DEMOCRACY AND EUROPE
Our Common Future
A report of the conference proceedings and outcomes
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive summary .................................................................................................................. 4

2. Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 5

3. Session 1. Democracy at a crossroads: citizens, demos and democratic legitimacy........ 8
   3.1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 8
   3.2. Crisis of democracy ............................................................................................................. 8
   3.3. Visions for democracy ...................................................................................................... 12
   3.4. Reclaiming democracy: creating meaningful and effective participation pathways .......... 14

4. Session 2. Challenges to democracy and emerging alternatives ........................................... 17
   4.1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 17
   4.2. The theft of democracy .................................................................................................... 17
   4.3. Remaking democracy ...................................................................................................... 21

5. Session 3. Democracy in Europe and beyond: what role for the EU? ................................. 26
   5.1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 26
   5.2. Democracy at the EU level ............................................................................................... 27
   5.3. The EU’s democratic legitimacy: ..................................................................................... 32
   5.4. Enriching democracy in the EU ...................................................................................... 35

6. Session 4. Research and innovation: building a stronger democratic Europe .................. 38
   6.1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 38
   6.2. Citizenship + Research + Policy making ......................................................................... 39
   6.3. Mission Democracy ......................................................................................................... 43

7. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 51
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 30 and 31 October 2017, high-level researchers, activists and policymakers from across Europe came together in Lisbon, Portugal for the conference “Democracy and Europe: our common Future?”. Organized by Net4Society, the international network of Societal Challenge 6 “Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies,” National Contact Points, the conference gathered experts to critically examine and comment upon the state of democracy and its institutions in the present moment and to present solutions rooted in the results and approaches of social scientific and humanities research.

Following two days of intense debate, participants generally agreed that in order to strengthen democracy and reinfuse it with renewed vigour and meaning, more meaningful citizen participation is needed vis-à-vis the European Union.

The outcome of these debates crystallised in the form of the following recommendations, which ultimately should be considered by European policymakers:

- Develop meaningful and effective alternatives to elections at the national and EU governmental levels to ensure healthy citizen participation in the democratic political process
- Increase the inclusiveness of participation in democratic activities
- Make greater use of public forums (i.e. public squares, online spaces) to improve and support public engagement in the political process
- Address all citizen groups (young, poor, old, rich…) and not only a select few
- Make EU institutions more transparent and be more accountable for their reception by the public
- Look to Member States and other European countries for good practice examples of effective forms of democratic participation
- Support research with a democratic focus and social relevance
- Continue to promote multidisciplinarity as a means to capture and understand the multifaceted nature of 21st century democracy
- More EU effort needed to re-legitimise democracy among citizens—don’t leave to Member State-level only
INTRODUCTION

Why democracy?

Democracy is at stake in Europe and beyond, where its legitimacy is questioned. The damage done by the global financial crisis of 2007-08, and the Great Recession that followed, contributed to large numbers of people in Europe feeling disenfranchised and not represented by decision makers that many saw as faraway elites. In the last years, this disillusionment has been contributing to the rise of antidemocratic parties, candidates and other political actors.

This distrust is most noticeable in the shape of an increasingly loud discourse oriented toward social and political institutions, which have long been a hallmark of European society. As more and more people begin to question or turn away from long-standing democratic traditions and practices in favour of those more populist in nature, other questions arise on what this means for the future prosperity, security and cohesion of Europe on the whole. To counteract these tendencies, our democracies – it is widely understood – need more meaningful, effective and consequential ways for citizens to engage with and participate in the political process, including being able to affect public policy. This should be accompanied by more transparency and accountability in the way all political actors function.

The issue of democracy and its exercise is an important one for the European Union (EU) and its lawmakers, in a moment when the legitimacy of the EU project has equally been put into question. In a time of increasing complexity, still reeling from the Great Recession and from the shock of Brexit, and having failed to present a united front to the migrant and refugee crisis and other international issues, many people wonder what the point of the EU is.

