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**MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATION
BUILDING BLOCKS TO DEEPEN A EUROPEAN MINDSET;
APPROACHES TO OVERCOME REJECTION OF THE
EUROPEAN PROJECT**

Position Paper by

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Introduction and Outline of the Problem

In the recent years, our society has undergone significant developments. Due to new communication technologies, among which the Internet ranks prominently, we are able to connect with other people regardless of spatial and chronological barriers and we have immediate access to information from all over the globe. This transition to a ‘Knowledge Society’ bears not only great potentials, but also numerous risks such as increasing public frustration caused by a failure of the political actors to meet the rising demand for participation and transparency of political decision-making processes¹. The following paper reflects how the European Union can adjust to these societal changes by proposing an expansion of the Union’s communication system on one hand, and an extension of public participation opportunities on the other hand. The proposals concerning political participation aim at preventing the frustration-scenario depicted above.

According to the Eurobarometer survey of autumn 2016, 60% of the interviewed declared that they do not feel well informed on European affairs. However, 65% would like to know more about their rights as European citizens². These figures prove that there is not only urgent need but also a genuine demand for increased citizen information about European affairs. Furthermore, only 45% are happy with the way how Democracy within the EU works whereas 54% feel that their voice has no influence³. We therefore concluded that adjustments to the EU’s institutional set-up ought to be made not only to enable the European citizens to easily gain access to relevant information on European affairs but that they are also given a voice on the European level.

1. Expansion of the European Union’s Communication System

1.1 Towards the Creation of a European Public Sphere

At the moment, we have no common European public sphere but a fabric of multiple national public spheres, overlapping on some occasions but failing to provide the European citizens with a comprehensive picture of Europe. Consequently, no common identity can be found either. If citizens want to inform themselves on European affairs or important developments in other Member States, they either have to rely on national media or they are forced to

¹ European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (2015). Global Trends to 2030: Can the EU meet the challenges ahead?

² Eurobarometer (Autumn 2016).

³ *ibid.*

actively reach out for foreign media sources. Since the EU is characterized by a plurality of 24 official languages, the latter can often be inhibited by language barriers. This leads us to believe that some important prerequisites for successful integration are lacking on the European level. We therefore argue that an expansion of the EU's communication system is a first and essential step towards meeting the needs of our changing society and thus enhancing public support for European integration.

As a first draft to a better communication and intra European connection we propose to establish a European TV channel. The idea is that all public service broadcasters throughout the EU provide a certain amount of their content to a community channel. This channel would allow European citizens to watch series, films and documentaries from all over Europe in the various 24 languages.

As the Eurobarometer survey showed, people do not feel well informed about European affairs. Moreover, due to a lack of balanced media supply covering important developments in the other Member States, people know little about what their fellow-Europeans' opinions and problems are. It is therefore difficult to identify shared values, problems or visions. At the moment, national media coverage as well as reports about the direct neighbours and big Member States - such as Germany and the United Kingdom for example - dominate the media agenda whereas smaller states receive merely little attention or even no consideration at all. The establishment of a far-reaching European communication system would not only facilitate the European citizens' access to information about important occurrences within the Union but would also support the development of a common European identity, since the citizens would get to know the relevant issues and occurrences which are subject to debate within each member state. This would enable them to identify common problems, wishes and opinions and to realize that the European Union as well as the other Member States are not that distant from oneself as it is often perceived. The best outcome we can wish for, is that people start to look at happenings or challenges from a European, too instead of a narrow focused national perspective.

The project of a European TV channel aims at bringing together the different cultures of the various Member States but also the varying mindsets and values of their citizens. It has as its goal a closer Union where people know and respect each other.

Additionally, the special feature of broadcasting in the 24 official languages allows people to improve their language skills. As a consequence this also leads to a closer Union that

overcomes reticence across the nations. Hereof also the economy would profit since language barriers are still one of the biggest challenges regarding European cooperation, despite all efforts of creating an internal market with a free movement of workers.

To deepen the binding and relationship between the countries the channel may also provide Europe-wide shows which engage people from all over Europe (e.g. Europe's Next Top Model). During the Eurovision Song Contest and the European Football Championship we can observe faint signs of a European public sphere. The aim of such Europe-wide shows broadcasted by the proposed channel would therefore be to solidify these signs and to contribute to a sound European public sphere.

With a look at the costs of such a channel we want to mention that companies would benefit from a huge advertising potential which could cover-up the costs. Further, a kind of a solidarity tax might be established where each of the public service broadcasters contributes a certain amount of their broadcasting charges to the European channel.

1.2 Communication for information

First, we thought that there should be a European News TV-channel in order to keep the citizens of the various MS informed about what is going on among Europe. It was considered that it should be held in the language of the respective country in order to avoid a loss in interest on European topics because of language barriers.

