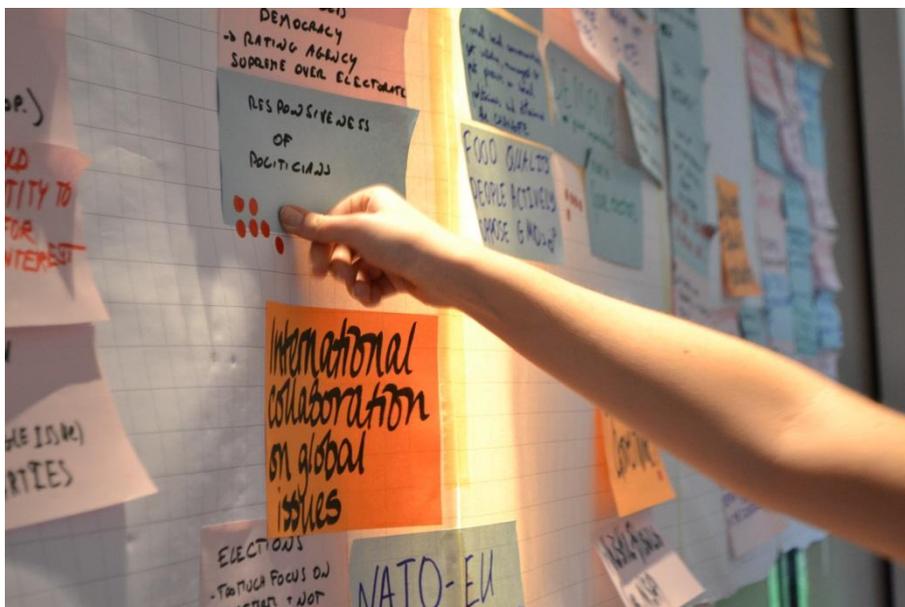


The future of Democracy: Report from the workshop

On 17 and 18 November a group of young Europeans met in Brussels to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the current democratic system(s) with regards to the future challenges and to identifying the priorities for action. The workshop was hosted by the King Baudouin Foundation as a part of the Foundation's initiative to look for ways of breathing new life into democracy in Belgium. The participating young voices from FutureLab Europe, a programme for outstanding young professionals who want to play an active role in the discussion on shaping the future of the European project, came from variety of European countries, both EU member and non-member states.

Examining the status quo of our democracy

Participation, a broader reach beyond the elites, citizens' understanding of their rights and a functioning justice system are perceived as the main aspects that make democracy of today healthy. The convincing assets of democracy are linked to empowerment and involving everyone through: *plurality of ideas* – the freedom of expression and choice; *motivation* – the independence of thinking, funding, choice of values, equal chances; and *rights* – such as safety, property, health and social care, education, employment. On the other end of the spectra: partisan media, politicized civil society, polarized/politically divided society, institutions not functioning properly, breach of rule of law and political imprisonments pertain as the main diseases.



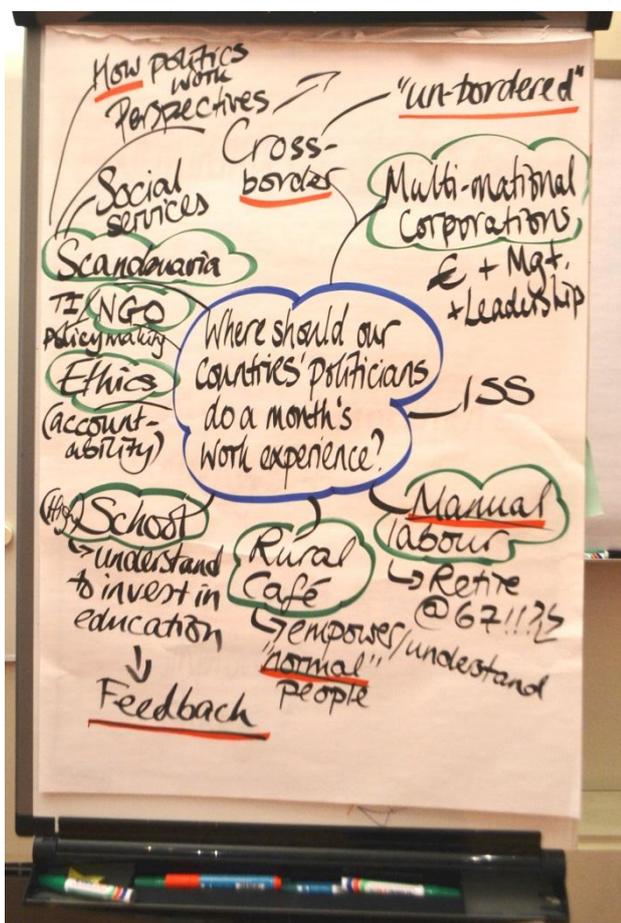
A disconnect between elites in politics and a common citizen? The job of a politician is generally perceived as attractive, even by some of those that evaluate the healthiness of democracy as very low. Nevertheless, the reasons are not necessarily connected to the impact of their work and the public figures in the limelight are often portrayed “as a pop-

star”, without real evaluations which would be based on meritocracy. There is a widespread perception that it could be useful for the politicians to step outside of their current box of thinking – in terms of another approach, a new toolbox and efficiency standards utilized in other sectors of the society (multinational corporations, NGOs, faculty of ethics) or other geographic contexts (Nordic states). Simultaneously there is a vital need to get in touch with the peripheral layers of society which a traditional politician does not normally engage with, esp. in the rural areas or the dodgy neighbourhoods in cities.

