other officially registered ECI so far.\(^{18}\) This initiative could be considered as one of the most successful citizens’ campaigns in terms of raising public awareness on European trade negotiations at the European level. It has proven that when important discussions are steered by the civil society activists, it is possible to mobilise citizens across the EU. Thus, the ECI has a significant potential to promote pan-European debates.

To sum it up, despite the challenging first years, the ECI should still be regarded as a first experiment of direct democracy in the EU. This attempt should be very much welcomed as it could help educate people on how to participate in a multi-level governance system, fostering European identity and make the work of EU institutions more transparent and understandable for EU citizens. All efforts taken by the civil society and EU decision-makers in the last four years have slowly improved the functioning of the ECI and should be seen as progress towards increased direct democracy in the EU.

Now we also need national actors such as governments to join forces and provide support for improving the knowledge about the ECI, disseminating information about its potential and accepting that citizens have a say in the development of EU policies. Increased attention also needs to be given to the interaction and the possible tensions between instruments of direct democracy (such as the ECI) and other forms of representative democracy. For instance, what happens when decisions of the EP go against the demands of an ECI? Such questions remain open for the time being and need to be addressed if the EU is serious about extending the impact of direct democracy instruments and making it compatible with other forms of democracy.

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a platform for dialogue between EU institutions and the civil society movements that are organising ECIs;
- Introduce a list of criteria that civil society organisations, who are in charge of ECIs, should respect in their campaign to ensure that citizens get the right information. For instance, each campaign should inform citizens about the division of competencies between the EU and national level in the area of the initiative;
- Introduce a specific body in the European Commission dealing with ECI campaigns in order: (i) to reduce the current, ineffective diffusion of responsibilities; (ii) keep signatories always informed about the Commission’s actions;
- Formalise the duty of Members of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee as well as of MEPs to provide support for ongoing or future initiatives and help local and regional actors and citizens understand the functioning of the ECI;
- Invest in awareness campaigns, and creating partnerships with national, regional and local authorities, including national governments, who would be in charge of educating their citizens on how to participate in direct democracy at the EU level;
- Foster a larger debate about how instruments of direct democracy could be further developed in a multi-level governance system.

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\(^{18}\) Stop TTIP, available at: https://stop-ttip.org/, last accessed on: 27.02.2016
CIVIC EDUCATION: A NECESSARY PRECONDITION FOR A SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

By Hatidza Jahic

Participatory democracy is a process in which the broad participation of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems is key. It strives to create opportunities for all members of society to make meaningful contributions to decision-making, and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities. For democracies to thrive, citizens need not only to be informed about the channels they have to make their voices heard, but also need to understand the functioning of the system and think critically about the issues being discussed. This is even more necessary in a system based on participatory democracy, as citizens are not simply delegating the decision-making power to elected representatives, but are offered the channels and tools to propose, amend and discuss ideas themselves. In this sense, in order to create and sustain a successful, high quality participatory democratic system, education and civic education in particular, are extremely important.

The EU has very limited competences when it comes to education, as its role is mainly confined to coordinating and supplementing the actions of the member states. At the same time, it can steer and encourage member states to take action and as education provides knowledge and skills for civic participation, the main aim of this chapter is to explore how the EU can help our education systems, not least through paying greater attention to civic education, turn people into active citizens and to foster a better understanding of what the European project is about.
Many European citizens believe that the EU does not have a strong impact on their country’s policy direction: the EU Flash Eurobarometer 373 of March 2013 indicated that EU citizens believe that voting in EU elections is a less effective way to influence political decisions than voting in local or national elections. Even more striking, in four EU countries – namely Latvia, the Czech Republic, the UK and Slovenia – a majority of respondents said that voting in European elections is not an effective way at all to influence political decisions.1

Civic education could play a pivotal role in remedying this trend, as it can both improve the knowledge of the role and responsibilities of citizens in EU democracy and of the EU’s functioning and competencies. To do so, education systems in Europe should promote (i) critical thinking and political literacy, (ii) participation, as well as (iii) the inclusion of society’s dormant groups, such as women and young citizens. All these are prerequisites for an informed, high-quality involvement of citizens in participatory democracy and because of that, the EU and its member states should strengthen their efforts in promoting civic education programmes alongside with participatory democracy instruments.

