

PROPOSALS

FOSTERING NEW FORMS OF PARTNERSHIPS

While the task of building new bridges between Europe and its citizens is a matter for all institutions and offers partnership opportunities to a large range of organisations, **this report will focus on two levels which represent a specific connection to most EU citizens, namely the local and regional levels.** Other partnership opportunities offered by the EU institutions are examined under Section 6.2.

3.1. Listen to and liaise directly with the local level

To close the perceived gap with its citizens, the European Union needs to be where its citizens are: in local communities, rural areas and larger cities. It must trigger and foster a new dialogue directly with the people, and bring Europe onto every street. For the European Union, the local context represents the natural, most tangible and nearest circle of belonging. This is the place where people live, work, pursue opportunities, experience good and bad times and are socially connected and culturally active. It is the place where people face their daily challenges.

However, no one is truly only 'local'; everyone is simultaneously also part of an interconnected world which is both local and European. Mayors and councillors therefore have a vital role to play.

In order to reconnect with grass-roots level organisations, the EU needs to fully recognise and exploit the know-how of civil society representatives. They are the ones who often define new solutions, as was evidenced recently by the Covenant of Mayors on climate change ⁽²³⁾.

Grass-roots organisations have been particularly vocal in recent months in defending European values and enhancing the social dimension of the European project in times of growing inequality and external threats ⁽²⁴⁾.

'Pulse of Europe' is a good example of this mobilisation.

3.2. A Europe with the regions

Beyond the grass-roots level, regions also play a growing role in rethinking governance in the Union and its Member States. With their solid socioeconomic base and common cultural identity, they offer the right scale for policy orientations and adequate delivery in many policy areas, as they are important actors and intermediaries in the outreach to citizens. Regions also play an important role in cross-border cooperation, an area where Europe's presence is tangibly felt.

The long-standing responsibility and (co-)management of regions in European regional policy and the EU's Structural Funds has also enhanced the role of regions.

Based on these considerations, the aim should not be to build an alternative 'Europe of the regions', but rather to form a 'Europe with the regions', as part of a multilevel governance concept based on mutual responsibility and partnership.

Finally, following the multilevel governance paradigm, regions should also be encouraged to fully associate cities and other local authorities, including socioeconomic partners at regional level, in designing and implementing regional partnership agreements on EU affairs.

PROPOSALS

6.1. Participatory democracy: implementing Treaty opportunities

The Treaty of Lisbon introduced the concept of European participatory democracy. The first set of proposals aims to address more of the possibilities offered by the Treaty and to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the Union.

Horizontal civil dialogue (Article 11(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU))

Treaty provision: 'The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.'

The promotion of horizontal civil dialogue at European level is very welcome and is long overdue. This is all the more relevant given that young people prefer more activity-related and issue-related politics. Several interesting initiatives have been launched recently in this area which could serve as pilots for more global action. These include the 'My Europe...Tomorrow' initiative, launched by the European Economic and Social Committee; the 'Eleven-One-Austria Project' ⁽³⁶⁾, run by the Austrian Institute for European Law and Policy together with the University of Graz; and the 'REsearch' project and 'Futurium' open-source tool, developed internally within the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology.

The vertical civil dialogue (Article 11(2) TEU)

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Treaty provision: 'The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.' The vertical civil dialogue (VCD) has to be enforced and opened up as widely as possible. The fragmentary, lobbyist-dominated character of vertical civil dialogue needs to be replaced and opened up to include input from the general public.

Agenda-setting needs to be clearly bottom-up, letting citizens co-decide in a reformed model that builds consensus from below. It is important that quality take the lead over quantity and that the Commission initiate a 'dialogue regime' where the European institutions focus on delivering on substance rather than concentrating on procedures ⁽³⁷⁾.

To win citizens' backing for the European project through wider participation, it is also recommended that a single online 'eleven-two-tool' platform be installed.

EU citizens' initiative (Article 11(4) TEU)

Treaty provision: 'Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties.'

The European citizens' initiative (ECI) needs significant changes. Its reform should be seen as a window of opportunity to eliminate the unnecessary barriers and hurdles encountered so far. In September 2017 the European Commission proposed a revision of the initiative to make it more accessible, user-friendly and easier for organisers and supporters to use ⁽³⁸⁾.

The ECI mechanism needs to change if it is to perform better in the future. It should be a platform of direct exchange between the citizens and 'their' Commission, creating a single handling entity, preferably run by an outsourced body. The European Commission should start to deal with unsuccessful but interesting ECIs, while giving serious ECIs, successful ones in particular, a chance to become partners in the vertical dialogue.

Data requirements should be reduced at regional and local levels, while citizens' committees should be given legal status, thus eliminating non-productive administrative burdens and increasing general awareness and knowledge of the ECI.

Dialogue on European values (Article 17(3) TFEU)

Treaty provision: 'Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with ... churches and [philosophical and non-confessional] organisations.'

This dialogue has to be opened up to the members of all accredited organisations. It also has to diversify the dialogue away from a Brussels-based dialogue to a genuinely open and European one.