How robust is the participation beyond elections? Participation in civil society is perceived as strong mainly at local level/in community engagement, in mobilization around a few important issues, plus on the level of an “academic” engagement. In the same way as there is disconnect between politicians and citizens there also are indications of disconnect between the policy world and the civil society. In many places the civil society is perceived as not able to push and achieve change, weakened by the lack of care, competence, a missing global perspective or the lack of a belief that “it matters”. Yet, with the social movements and the revival of civic spirit in social media there is a contrary trend of growing demand for more democracy by individuals and loosely organized citizen groups. In this respect, especially the youth engagement deserves separate attention.



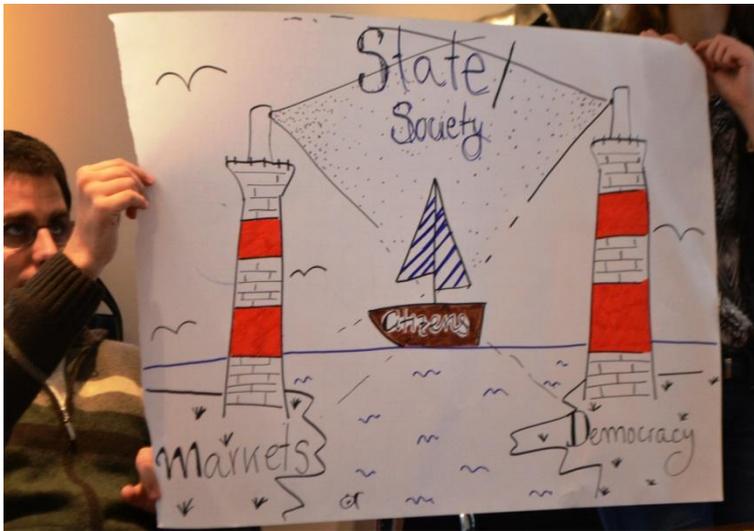
Challenges ahead and visions for the future of democracy



The ghost of (youth) unemployment, the disconnect between citizens and European Union, the welfare state retrenchment with rising inequalities and unsustainable demographics – all of these already strongly impact on people’s engagement with politics. In the near future, a further increase in challenges can be expected in the field of broadly understood security, climate change and refugees, growth of radicalism and separatism. Are the democracies in Europe or on the European level well equipped to respond to these challenges?

There is a widespread understanding that the shift in ways in which people are engaged in civic and political life has not yet been grasped by the traditional institutions of representative democracy. This goes hand-in-hand with political stagnation, disengagement and lack of ownership in the society.

The participants have identified three parallel visions for the future of democracy, based on which they worked out several recommendations to improve and develop the current democratic models.



- **Vision I: Work towards a blurring of the boundaries between the markets and the democracy**, which are currently portrayed as opposing poles. A citizen is simultaneously insider to both, asked to function in an impartial way, reconciling his multiple interests. He needs a “grey zone” as a new space for interaction and cooperation, where each citizen can take ownership as entrepreneur in both the market and in the democracy clusters, to

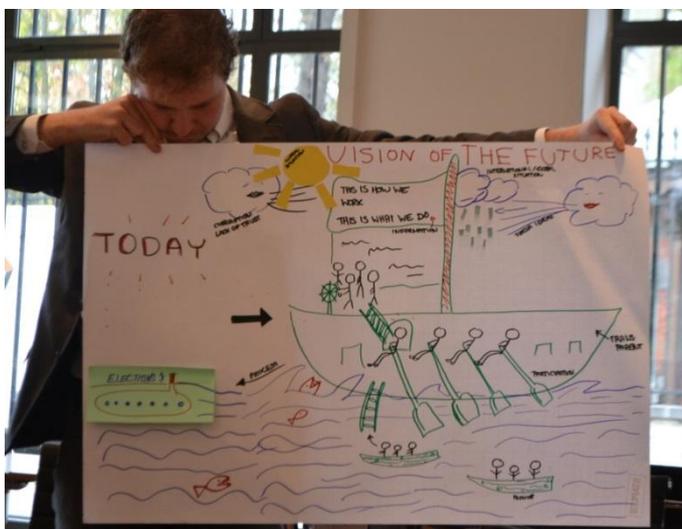
encourage the mobility of ideas between them and work through partnerships. The blurring happens gradually via encouragement of public institutions to learn efficiency from the private sector, a real corporate social responsibility, incentivizing active citizens bringing these two closer (active insider), utilizing the multinational nature of the markets.