Of course, as well as this proposal is well-meant, it is difficult to realize. It is costly and even though there is interest in what is going on among Europe, a 24/7 channel about European news may be too inflationary regarding information.

What might be a solution, or rather kind of a compromise, is a half an hour of Euro-News in the European TV channel that was proposed before. Like - as can be assumed - every country among the Union has several news programs, these can be adopted - but however, with a focus merely on EU topics. This format should also be held in the respective language of the Member States to keep the interest high and make the information provided easy to access.

When considering a news channel the content should not just inform about what happened in the various MS but also about the work of the EU-institutions: What are the challenges they are working on, which decisions have to be made, what is the ECJ at the moment dealing with, who bears which office in which institution and what is the job etc.

Of course, these services shall also be broadcast via internet in order to grant mobile access to information and to reach as many European citizens as possible.

A combination of a EU-wide broadcasting channel together with its corresponding online-appearance and perhaps also an expansion of the European institutions' Social Media appearances through cross-references in the different media channels creates a real potential for reaching out to as many European citizens as possible and to meet their demand for extensive information.

However, it is of utmost importance that such an expansion of the EU's communication system is not perceived as an attempt to spread positive propaganda. A balanced picture of the EU needs to be depicted by presenting not only the Union's strengths and positive externalities but also its apparent weaknesses and pressing problems. The citizens should be confronted with objective information enabling them to critically reflect on the current events and to develop an own opinion. For this, it is also necessary to include educational programs containing relevant information on how the EU and its main institutions work and, most importantly, on what implications this has on the Europeans' everyday lives. In order that people from all social and educational backgrounds are able to fully understand the news programs, information has to be presented as simply as possible and without the need of detailed background knowledge about the functioning of the EU institutions.

In order to secure objectivity, a control-authority with the competence to supervise the European media's compliance to ethical and journalistic standards and to sanction any violations of those has to be established. Such an authority should be an independent body composed of politically neutral actors from every member state.

Once the European citizens are provided a realistic picture of the EU, its strengths and weaknesses as well as its potentials, they are able to critically reflect on European and national media coverage, to weigh up different arguments against each other and to finally develop an own opinion. This would significantly diminish the incentives for national decision-makers to engage in the "blame-game", holding the EU responsible for unpopular measures whilst presenting positive developments as personal achievements before the national public, regardless of the actual cause for success or failure. Informed citizens would immediately realize when they get deceived about the actual effects of the measures in question. In this regard, the European media channel (provided its objectivity is effectively controlled by a neutral supervisory body) can act as a further source for information and opinion building and thus contribute to media plurality within the Union.

In sum, this would not only help the people to be up-to-date about what is happening in Europe but would also facilitate to get a better understanding of how the Union and its institutions work and why they are important. Further, a news-session in the format we proposed would help to get 'Brussels' closer to its European citizens and may counteract Euroscepticism. As a last step, referring to the foregoing point it might be a partial solution regarding the democratic deficit of the Union since it may allow a more extensive politicization of the EU.

Obviously, there is also the need to make adjustments in the European Unions' institutional set-up in order to meet the needs of such an informed citizenship. In order to avoid further frustration and political apathy, tools should be provided which allow citizens to actively engage in the process of European integration.

2. Increased citizen participation within the European Union

2.1 Political competition

Recently there has been much debate about the EU's "democratic deficit" with several authors taking position on this topic. Most notably, Hix and Føllesdal⁴ propose a series of minor institutional changes in order to close the EU's democratic gap. We share with them the idea that politicization needs to be increased at the European level. At the moment, decisions within the European Parliament are reached by overwhelmingly pro-European majorities. Therefore, the only line of conflict seems to be pro-European versus Euroscepticism whilst there is almost no political competition on the left-right-axis. Political competition over policies and positions, however, is in our view crucial to wake the citizens' interest in European decision making. If there are different political positions competing with each other over policy content, it is easier for them to identify with one position or another and to see how their vote gets translated into a political position. Increased competition not only aligns the decision-making process on European level with the process on national levels. It has potential to lead to higher turnout rates at EP-elections, greater political interest shown by the citizens and a higher degree of transparency of the decision-making process.

⁴ Føllesdal, A. / Hix, S. (2006). 'Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44(3): 533-562.

The European media presented in the first section of this paper provide(s) a valuable platform and support(s) the political contestation over EU issues. It offers an opportunity to overcome distortion of information through national channels and provides a neutral view on European happenings.