Promoting political literacy through education

Political literacy can be defined as the set of abilities considered necessary for citizens to understand a political system and to participate in its decision-making process. This includes an understanding of the important issues facing society as well as some critical thinking skills to evaluate different points of view and trade-offs when decisions have to be made. Political literacy is a prerequisite for a high-quality participatory democracy and education must adhere to its function, ensuring that pupils are ready to make informed choices and be integrated into society as full members when they leave school. Especially in the case of the EU, citizens should know how the Union functions if they are to understand the division of competencies between the European and national level and to evaluate critically what they read. The current trend of blaming EU authorities for whatever national problem – a tool used by an ever growing number of politicians in EU member states – would not exist or be as strong if people were informed and could interpret information for themselves. Education systems therefore need to provide contemporary curriculums, which will enable students to familiarise themselves with the EU institutions, the legal system, decision-making processes and how political decisions at EU level are influencing the way we live.

The role of the education system in fostering participation

Civic participation demands long-term planning and, most importantly, an early stage involvement of citizens. One of the most consistently documented relationships in the field of political behaviour is the close association between educational achievement and political participation. As demonstrated by various studies, including by Eurobarometer results, people with higher education are more likely to participate in democratic processes.2 In other words, the higher a person's level of education, the more likely it is she/he will work for a campaign or party or vote in elections. Education can therefore be considered as the default base, ensuring that the youth of today will turn into an active constituency tomorrow.

Besides this, the role of education should be to educate pupils and students about possible ways of participation and engagement. If this process is conducted responsibly with all stakeholders involved it will result in citizens being aware that their voice and involvement in the decision-making process can make a difference. Besides fulfilling their civic duty by casting their votes, students should also be informed about other ways they can make their voices heard. Today’s modern system includes new forms of participation through e.g. petitions, debates, demonstrations, action groups etc. These forms of participation are not all equally effective and are not interchangeable. Civic education should inform and educate students about these different options and foster the idea that citizens can shape the future of our democracies through participation.

Increased attention of the education system to dormant groups

Falling voter turnout is a common trend; total electoral turnout has declined in all national elections in EU member states, from an average of 83% in the 1980s to 65% in the last elections.3 Research also shows that women and young people4 participate less in elections than their older and male counterparts. The importance and need for greater youth participation was recognised in May 2015, when the 28 EU ministers responsible for youth met for a ‘high-level policy debate’ to publicly discuss “empowering young people for political participation in the de-

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4 It is important to recognise that women and young people are not the only groups with low level of participation. Other social groups, such as multi-ethnic minorities, are also facing the same issue.
The education system could help address this issue in several ways. First, civic education programmes should devote particular attention to girls and young people, making them aware that they won't be represented in politics unless they make use of their civic rights by voting in elections. This can be an important first step to break the current vicious cycle in which, because young people and women’s democratic participation is low, political parties do not feel pressured to promote female or young political candidates or to include gender or youth-specific proposals in their programmes. This, in turn, pushes young people and women further away from the ballots, as politics and politicians do not talk to them. Making these so-called dormant groups aware of their underrepresented condition can be a simple way to give them the necessary tools to activate their participation.

A second suggestion would be to develop new methodologies at school that move away from traditional teacher-centred methods; encourage early participation of all pupils through cooperative learning activities that are based on working in small groups; and focus on development of leadership, negotiation, debate and conflict resolution. All these are useful tools for promoting critical thinking.

Third, it is important to recognise the need to teach teachers how to apply such new inclusive methods. Teachers often rely on obsolete education systems and do not have the tools and resources to invest in innovative approaches. This is a major issue to tackle if Europe wants them to prepare pupils to the challenges of tomorrow. For instance, teachers have the possibility to make use of new digital technologies in order to encourage everyone, including the most silent pupils/students, to raise their voice and take part in a decision-making process, even at the classroom and school level.

**Conclusion**

Citizens must not only be able to understand the functioning of the European political system, but also think critically about the issues on the EU’s agenda and be aware of the channels they can use to influence it. For this, effective civic education programmes are essential.

While the EU’s limited competences in education reduce the impact it can have on education policies in the member states, the European Commission should not shy away from providing guidance, and steering and encouraging member states to take action. Some member states do perform much better than others on this matter; their education system is inclusive and allows for an early involvement of pupils. These examples should be followed. Thus, promoting the sharing of best practices among member states, creating more opportunities for the involvement of young people in policy-making and training teachers on innovative teaching methods tailored for civic education and political participations are a solid base for an effective civic education that the EU could promote.

**KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Give more weight to civic education in the European programmes on education and youth by including compulsory attendance of civic education programmes for participants and grant recipients of existing education programmes, such as those falling under the Erasmus+ framework;
- The EU should encourage member states to pay particular attention to civic education through the exchange of best practices and strategies, like Europe 2020;
- Use existing practices of research such as surveys and studies in the decision-making process, especially to target and include marginalised groups;
- Member states should teach the teachers to implement innovative and inclusive methods, while international networks for teacher cooperation should be created at the EU level;
- The EU should encourage member states to create more opportunities for the involvement of youth in policymaking, particularly through non-formal education;
- Use the media to promote a better understanding of the political system at the EU level, different ways of involvement and to communicate the importance of civic education not only to pupils and students, but to parents as well.
Trust between citizens and their elected representatives is a crucial component of a well-governed EU. Lacking trust, citizens become cynical about their political system and apathy rises. Even worse, distrust is making many people experiencing something stronger than apathy: the feeling of absolute disaffection. Clearly, there is a downright dissatisfaction with people in authority nowadays and voter disengagement is getting worse both at national and European level, with the last EU election having the lowest-ever turnout. People’s distrusts in Europe can ultimately threaten the unity of the Union, the strength of the EU in the face of external challenges and the quality of the European democratic process itself.
Tackling corruption to restore trust and increase participation

Political truth seems to be mutable and capricious in the rush to win. Words of politicians are regarded as a medley of partial truths destined to be self-serving. While truth might nurture trust, its absence does the contrary. Consequently, distrust can lead to alienation and withdrawal from the political process. When aggravated for too long, intense distrust may generate a hostile response against the political order and a quest for more radical and anti-system alternatives. Revolutions, failed states and other distressing failures of governance all somehow have in common the breakdown of trust between citizens and the state.

Nonetheless, scepticism can be healthy for good governance and democracy. A smart distrust of governance can help citizens and civil society organisations analyse what government does and check misuses of power. However, it is not scepticism that is prevailing in these times – cynicism and chaos are. Trust in parties and elected politicians is very low. Indeed, no institution is so distrusted and reviled as mainstream political parties and a key reason why this happens is that people regard politicians as a deeply corrupt class – is not just the fact that political truth is mutable or even absent. According to the Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer’s figures, more than 80% of people in Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain believe political parties are corrupt or extremely corrupt and in almost all EU countries surveyed political parties were rated as the most corrupt sector by the public. The term corruption covers a broad range of human actions. For the sake of simplicity, let us settle on a broad and straightforward definition of corruption – the abuse of public office for private gain.

Distrust and perceptions of government corruption go hand in hand, as contended by the political sociologist Larry Jay Diamond. Indeed, there appears to be a remarkable relationship between trust in political institutions and the perception of progress in reducing corruption. In general, the more the public believe there is progress in the battle against corruption, the greater their levels of trust in democratic institutions. Although there is no one factor that has caused trust to vanish and there is no simple and seemingly magical solution to this complicated problem, more transparent, responsible, accountable and responsive government should be the starting point. Governance must change in such a way that corruption becomes too risky and costly. In order for that to happen, declared intentions on anti-corruption policies need tangible results and should be backed by clear political will. The EU has been inaudible on this issue so far and this needs to change. Corruption not only makes member states less efficient but it also produces spill-over effects on the functioning of the entire EU due to the high degree of interdependence among EU countries. Greece is a good example. Moreover, if the EU is to increase its legitimacy, more anti-corruption action could significantly support this endeavour. In this sense, the EU needs to become an agenda setter in this field. This article aims to address three crucial topics in tackling corruption: firstly, how citizens are being deprived from access to information and how that enhances corruption and disengages citizens from political participation; secondly, how whistleblowing protection frameworks could facilitate political transparency and accountability and how the criminalisation of defamation is ultimately preventing citizens to expose corruption situations; and, finally, why tax evasion and offshore financial centres are hindering political transparency and accountability.

Access to information

Secrecy is fertile soil for wrongdoing to grow on; information, on the other hand, is the oxygen of democracy. Europe needs to ensure that government operations are transparent and open to scrutiny. Robust laws must be put in place to ensure citizens have the legal right to access information they need to expose mismanagement and corruption, particularly when it comes to government finance, contracting and procurement. But what one can see is a disquieting movement towards limiting the scope of those institutions that fall within the remit of access to information laws and the increase of exceptions that are permitted. Moreover, while it is true that access to information laws are in place, in practice there are many obstacles to actually retrieving that information, such as excessive fees, long delays, extensive exemptions regarding business and company secrets, lack of an independent oversight body and municipal authorities’ lack of capacity to comply with the rules.