- **Vision II: Better links between an idea, citizen’s voice, governments and corporations**, enabling an effective feedback loop, cyclic and transnational. Accessibility of information and quick spread of ideas by exploiting the potential of ‘new’ technologies in citizens’ mobilization and direct, non-hierarchical interaction with institutions of the public as well as private sphere towards the recognition of mutual goals and transparent outcomes would all function as motivators of citizens participation.



- **Vision III: Active participation of individuals in the creation and implementation of fresh ideas** through diverse participation tools, transparency and accessibility of information.

Metaphorically this envisions moving the citizen from an observer in a submarine to an active sailor on a boat. Oftentimes the elections are portrayed as the main way to participate in the formation of a vision for the future, which is like offering the citizen in the sea the possibility to look from a submarine to what is going on above the surface. In an open democracy the citizen needs to move from “only” being represented and passive to feel actively involved in the societal project and generation of ideas.



Recommendations and ways to improve, develop or change

All the three visions counted on a broader ownership over societal developments. They pointed out the need for blurring the traditional boundaries through active involvement of citizens: between markets and democracy, state and society, as well as to seek more flexible, less hierarchical, informal, and ad-hoc ways for creative participation. Here are several recommendations for a move in this direction:

1. Social entrepreneurs in all ways of life should be able to get their ideas through in order to contribute to a functioning democracy. Social innovation within each entity should quickly and easily be transmitted to and accessed by the relevant actors from science, society, industry, politics, in a simple scaling of each idea. This would motivate the citizens to socially innovate, feel connected to the decisions and foster risk-sharing between the citizens, the state and the corporate world. An enabling environment should be created by a leadership open for innovation, individual suggestions irrespective of hierarchy and held accountable for any lack of consultation, combined with new ways of presenting and sharing ideas. Active individuals contribute by pursuing non-linear careers and consistent thinking outside any box, educational institutions by encouraging innovative behaviour via professional support, teaching methods and flexibility, foundations by funding and awarding innovation.

2. Informed choices based on “good information” are crucial. The society needs a revitalized media mix, to add something on top of the existing media and to create a more aware readers. To make timely, accurate and relevant facts available, distinguishing opinions and facts are needed as well as a media mix reaching to a substantial audience and backed by a substantial readers base. It is crucial to get the citizens actively involved as a “part of the story”, to offer an opinion-leading role to all citizens by collecting ideas and suggestions for action. The quality of information can be enhanced by public-funded collective bodies of independent journalists, with a broad shareholder mix, to find the balance between the consumer-oriented media and the need for quality journalism. Science and research data should be available in accessible formats. It is essential to utilize the role of social media in the scoops, offering excerpts, directing attention to the longer information. On the other hand, both the government and the media are responsible to ensure that citizens search the access to basic information. Media should make the information more “attractive” and the citizen needs better education on both “politics-me” axis and on media use for creating interest in quality information. Government structures need to work towards being visible and easy to access.

3. Open government is about creating a culture, not a structure. This would foster a dynamic, agile government able to innovate and adapt. What it needs in practice is a direct line of communication, ad hoc idea exchanges, transparency and making information public in timely and digestible manner, plus a system of rotation for people who deal with secrecy to ensure



some kind of checks and balances system. For a citizen such open government fosters more issue-based participation and more “lobby” approach. Beyond the current dominance of professional lobby groups, bringing in the interests of various single-issue groups, like for example association of young mothers.

4. Better system of basic citizenship education is needed, based on “from information to action approach”, to ensure better educated critical citizenship for voting, media use and active participation. The citizens should be educated from an early age to take ownership of our society, along the lines “that’s not just about the mass out there, that’s about us personally”, seeing each problem in a wider context and with a sense of responsibility towards the community and the broader system. This requires an adjustment of the system of teaching citizenship education to be more centred around making each pupil feel responsible to participate in society (eg. use history lessons to understand democracy rather than just learn facts) and develop the curricula and teaching methods inclusively (eg. more say for the civil society, the corporate world and to schools themselves in creatively designing these as tailored to the local situation). This is not only about the government and public money - it should involve other stakeholders in a democratic society as well as more exchange between the private sector and a wider society in general.

5. Adjust or change the electoral model to achieve a proper representation of citizens. In addition to the flexible and ad hoc channels for citizen participation suggested in point 1 and 3, there is a need for a parallel review of the traditional channels. This would first and foremost require a reform of the basic cornerstone of representative democracy – the electoral code. In practical example, a proportional representation with an open list model should be implemented also in countries where it does not exist at the moment: a model of proportional representation which allocates the chairs in the parliament according to the amount of votes received and without a minimum threshold for entry of a party into the parliament. This would reduce the amount of votes currently “lost” in countries with a majority vote system where the winner takes it all or lost below the minimal threshold which oscillates around 3-5% in many European democracies. An open list model, enabling to cast votes for concrete individuals rather than to a party as such, would strengthen the link to one’s representative and the feeling of being represented.

More information about the participants on www.futurelabeurope.eu