The current setting needs enriching and opening up to turn it into a broad and fruitful public dialogue, connected to communities and citizens.

Delegated acts (Article 290(1) TFEU)

Treaty provision: 'A legislative act may delegate to the Commission the power to adopt non-legislative acts of general application to supplement or amend certain non-essential elements of the legislative act.'

The objectives, content, scope and duration of the delegation of power shall be explicitly defined in the legislative acts. The essential elements of an area shall be reserved for the legislative act and accordingly shall not be the subject of a delegation of power.'

Article 290 of the TFEU allows the EU legislator to delegate to the Commission the power to adopt non-legislative acts of general application that supplement or amend certain non-essential elements of a legislative act. These delegated acts are of great importance for the implementation and the daily governance of many important policy areas. Results on the ground often depend on the right knowledge and understanding of the consequence of delegated acts.

The transparency of and communication about these delegated acts should be improved, to better inform the general public.

Deepening democratic representation at European level Initiating the 'Spitzenkandidaten' process during the last European Parliament elections represented a significant step forward in improving citizens' legitimisation of the nomination of the President of the European Commission, but additional

steps are needed to develop this further.

The process could be extended to result in the direct election of a single President of the European Union. It could be the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission or the President of a new functional constellation.

The election of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) on the basis of Member State-determined constituencies has been regularly questioned. An EU-wide electoral constituency should be created for the election of MEPs.

6.2. Setting up partnership agreements: improving the existing instruments of the EU institutions for enhancing outreach

Communication of EU affairs must not be the responsibility of the European institutions alone; it must be shared across all other levels of governance — national, local and regional. A new generation of partnership agreements is necessary to succeed in doing so. This set of proposals also passes in review some of the current actions as implemented by the Commission.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament has a crucial role to play during European election campaigns as well as in the course of the ensuing mandate. The campaigns offer a unique opportunity to have dialogue on, debate and discuss EU issues with the general public, to address their concerns, anxieties and expectations, to listen to their criticisms and to present the added value, ambitions and achievements of the European project. The mandate provides the opportunity to deliver on the promises made during the campaign.

The low turnout (42.6 % of the eligible EU-wide electorate) at the last European Parliament elections in 2014 remains, however, a great concern. Greater focus should be given to analysing why almost 60 % of eligible voters chose not to participate in the election. In the run-up to the forthcoming elections in 2019, more engagement is undoubtedly needed by organisations at local, regional and national levels, as well as from civil society as a whole, to campaign for Europe together.

The European Parliament has become a real parliament: not a mere 'echo chamber' for EU citizens, but a co-legislator in Union-wide policies.

As a result, the European Parliament has a special opportunity to interact from a bottom-up perspective with citizens, who are the source of its legitimacy, and to better explain its role and achievements in more accessible terms. This should be organised in cooperation with the other institutions and with national, regional and local representatives. Common debates and events would have a positive role to play in this regard.

The European Parliament should open its doors to citizens on a regular basis in

order to provide them with the opportunity to directly submit their proposals and concerns to a joint plenary session with Members of the European Parliament and Members of the European Commission. These sessions should also be open to citizens participating remotely via the internet or through social media.

The European Parliament's 'European Citizen's Prize', honouring committed Europeans, deserves to be highlighted and fully supported.

EUROPEAN COUNCIL

As mentioned earlier in this report, the time seems right to challenge the false dichotomy between 'Europe' and 'democracy'. An intolerable situation has gradually developed in which Member States argue that the EU does not fulfil its mission, while they themselves obstruct its decisions. This lack of basic coherence leads to confusion and breeds mistrust among the general public.

All institutions must work together to eliminate the contradiction between the Union's responsibilities and ambitions on the one hand, and those of the Member States on the other, with due recognition of their respective competences, and in full respect of the subsidiarity principle, where the Union deals with the large issues and does not focus unnecessarily on the smaller ones, to be dealt with at national, regional or local level.

The lessons from the 2016 referenda, the European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe and recent developments on the international scene provide new scope for a renewed dialogue between the Council and the other institutions, in order to consolidate the Union both internally and at international level.

EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

The European Committee of the Regions plays an important role in connecting the Union with its citizens at the two levels that citizens feel the greatest connection with: the local and the regional levels.

On the one hand, regional and local representatives are able to voice local citizens' concerns directly to the political assembly. They are best placed to relay their daily experience and local expertise, given that they are directly confronted with the challenges and concerns of the citizens. These include economic problems, job creation, social wellbeing, the environment and security. On the other hand, being interinstitutionally connected, regional and local representatives have a unique opportunity to explain and disseminate Europe's goals and achievements at the local level. The Committee of the Regions is ideally placed to ensure respect for subsidiarity and to connect the Union with its people ⁽³⁹⁾. It could thus gradually evolve towards becoming a reflection chamber of the Council on territorial issues.