Very importantly, it is fundamental that Europe actively raises public awareness of the freedom of information laws, as many people don’t know about these laws or how to use it to their benefit. If access to information laws are not properly implemented, citizens cannot exercise their rights properly. All public institutions, regulatory authorities and local governments in the EU should be obliged to publish their decisions online, including with regards to public procurement. If the EU wants to bridge the actual gap between citizens and EU policy-makers, it needs to get citizens to participate fully in political life and reduce distrust, while citizens deserve to see the questions they raised answered. Citizens must also be knowledgeable of all functions and decisions of government that are not elements of national security or that do not invade individual rights of privacy. They have the right to know what their representatives are working on and how they go about their jobs. Therefore, these obstacles need to be addressed so citizens can actively participate in the decision-making process and in the design, implementation and monitoring of public policies.

Whistleblowing

Whistleblowing can be regarded as the disclosure of information related to corrupt, illegal, fraudulent or hazardous activities that are of concern to or threaten the public interest.

While the value of whistleblowing in corruption-fighting efforts is increasingly recognised, protection mechanisms and adequate and independent follow-up are far from effective in the EU. Indeed, according to a report released by Transparency International, only four EU countries have legal frameworks for whistleblower protection that are considered to be advanced: Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia and the UK. Whistleblowing legislation in the EU is mostly fragmented and ineffectively enforced, as researched by Transparency International. Consequently, the practice of whistleblowing remains very unusual in most European countries. Political will to pass and enforce whistleblowing legislation is also lacking in many countries, which consequently is aggravating distrust in the political class.

Whistleblowing is sometimes wrongly linked with spying and snitching. This is the result of years of authoritarian regimes and the existence of secrete polices. On the contrary, whistleblowing is actually a right — and a duty — that citizens have in order to protect the well-being of society. Whistleblowing contributes to an energetic, participatory and democratic culture. Therefore, the EU should be committed to promoting a cultural change that ultimately makes whistleblowers come to be appreciated and perceived as an essential resource to democracy.

Whistleblowers often take a great individual risk when exposing corruption, fraud and mismanagement: they can be fired, sued, threatened, or even assaulted and murdered. Therefore, it is fundamental that effective protection mechanisms are implemented so that fear of retaliation is reduced and would-be whistleblowers and media come forward and expose misdeeds.

While it is true that some countries have promised to legislate whistleblower protection laws through international conventions, there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of getting governments to establish appropriate channels for disclosure; enforce meaningful protection from retaliation and implement policies regarding compensation for retaliation and, finally, set up follow-up procedures.

The EU needs to take a more proactive role and create a directive that requires member states to achieve a symmetric result on whistleblowers’ protection and disclosure mechanisms. There should be a single, comprehensive legal agenda for whistleblower protection. Europe should follow the US Dodd-Frank Act, which stipulates that whistleblowers could be eligible for a reward if they provide the authorities with useful information, and that they should be protected from legal prosecution and job loss.

Some positive steps have already been taken at the EU level. For instance, the EP resolution of 25 November 2015 on tax rulings actually provided very straight to the point recommendations, such as the creation of an independent European body responsible for collecting information from whistleblowers and carrying out investigations, as well as a pan-European whistleblower common fund. This fund aims to guarantee that citizens who act in the public interest and disclose information of any conduct that infringes upon the fundamental principles of the EU, receive adequate financial assistance. However, given that a resolution does not have any binding effect, these very interesting proposals have not been translated into action yet. Therefore, without a European directive on whistleblowing, the EU is losing an opportunity to improve transparency and accountability in governance.

**Tax evasion and offshores financial centres**

Tax evasion and offshore financial centres are decisive issues, fuelling corruption and hindering political transparency and accountability in Europe. The banking secrecy and trust services delivered by European financial institutions operating offshore offer a shelter for the laundering of the earnings of political corruption, fraud and embezzlement. Offshore financings’ innately secretive nature has a corrosive effect on governance, permitting dishonest representatives to keep their plundered wealth, mansions, art and other assets away from the inquisitive control of public authorities.

The complex offshore structures and the tactics that offshore centres use to keep companies, trusts and their owners under cover, such as appointing artificial directors and shareholders, makes it nearly impossible to expose who is really behind offshore companies. This fact ultimately makes the already distrusted political class seem even more suspicious. If the EU is to build trust in political institutions and create a perception of progress in reducing corruption, it is inevitable that efforts in identifying and fighting tax havens become a serious priority.

