



JEAN MONNET

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A call for a renewed and inclusive European political process

By

Matevž Malčič and Tomaž Čebela

University of Ljubljana

Faculty of Social Sciences

SLOVENIA



Matevž Malčič

matmalcic@gmail.com

Tomaž Čebela

tomaz.cebela@gmail.com

Introduction

The European movement, which has resulted in the creation of the European Union (EU), is without hyperbole, facing its greatest danger yet. This danger does not come only from the current sovereign debt crisis; in fact, the limited reaction to EU's current ills is caused by a crisis of faith, or as it is better known in the general public, a crisis of legitimacy. The "sudden" appearance of this problematic comes from an important transformation of the European movement, particularly the integration process under the auspices of the EU, from a project being led by political and economic elites, to one whose impact is so widely felt that it has transformed into a popular one. Yes this popular project is faced with a paradox. On the one hand, Europe is united in a way that few of its founding fathers would've imagined, but on the other, the continent has never been more divided, both on the level of political elites, as well as on the ground, amongst its citizenry. It is the latter which also has the power to either pull this project back from the brink, or push it over a cliff's edge. Yet speeding through the last treaty reform after the No! referenda in France and Netherlands in 2004, which resulted in the Treaty of Lisbon, was in our opinion a major mistake on the part of political stakeholders in the European project. Thus a European social contract, which would've been delivered by an equivalent of a constitutional text, was never put into place and the European political process ground to a halt with the acrimonious negotiations over the Lisbon treaty, the following referenda in Ireland and blockades from certain countries, as well as the current economic and fiscal crisis. Pressed by the markets and lacking popular support for a strong common and EU level solution to the current predicament, heads of state and government were left with few policy options and Brussels was swept once more to the side-lines, with the European Council gaining on *de facto* power at the expense of the former.

This paper is a response to such developments, which present, in our opinion, the most important issue facing the EU right now. A renewed and inclusive European political process needs, first and foremost, to represent the citizens of the EU, who themselves symbolize the central motor of future European integration and whose welfare and political inclusion should be a central point of an EU for the 21st century. To reach this goal, we propose a two-prong restart process, with a high-level stakeholder and grassroots instrument. The latter would take the form a grassroots motivated, locally, regionally or in some cases nationally organised groups which would serve a double purpose. Firstly to create a space for an open, rationalistic debate on European integration amongst different worldviews, without any predetermined agenda or ideological goals, and which would secondly permit citizens to either join or pose questions to their closest group, receiving the greatest possible level of objective data on which they may base their decisions or even join in future debates. Such a process cannot exist in isolation, but must work in tandem with the political, economic and cultural elites currently responsible for running of the day to day life in the EU. The newly restarted European political process at this level must commence with a second Hague Congress, an over 60-year old follow-up to the originator of all institutions of European integration. A meeting of stakeholders is paramount if we wish to achieve the consensus on which to build the future of our integration. As this paper will show, it is our profound belief that should this two-prong process succeed, even in part, we will be able to claim to have a Union of the people, by the people and for the people and that the current and future crisis will consequently be met with a stronger resolve and greater stability than ever before.

Method of deliberation

Before we take a look at our chosen instruments, we must present the basic theory on which all our presumptions are based. Without going into too much detail, we draw greatly from the works of Habermas, in particular, his work regarding the public sphere and non-coercive discourse. What is necessary for our instruments to function is rationalistic deliberation, wherein argumentative exchange between actors who engage in consensus building is of paramount importance. It is expected of such actors to hold the power of the argument, rather than the argument of power as a fundamental value. Furthermore, the debate they participate in should be free, open and fair, and it should guarantee equal access for every interested actor, as well as assure at least their legal equality. These elements allow participants to challenge the validity of one another's statements, while remaining willing to question their own arguments. Shedding away any selfish reasoning on their part, the attainment of the truth and the discovery of the common good becomes the primary goal of participants, who internalise it as the right thing to do (Karolewski 2011, 69). As for the political process, the following definition fits tightly with the method of deliberation. It is a procedure followed to resolve important issues that concern a large number of people, as well as legal activities where citizens can change public policy, which includes interaction between social groups and political institutions or between political leadership and public opinion. This latter also describes the importance that the meeting between the participants of our proposed grassroots and the stakeholder instruments will have.

Grassroots level

In addition to the political process described above, we also need to define what we imagine as grassroots movements, as their usage in our proposal differs from the regular application in the decision-making process. The creation of such movements should be natural and spontaneous, without external interference, which is an important difference in comparison to movements orchestrated by traditional power structures. They take place at a local or regional level and lead to a change in priorities and shifts in public opinion, which in our case happens through the instrument of educating the citizenry.

It is through the prism of involvement of the grassroots movements, that we can consider town twinning and Erasmus as two of the good practices that included citizens, who then also actively contributed to the creation of a new European story. Twinning started in 1951 as an idea of a French mayor to cooperate with his peer in a German city, but not just on an official or political level. The basis of this cooperation was the inclusion of individuals from both cities into a variety of cultural, artistic and musical activities. In order for citizens to socialise, they first had to learn at least the basics of the other side's language, which made them understand and accept the underlying principles which are in the background of cultural differences. Comparing twinning with the Erasmus programme, we can see the same added value also being present there, only realised in a more academic field. These attempts at educating citizens about our differences and exposing them to different worldviews form together an important foundation for our grassroots suggestion and a fertile field in which the seed can grow.