The European Committee of the Regions' 2015-2019 communication strategy aims to better connect Europe with its citizens and to improve the dialogue and interaction directly, including through the use of digital tools, between the regional and the local level and all European institutions. Several priorities

have been developed and concrete actions proposed, giving a key role to the Committee's Members as committed and engaged players. Results can only be expected once the interaction with the other EU institutions becomes two-way — not just in terms of interinstitutional networking, but particularly in terms of interinstitutional partnership. Enhancing common communication on cohesion policy might serve as a good example.

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

As the main institutional bridge between Europe and civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) ensures that European policies and legislation tie in better with the economic and social situations on the ground, thereby promoting the development of a more participatory European Union and enhancing the role of civil society.

More contacts and improved partnerships with the wide range of actors represented in the EESC — based on the concept of multiactor governance — need to be considered, in order to help develop proposals that will benefit citizens and civil society. These partners include entrepreneurial associations; trade unions; socioeconomic bodies and networks; cultural, environmental and social networks and organisations; NGOs; and think tanks.

No new outreach strategy can be fully successful without their involvement. European political parties have also to fully play their role and to be more prominently involved in connecting with the grass-roots organisations operating at the national and regional levels.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Representations in the Member StatesThe European Commission's representations play an increasingly important role at national level, being the extension and hub of the European Commission in their respective countries. Representations, the scope of which has already been widened, should be more extensively used, connecting in their daily work with national, regional and local authorities, social partners, academics, researchers, journalists, businesses, cultural actors and the media, in order to relay EU priorities and feed the domestic debate.

Their outreach could be improved by involving a broader network of high-level experts from different spheres, including from the Commission's specialised services.

Well-known cultural and sports personalities could be asked to serve as Union ambassadors.

Europe Direct Information Centres (EDICs)

The over 500 EDICs across the European Union play an essential role as important partners for interacting with citizens and connecting them with the EU. As the first contact point for citizens, their proactive role in communicating the Union's ambitions and achievements should be improved.

They have an important role to play in enhancing the 'Dialogue on Europe and Europe in dialogue' mission set out in this report.

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

Improved cooperation between the EDICs and the European Committee of the Regions should be fostered.

Citizens' dialogues

Citizens' dialogues provide citizens with an opportunity to have discussions with decision-makers, including the Members of the European Commission and other European, national and regional politicians, as well as with senior Commission officials. Between January 2015 and September 2017, the European Commission held 333 citizens' dialogues in 145 towns throughout the EU. With the citizens' dialogues to debate on the Future of Europe, held between March and September 2017, the Commission has potentially reached out to 34 million Europeans through media and social media coverage.

Citizens' dialogues are a significant initiative to help the EU connect with its citizens. They give an opportunity for Commissioners and Commission representatives to be active in the Member States and to experience Europe 'in situ'. It is important that they connect, as much as possible, with the lives of the general public.

Citizens' dialogues can, however, only be useful if they are conceived as a two-way exercise, enabling citizens to fully engage in the debate and bringing them onto the podium.

heard. Work with the media to avoid coverage of EU topics being limited to specialised pages, instead of being treated as national or regional items.

9.

Streamline and simplify the communication activities of the networks set up by the Union.

10.

Carry out more proactive communication actions to encourage citizens' participation in public consultations. Make full use of the opportunities offered by social media to support digital democracy, while drastically limiting print communication.

11.

Emphasise the diverse identities and cultures of EU citizens by respecting and using their respective languages.

12.

Develop more effective intergenerational communication.

13.

Mobilise Erasmus alumni and other university students to speak about

European affairs.

14.

Make full use of the educational potential of communication.

15.

Focus on communicating with young people to increase their understanding of European issues. Explain the historical context in which the European project was initiated. Increase their awareness of the fact that the past is part of their future.

6.4. General recommendations

The final set of proposals includes recommendations beyond the single field of communication. These recommendations range from encouraging bottom-up, decentralised 'citizens' assemblies' (which would encourage reflection and debate in order to engage and take ownership of the future of Europe), to promoting new schemes facilitating exchanges and networks, based on the 'Erasmus+' experience.

1.

Create a permanent discussion platform between the European Commission and citizens' representatives and install a single online 'Article 11' platform.

2.

Develop a White Paper on EU citizenship.

3.

Develop new means of participative democracy, based on the experiences of the G-1000 platform for democratic innovation⁽⁴⁰⁾ and the concept of 'deliberative democracy'. The objective is to involve 'non-organised citizens', as well as organised movements belonging to different groups in society, in order to discuss essential societal issues, and enable them to develop proposals that can be brought into the public sphere and submitted to public authorities for further development. Bottom-up, decentralised 'citizens' assemblies' under different forms could be encouraged and sustained as a collective process of reflection on the values that consolidate a community and the reasons for building a future together.

Such assemblies could be organised in different Member States or regions, and also as transregional ones, **with a view to bringing citizens' proposals together. The outcome of these debates should be voiced in and connected to the European Parliament.** Regular European citizens' 'question-time' sessions should be organised for citizens in the European Parliament, as described in Section 6.2.

4.

Launch a Covenant of Cities and Regions for Europe coupled with an online platform supported by grassroots movements.