The lack of appropriate sanctions for tax havens and countries cooperating with them has facilitated criminals, corrupt leaders, wealthy individuals and multinational companies moving their wealth and profits off-shore to avoid paying tax. In turn, democracy in the EU gets undermined, as is the principle of cooperation and the integration process itself. The more tax is avoided, the more the remaining tax burden falls on ordinary people, who are forced to pay higher taxes while corporations and the rich avoid theirs. Moreover, companies threatening of moving elsewhere unless given concessions on lower regulation and lower taxes is causing tax competition between EU countries, which are now out-competing each other to offer the lowest taxes possible to attract foreign investment. By acting passively and not building a common EU strategy on taxation, politicians are putting the concept of cooperation and solidarity between members of the Union in jeopardy, which, in turn, ultimately compromises the integration process.

**Conclusion**

Political will is crucial for anti-corruption endeavours. Unsurprisingly, lack of political will is quite often identified as the reason for unsuccessful anti-corruption efforts. However, it may well not just be a matter of will but also a matter of capacity — setting up transparency and accountability mechanisms requires resources and new skills and technical procedures, along with strategic management capabilities that are not easily found. Even though political willingness can be negatively influenced by the perceived incapacity of would-be reformers to implement measures, it is also true that political will can be positively influenced by public pressure and citizen engagement. Indeed, there is an urgent need for a sense of political urgency in this area, as the current trend towards a culture of impunity, wherein representatives do not feel responsible and citizens’ expectations of accountability are limited, does not bode well for a vibrant democracy in the EU. It is imperative that the EU becomes active in this policy field as political will at the national level is generally missing due to the vested interest of the political class. Moreover, as the EU is an integrated economic area, it makes even more sense that common actions to combat tax evasion are developed.

Finally, having the EU setting the agenda on the fight against corruption could ultimately give the much needed positive signal to EU citizens that the EU is doing something to protect their interests and, in this sense, demonstrate and increase the EU legitimacy itself.
KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

At the EU level:
• The EU should create a pan-European whistle-blower fund and apply effective protection mechanisms as well as adequate and independent follow-up to the disclosures;
• The EU should apply appropriate sanctions for tax havens and countries cooperating with them;
• The EU should build a common strategy on taxation;

At the national level, with the support of the EU
• Governments must be more transparent, responsible, accountable and responsive with the public;
• Robust laws must be put in place to ensure citizens have the legal right to access information;
• Governments should actively raise public awareness of the freedom of information laws;
• All public institutions, regulatory authorities and local governments in the EU should be obliged to publish their decisions online, including in relation to public procurement;
• Governments should eradicate all criminal defamation laws, which should be swapped with suitable civil defamation laws.
As several forces are tearing Europe apart, democracy is in profound need of a rethink. Political distrust is growing in every country, among all generations and at every level of governance fuelling destructive forces: apathy, Euroscepticism and mistrust. The last EU elections in May 2014 saw the lowest ever turnout among the European electorate. Eurosceptic or straight out anti-EU forces are getting stronger and more influential. Levels of trust in governments as providers of viable solutions are hitting all-times low. It is time to stop ignoring these negative signs and address their root causes.

Citizens should become again the centre of political action. They must be the prime focus of political processes and the gap dividing them from decisions makers must be bridged. This publication, written by the fifth generation of FutureLab Europe, is a call to go in that direction and entails concrete policy recommendations on how one can move collectively towards a citizens-led Europe. To do so, several actions will have to be carried out simultaneously and will require the support of joint forces. That being said, we strongly believe that the future of the European project and the EU’s credibility strongly depend on its capacity to take the lead on this matter. An active role of the EU in reforming our governance model is therefore a must!

And there is no further time to waste. European democracy should return to *demos* and the first bricks to strengthen our democracy must be laid down now.
The body of this report was written by Franz J. Allma-
yer, Hatidza Jahic, Simona Pronckuté, Luis Plácido San-
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Europe has to be a “citizen project” in order to succeed. It needs fresh ideas and innovative concepts as well as a strong supportive base from its younger generations. In order to enable FutureLab Europe to exist and develop, ten European Foundations, with the help of the Network of European Foundations and the European Policy Centre in Brussels, joined forces. They are assembling experiences, resources and – most of all – their outstanding Alumni. The programme currently has 105 participants coming from 30 countries – EU countries as well as non-EU countries.

FutureLab Europe empowers young voices mainly on the topics of democracy and participation, equal opportunities on the labour market, and European identity. Participants of FutureLab Europe develop their own ideas and positions on matters of European relevance and take responsibility and actions in order to help build the Europe of the future. They share their young perspective on Europe through their blogs, in public debates and through their individual projects.
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