We can also point out two other initiatives, whose goals was either to inform or engage individuals, but in a more specific area of EU integration. The latter approach was undertaken by the Debate Europe website, set up by the European Commission and updated between 2005 and 2010. It was the first use of the Internet by the EU in order to try and stimulate an autonomous public debate among concerned citizens on EU topics. The site, being an elite-initiated debate, exemplified how deliberation was used by the EU as a fallback to counter

setbacks in the integration process (Hoffmann and Monaghan 2011, 142). As such, the Debate Europe website was unable to either close the gap between citizens and the EU, or to use the Internet as a place for public debate, which did not generate new ideas and fell short of bringing new legitimacy to the project. In addition to all this, the website never managed to attract a significant breath of contributors and the few ideas that were presented, did not find their way into the Commission's policy proposals (*ibidem*, 145–6). The failures of Debate Europe were at least partly addressed by the AsktheEU.org website, whose goal is to make it easier for members of the public to ask for information, while contributing to making the EU more transparent, accountable, as well as to encourage public participation in the decision making process. However, the website focuses only on the institutional framework and on how EU institutions function (AsktheEU.org). Consequently, it does not, in itself, contribute directly, but rather indirectly to a debate on the future of Europe via education. Nevertheless, a website that may not be accessible to everyone and which is limited to 4 languages can do little to attract individuals which are usually left disinterested or with some knowledge, but no place to ask questions and participate in debates.

These two examples show us the real problem of the democratic discourse in Europe. We strongly believe that it is only with education on how European institutions functions and on different policies and policy processes, that we can achieve stronger participation of individuals in the public sphere. The grassroots motivated groups that we propose be set up, would, in comparison to the aforementioned attempts, have the added benefit of ensuring a larger number of European citizens being informed or made aware of the current problems, debates or politics at the EU level.

From this would stem two additional positive influences. The first one concerns the newly enacted European citizen initiative, which unfortunately will, in our opinion, suffer from either low-inclusiveness of individuals who do not already hold an interest in EU politics, or (non)cooperation of citizens misled by ideology and demagoguery, rather than a thoughtful analysis of a problem. Access to information from the proposed groups would enrich the newly created initiative, while also having the positive influence of bringing citizens closer to the Union, which currently suffers from alienation. A Union that begins and ends at the borders of Member states cannot stand, meaning that the European level of the much touted multi-level governance must also be in reality brought to the citizens. Yet the pressure on national governments to do so can only come from an informed citizenry, capable of organising itself on such an issue.

The education of citizens will undoubtedly play an important role in future debates on the European question. The EU as the main visible institution of this integration needs to, without a doubt, be present in this process, yet not as a benevolent lord, but an equal partner in the debate. The independence of the grassroots movement needs to be maintained, lest its legitimacy and freedom to discuss all topics be put in question. However, the EU can, after this independence is secured, offer support and infrastructure to kickstart this new European political process to a higher level.

High-level stakeholder instrument

It may appear incongruous at first to link so closely an idea designed to rebuild the legitimacy of the European project at the grassroots level, with a high-level, in a sense “elitist”, gathering of representatives. Yet the call for a second Hague Congress, which in 1948 represented a manifestation of post-war efforts to provide a politically fragmented Western Europe with an effective formula for integration, will draw upon an important element of its predecessor, its composition by representatives of different European social strata. In 1948, the support for integration often came from groups that we now consider as grassroots in character. While before the Second World War, only governments participated in such massive endeavours, with the occasional support by spirited individuals or parliamentarians, the Hague Congress managed to bring together MPs, who were independently joining the European Parliamentary Union established by Count Coudenhove-Kalergi, as well as the strongest supporters of European integration, the European Union of Federalists. The partisans of the political idea were joined by the economic sector with financiers and industrialists, as well as the sphere of culture and religion (Walton 1959, 739). It is thus not impossible for us to claim that they managed to form an analogue of public opinion at the time, a development that we can also apply to our proposal.

The EU itself has experience with a similar gathering, although far more limited in scope, which also had the teleological nature of devising an endpoint or purpose of European integration that would also give meaning and validation to EU politics, thus ensuring legitimacy of the integration process. We are talking about the Convention on the Future of Europe, which took place during 2002–2003, presided over by Valérie Giscard d’Estaing and whose 207 members came from national governments, the European Commission and national and European parliaments as equal participants. Their objective, drafted under the Laeken convention in 2001, was to simplify the four treaties in force at the time, with the question of a possible constitutional text being pushed into the future. Contrary to what the heads of state might’ve imagined, the Convention took a life of its own and ended in the proposal for the rejected Constitutional treaty (Hoffmann and Monaghan 2011, 143). Unfortunately, the Convention does provide us with an important precedent for a Hague Congress in situ the EU, as it does not conform to certain requirements that we consider are crucial for a quasi-top-down instrument to function. First and foremost, due to its teleological nature, it missed, in our opinion, the possibility to construct a new framework for integration, taking into consideration the transformation we already mentioned. The participants cannot however be considered fully responsible due to several limitations that they were faced with, perhaps the most important one being their composition, which was purely political in nature. We join Hoffman and Monaghan (2011, 145) in their analysis of the outcome, which failed to generate any significant public ownership and after the deed was done, it left political leaders on the back foot, trying in vain to defend it against a doubtful press and an unsupporting public. This proves that an elite debate that is merely held in public, but is not composed of the public, cannot provide us with the value base on which to build the future of European integration.