To make the situation more complex, these days we live in an increasingly accelerated communications ecosystem, in which political parties, conventional media and other traditional social and political institutions are struggling to catch up with the instantaneous spread of huge amounts of information and misinformation on social media.

In such a context, which has drawn attention to weaknesses within the current social and political system that require practical solutions, how can European democracies and the EU regain their legitimacy and their citizens’ trust? And what can citizens themselves do to reclaim their democracies?

Where are traditional democracies failing? And what are the emerging alternatives that could improve democracy?

Should the EU have a more proactive role in supporting democracy within and beyond its borders? What about democracy at the transnational, EU level?

How can the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) help democracy in this time of crisis? What have we learnt and what have we yet to research that can be used to reinvigorate democracy?

The answers to these questions seem to lie in the same general direction: “there is a widespread perception that democracy is in need of reshaping with an emphasis on participation, engagement, transparency, responsiveness, accountability and effectiveness”.¹ Or in fewer words, which are as easy to state as difficult to achieve: the answer seems to lie in more democracy.

Advancing towards this goal depends on actors on all sides. States and supranational bodies must work on designing and implementing participatory mechanisms and institutions, and on increasing their transparency

and accountability. But citizens, too, must proactively find out how they can participate, and then demand more ways to do so if what they find is not enough. Researchers, particularly from the SSH, need to play their part and engage in scientific research that helps society be better informed and more democratic, and helps policy-makers take evidence-based decisions.

Everyone, young people, the general public, researchers, policy makers – that is, all citizens are in the spotlight when it comes to Mission Democracy. What are Europeans doing to reclaim their democracies? What can be done?

On 30 and 31 October 2017, high level researchers, activists and policy makers from across Europe came together to address these issues and to discuss potential ways forward at the conference “Democracy and Europe: our common future?”, organised by Net4Society and hosted by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia at the Pavilhão do Conhecimento (Pavilion of Knowledge) in Lisbon.²

As the international network for Societal Challenge 6 (Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies) National Contact Points, Net4Society organises conferences as a means of raising the awareness of issues which are of importance to members of the SSH and SC6 communities. The conference did so by highlighting the urgency surrounding the issue of democracy in Europe.

The speakers were professors and academic researchers from the fields of Philosophy: Julian Nida-Ruemelin and Fiorella Battaglia (both from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich); Sociology: Bjørn Hvinden (NOVA Institute), Cristina Flesher Fominaya (University of Aberdeen) and Ramón Flecha (University of Barcelona); Political Science: Marina Costa Lobo (University of Lisbon) and Bernard Reber (Sciences Po Paris); Economics: Maria Raquel Freire (University of Coimbra); and Linguistics: Milena Žic-Fuchs (Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts).

There were also seasoned activists like Katrín Oddsdóttir (Constitutional Council of Iceland), Balázs Dènes (Civil Liberties Union for Europe) and Katarzyna Mortoń (KOD International). Yuri Borgmann-Prebil, Policy Officer at the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, gave a presentation on the subject of the EU citizenship. The moderator was communications expert Katrina Sichel. The public at the conference was composed mostly of other academic researchers and also of people from EU institutions and the policy making sphere.

By bringing together experts from the SSH, as well as other stakeholders within the Societal Challenge 6 and SSH sectors, the conference aimed to provide European Commission policy makers with suggestions for tackling negative perceptions of democracy and its institutions that are based in SSH research and approaches.

² Ibid.
Discussions in the conference were focused on the role the SSH have in understanding the perceived crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic systems in Europe and at the EU level, and to propose lines of research and solutions that could tackle these issues. Conversations also revolved around ways to understand what makes citizens more active and politically engaged, how to bring about an active citizenry, and precisely how to bridge the often differentiated spheres of SSH research, citizen activism, and policy making.