Beneath the European TV Channel and the transnational news, we recommend expanding the instrument of the citizen initiative in order to get the citizens more involved into European issues. The idea is to expand it so that initiatives do not have to be addressed only to the European Commission but, if the initiative fails there, also the European Parliament. Since the latter is the only directly elected organ composed of citizens' representatives, the European citizens should be given a possibility to express their will by directly addressing the EP with their demands. This opens a direct channel of interaction between the EP and the European citizens and helps to keep the EP in line with the latter's interests. Although we are aware of the fact that with regard to the treaties, especially as laid down in Art. 294 TFEU, describing the ordinary legislative process, according to paragraph 2 of it, only the Commission holds the power of initiative, we would welcome, if the Parliament nevertheless uses its bargaining power to exert further pressure on the European Commission to deal with the citizens' interest expressed in the initiative.

2.2 The Internet and its Potential for Democratic Participation

The Internet brings great potential for direct democracy since it allows easy and direct exchange within Europe. Despite the technical possibilities exist, we miss a proper use of them at a European level. The potential of online communication could be used by expanding the reach of public opinion polls. Eurobarometer, a quite extensive survey brought into life by the European Commission, currently involves face-to-face or telephone interviews, group discussions and in-depth studies. Its reach could be significantly expanded if online interviews were included as well.

Moreover, the online-appearances of the European media programs should also include short opinion polls in order to enable the percipients to express their own view. These opinion polls should not only include general attitudes towards the EU and issues of great importance but contain also specific proposals and policy solutions from various political positions. Easy access to such opinion polls via Internet has two advantages: first, citizens are able to voice their opinion and hence directly reach out to the EU-institutions and second, the latter can check, how well the discussed proposals on the European level go down with the public.

Furthermore, there is the possibility to set up an online discussion platform where citizens can directly interact with representatives from EU-institutions, ask questions and express their concerns or demands. In order to circumvent language barriers, the individual contributions would have to run through the translation service in order that each contribution can be published at least in the original language and in English. Such a platform has the great advantage that (1) citizens from all over Europe can interact with each other and with the European institutions regardless of language and national barriers, that (2) EU bodies can promptly react to the citizen's contributions thus evoking a dynamic exchange of ideas and that (3) the impression of a remote European Union sitting in Brussels can be overcome.

2.3 Institutional Changes to Facilitate Participation

In order to enhance citizen participation, we also propose a further development of the European Union's corporative structures. More specifically, we recommend introducing an advisory committee on the European level, the "Committee of Youth". Young people are the future of Europe: it is them who will be responsible for continuing the project of European integration in the future and therefore they should be given more influence and direct contact to the European institutions. Currently, young adults are facing a number of problems such as high unemployment rates, social and political insecurities.

The proposed committee (inspired by the Committee of the Regions) would act as an advisory organ to the European institutions, to be consulted whenever European policy has a direct impact on the younger segment of the European population. Moreover, it has to be given the competence to issue opinions and recommendations on its own. In this way, the committee can act as a joint between the European youth and the political actors. Interests, demands and concerns can be collected and channelled, regardless of national barriers within the Union.

In order for the committee to function well, there have to be headquarters in each member state composed of youth representatives. These locations shall be open to the demands of national youth associations and organizations as well as individuals. The headquarters would act as substructures to the Committee of Youth and they would be interlinked via online platforms and networks which would not only facilitate transnational, European-wide communication between the youth-representatives but also enable young people to reach out to their direct representatives on the European level.

As our last point to achieve a closer link between the EU institutions and the European citizens, we propose to expand the European Ombudsman's area of responsibility. In addition to its legal competences as laid down in the treaties, especially with regard to Art. 228 TFEU, this body shall not merely be "empowered to receive complaints from any citizen of the Union or any natural or legal person residing or having its registered office in a Member State concerning instances of maladministration in the activities of the Union institutions, bodies, offices or agencies, with the exception of the ECJ acting in its judicial role", but shall also act as a point of refuge for European citizen's political concerns and demands as well as an information centre in case of uncertainty regarding EU-related competences and issues. In this way, bottom-up inputs can be collected in one body and redirected to the decision-makers. The aim is to establish a body that stands in continuous interaction with the European citizens, that is open to their inputs and that act as a mediator between the European citizens and the Union.

Such an expansion of the Ombudsman's area of responsibility would certainly require an expansion of the body's personnel and financial resources. We believe, however, that the positive impact of having a clear address to where people can direct not only their legal but also their political concerns outweighs any additional financial burdens arising from it.

3. Conclusion

Through the interplay of our two general proposals, a way can be found to meet the demands of our modern society with its increasing demand for information and democratic participation. If European integration keeps being an elite project, public support for it will erode. Since public support is crucial, there will be no progression on the path of integration as long as the public opposes it. On the other hand, if the European citizens gain a realistic and fair picture of the European Union, its weaknesses and strengths and are provided with tools enabling them to actively engage in the political process, there is a realistic chance that public support and demands for additional steps to be taken at the European level can act as an engine for further European integration.