Before continuing, we have to add to the previously pointed problems, what Karolewski (2011, 70–9) calls pathologies of deliberation in the EU. The first one is false-will formation, which appears as a result of a pre-determined and single goal deliberation. Consequently, the Convention was unable to develop a proper and common European will which would correspond to the collective will of EU’s citizens. This particular pathology stems from the conventioners representing their nation or institution, which set limits on how much they can “give away”. Without the prerequisite challenging of their views, there can be no deliberation

and without the discovery of the common good, no building blocks can be set in place. As a warning for our own process, we can expect the representatives of executive bodies to be less like to change their preferences, while parliamentarians themselves are bound by argumentative elasticity and their mandate, meaning that they face possible censure at future elections. In this sense, delegated deliberation would embody the elite-orientated and bureaucratic character of the polity, which would undermine its democratic quality. Karolewski proposes that deliberation between the elites be followed by deliberation with the public, where representatives debate the controversial issues, rather than just subjecting the final decision to a referendum. Such a proposal fits nicely with our own grassroots education movement, as well as the enhanced representation of the citizenry at the stakeholder level, including ordinary citizens themselves.

The second pathology is called rational hijacking of deliberation. In addition to the Convention being unable to represent the democratic will, it is also taken hostage by selfish rationalisation by political actors who engage in pseudo-deliberation, which is then used by rational actors to trick their opponents, rather than seek consensus and try to solve common problems. The latter is also used by actors in order to manipulatively use arguments which refer to collective identity, norms or the common good in order to gain political legitimacy for their own interest. This tactic also enables them to delegitimise the position of those not in agreement, as well as shame them into complying with their demands by presenting their ideas or actions as inappropriate in the search for the common good. Due to the origins of the members of the Convention, they have an incentive to act rhetorically, leading to the classical prisoner's dilemma, which forces participants to look after their own best interest and to try and lock the other party in a constitutional rule-set, which is difficult to change once adopted. This practise was seen during the deliberation on the new rules for QMV, with the double majority system being favourable to large states who managed to push for their entry into the Constitutional Treaty, with even d'Estaing being silent on this issue. Karolewski proposes that an institution capable of controlling powerful actors is put into place or that citizens are allowed to "testify", ie. to present their own perspective without the need to defend it. Our own proposal already covers the latter proposal, to a far greater extent even, and participation of both representatives of different fields, as well as an informed citizenry, diminishes in our view the danger of rational hijacking.

We hope that it is clear from the arguments presented above why we do not only consider the grassroots level to be in need of a different toolset, but that high-level deliberations need to be changed as well in order to conform to new realities. Similarly to the original Hague Congress, the purpose such a meeting would be firstly to demonstrate widespread support which exists for the cause of Europe unity; secondly, to secure an exchange of views and arrive at agreed foundations for future action; and lastly, to provide a new and powerful impetus to the campaign. It is our hope that the second Congress will be able to live up to the experience of the first one and be the only contemporary example of a deliberate, non-coercive, popular effort to modify the traditional nation-state pattern, establish political jurisdiction broad enough to satisfy the political and economic needs of our time and thus successfully counter today's curiously unhistorical centrifugal organizational trend. These were the words of Arnold Zurcher when he tried to describe the original Congress ten years after it took place (Walton 1959, 739–40).

Conclusion

As we've seen, the reestablishment of legitimacy of the European project through a proper European political process will require major changes on both the European, national and regional level in terms of how individuals organise and how common values are decided upon. The spreading of the European idea via knowledge and the meeting of different stakeholders will give the impetus for new ideas and create a new generation of visionaries, to be in their own right considered as founding fathers of a European polity for the 21st century. We have to warn however, against any premature decision to delegate the nation state to the scrapheap of history. It remains for the time being, the political form in which citizens are socialised and into which they put their trust. The state also remains the supplier of basic public goods and services, as well as the infrastructure guaranteeing the protection of individual freedoms. As the current technological and societal development doesn't allow for a proper public sphere or civil society to develop at the transnational level, it is up to the national state to provide a fertile environment for their formation. Without this support our grassroots suggestion has little chance of ever flourishing.

We would also like to suggest that a small-scale experiment take place, utilising the different ideas expressed in this paper. Youth groups, from different academic areas would work together for 3-6 months on debating the most important issues and at the end of their deliberation, would present a document setting out the role of students in both the grassroots and stakeholder instruments. A positive influence of such an experiment would not only be the new skillsets that students could use in the future, but most importantly, a glimpse into how things may evolve if we decide that the European project is worth saving for yet another generation.

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