Everyone present engaged in lively discussions and conversations that extended beyond the conference sessions and revolved around a common idea: we need more and better democracy in Europe, but how exactly can it be achieved? The most repeated keyword was probably participation: we need people from all parts of society to participate more directly and effectively in their democracies. But if this diagnosis was almost universally shared, then different answers were given to the open question of how to make citizens more engaged and politically active, and through which participative mechanisms.

This report tries to give a comprehensive account of these discussions by identifying and covering the key questions and proposals that came up during the conference. It presents the main ideas discussed in the four conference sessions: Democracy at a crossroads: citizens, demos and democratic legitimacy; Challenges to democracy and emerging alternatives; Democracy in Europe and beyond: what role for the EU?; and Research and Innovation: building a stronger democratic Europe. This report aims to generate national and transnational conversations among and between young people, the general public, researchers and policy makers, to find ways for everyone to participate in making European democracies and the EU more legitimate and effective. In fact, this report calls for all citizens to take action to defend and promote their democracies; and it explicitly includes a series of recommendations to policy makers, researchers and citizens, including a list of potential research topics to advance in the understanding of the crisis of the legitimacy of democracy, and in how to respond to it.

If it is not exercised, then a democratic citizenship withers like a flower that is not watered enough. But if we exercise our citizenship in a responsible way, if we work on our democracy and help others work on it, then democracy takes root, grows and becomes an irrepressible force for good, the betterment of society, and the protection of all citizens’ rights.

Democracy is not an external object that can be fixed from the outside, but a shared experience for all of society’s members participating in it.

If enough people engage actively with it, then democracy may be a rich and positive experience for the whole society, and it will work in the public interest. If not enough people engage actively with it, then democracy may retreat and finally give way to something else controlled by some vested interests, leaving whole swaths of the society without political access and unprotected.

These are not simple issues. But we must make an effort to answer them, and then we must make an effort to provoke actual change. After all, all of us are the citizens, and it is our democracies and our European project which are at stake, and it is about a future that is up to us to start building today.
SESSION 1:
DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS: CITIZENS, DEMOS AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

Introduction

To be fully legitimate and effective, democracies need more than just efficient electoral systems. They also need a system of functional checks and balances, an independent and responsible media, and an informed and politically active citizenry. Because healthy democracies seem to require an active understanding of citizenship – one in which, through civil society, citizens may become engaged and more constantly involved in the political process as a political actor in their own right.

In our present situation, and for democracy to become legitimate and effective in Europe, national governments as well as EU institutions need to work harder to provide their citizens with more meaningful and effective channels to participate in the political process. And citizens, too, need to devote more effort to educating themselves about and to becoming more active in the political process if they want to reclaim and protect their democracies.

These were some of the key issues discussed during this first session of the conference by speakers Julian Nida-Rümelin, Chair for Philosophy at Political Theory at Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich³; Bernard Reber, Director of Research at Sciences Po in Paris⁴; and Marina Costa-Lobo, Political Scientist at the Institute of Social Sciences in Portugal⁵.

Crisis of democracy: electoral democracy and majority rule

An understanding of democracy in purely technical terms, an overreliance on the electoral system (which is detrimental to other participatory mechanisms) and the absence of an effective system of checks and balances may lead to majority rule governments.

Such governments may then impose a political agenda that does not respect other institutions of democracy and the rights of minorities and of each citizen. Furthermore, to retain power, majority rule governments may

---

³ Julian Nida-Rümelin. Available in German on http://www.julian.nida-ruemelin.de/ [last visited on 17 November 2017]
embark on state capture and on eroding checks and balances as well as any participatory mechanisms other than the elections themselves.

As long as conventional electoral mechanisms are respected and every citizen has the right to vote, the government and its electoral base can claim that democracy is functioning and is being supported by an (electorally) active citizenry. Yet, depending on the turnout, these electoral majorities may be relative and not even represent the biggest part of society.

To illustrate this point, Katarzyna Mortoń, coordinator of KOD International and in this session a member of the audience, emphasised that a similar situation can be seen at this moment in her native Poland, where she said there were two competing and almost opposite notions of what democracy and citizenship mean.

A big part of the population, which felt left out of the expected benefits of the so-called Europeanisation process, now feels represented by the illiberal majority rule in government, Mortoń argued. And these people seem content at expressing their citizenship through voting in the elections.

On the other hand, there is another large part of the population that understands democracy in liberal terms and based on the respect to political and civil liberties. For these people, exercising their citizenship means more than merely having the right to participate in elections every X-number of years.

As a result of these different understandings, the two sides speak different languages of democracy and may find it difficult to even talk to each other about these issues.

These divisions in society can be exploited by majority rule governments, which can use a nationalistic rhetoric and a purely technical vision of democracy to entrench themselves in power by eroding the capacities of other democratic institutions. This would alienate even more the liberal parts of the society, who would not perceive the political process as legitimate or even feel represented by these illiberal elites.

These same divisions can also mean that liberal governments embracing cosmopolitan values and trying to promote abstract principles, like the respect for human rights, may end up alienating another large part of society, which would neither feel involved in the political process nor represented by such liberal elites.

When does an electoral democracy stop being a democracy at all? Where is the line that divides actual democratic regimes from superficially democratic ones that are becoming more authoritarian?

There is no longer such a clear dichotomy but rather a gradual scale, on which it may be difficult to pinpoint when a low-quality or dysfunctional democracy has slipped into an autocratic regime, argued Marina Costa-Lobo.

True equality of participation is needed for electoral systems to produce a legitimate and effective democracy. Each citizen of every group in a society needs to have equal access to the electoral process as a voter and as a potential candidate. Yet, this equality seems reachable only in societies in which the fundamental conditions of liberal democracy, like respect of human rights, are met. A key challenge for democratic governments is then how to achieve an inclusive regime in which each part of society feels involved.

At the same time, other mechanisms and institutions of democracy, and not only elections, must be in place and fully functional to ensure that the electoral process results in a legitimate and effective body of representatives.

---


7 Back in 1997, Fareed Zakaria, Managing Editor of Foreign Affairs magazine, distinguished between liberal democracy, “a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property”; and what he termed illiberal democracy, where multiparty elections produce elected leaders that don’t respect the rule of law and the separation of powers, and/or that restrict those basic civil liberties. See “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy”, by Fareed Zakaria. Published on Foreign Affairs, Nov/Dec 1997. Available online on https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy [last visited on 7 May 2018]
Crisis of democracy: nation states vs the EU

In the last years, we have seen how in some European countries the irruption of the EU in the national political debates has created havoc by breaking traditional alignments, argued Costa-Lobo. Where the cleavage was between the left and the right, it then became between pro- and anti-EU parties and positions.

This displacement of traditional political lines can contribute to the decline of centrist and moderate parties, and especially of social democratic ones. At the same time, this displacement can help support the rise of anti-EU populist parties, particularly on the far-right, for which the tactic of always blaming Brussels may prove productive.

Costa-Lobo said one of the responses of the EU to this situation has been to try and depoliticise the decision-making process; which can, for instance, be seen in the prominent role taken by non-elected bodies like the European Central Bank (ECB).

However, this resorting to “more technocracy rather than to more democracy”, as Costa-Lobo put it, may place Europe onto a dangerous sliding slope towards democracy without choice, which would not be real democracy. Besides, this type of response tends to alienate people even more from EU institutions peopled by elected representatives, like the Parliament and the Commission, especially in those countries most affected by the economic crisis. Citizens may feel that their voice is not taken into consideration and that they have no vote to affect the political process at the EU level.

But the fact is there are borderless issues that are better dealt with at the transnational level than at the different national ones (e.g. environmental issues), and for which the EU may be better equipped than national governments. However, when supranational bodies like the European Parliament or the European Commission work on transnational issues this may cause an unavoidable tension between citizens’ perception of the political process at their national and at the EU levels, because many citizens feel they cannot affect the EU political process, which these citizens may see as disconnected from them. This tension can be exploited by nationalist and anti-EU national parties, which may prevent citizens from becoming interested and involved in the EU decision-making process, which some citizens see as beyond their reach anyway, and to thus take solace in narrower and more nationalistic notions of citizenship and democracy.

Crisis of democracy: limited citizenship and participation at the EU level

The concept of EU citizenship was introduced by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and has been in force since 1993. It is additional to and does not replace national citizenships, and it basically gives a series of EU-wide rights to citizens of member states.

However, as Costa-Lobo argued, the EU itself has not taken the concept of EU citizenship seriously enough to have it serve as a core component of what the EU is or wants to be. Instead, she considers that the EU agenda has been about establishing a supranational authority of sorts, accumulating competencies, and expanding territorially.

Ever since the financial crisis hit, the imposition of austerity by some EU institutions has created disaffection among many people in the countries most affected. And this disaffection has made more problematic the concept of an EU-wide and commonly shared notion of “EU citizenship”, as people diverge from each other – both within and between member states – about what the EU is to them, and about what kind of EU they want.

An example of this divergence could be seen during the crisis between Catalonia and Spain in September and October 2017. After a heavy-handed police intervention used to stop a Catalan independence referendum deemed illegal by the Spanish authorities, pro-independence Catalans requested, as EU citizens, that the EU

---

intervene in their defence. On the other hand, the Spanish authorities framed the issue instead as one that concerned only the Spanish state and Spanish citizens.⁹

The questions of what being an EU citizen and what democracy at the EU level really are about have become deeply contested at the national level, and some people are looking for shelter in the narrower and more emotional national citizenships and feelings of identity.

For many citizens, this tendency to look for shelter reinforces the idea that elections at the national level are the most – or even the only – relevant mechanism to participate in the political process. Nevertheless, people also realise that some key political decisions, particularly concerning economic matters, are taken beyond the national-state level, which can then feed the democratic frustration of these people.

In addition, some national parties take an anti-EU stance and use the always blame Brussels tactic in their own short-term, strategic and electoral self-interest.

The strategic use of this approach creates confusion and makes it difficult for people to understand how to exercise their citizenship and how to participate in a political process that at the EU level seems to escape them. The fact that many media often do not do a good enough job at portraying what the EU is about and how it functions does not help to make the debates clearer.

The EU has to be criticised at the national level, Costa-Lobo acknowledged, but in an informed and constructive way. She suggested we need more EU actors engaging in conversations at the national level. Yet if these debates are led only by national actors, then some will always have the temptation of just criticising and blaming the EU for everything to make electoral gains.

As it happens, these days, 70% of people in the EU say they feel like “a citizen of the EU”, according to the latest Eurobarometer.¹⁰ There are of course differences by country, and while in Luxembourg (90%), Spain (88%), Malta (85%), Germany (82%) and other member states people feeling like citizens of the EU are the big majority, there is also the case of Greece, the one country in which less than half of the people feel like EU citizens (48%).

Still, this is the overall highest percentage ever when it comes to this indicator, and EU bodies could try and take advantage of this upward trend, plus the fact that 7 out of every 10 people in the union feel like EU citizens, to develop more meaningful and effective mechanisms of participation in the political process at the EU level.

**Visions for democracy: citizenship and democracy as cooperation**

In order to fight the purely technical view and the majoritarian risks of electoral democracy, we need a conception of citizenship and democracy based on the idea of cooperation, argued speaker Julian Nida-Rümelin.

Citizenship and democracy as cooperation means each citizen in a society can in principle understand democratic institutions as different elements of a cooperative scheme, to which then each citizen can also in principle contribute. This way, and again in principle, all citizens would feel a sense of cooperation with each other and with the state in the functioning of their democracy.

In this vision of a cooperative democratic society, if a citizen does not agree with a particular policy they should still be able say: ‘This is still my state and this is still my policy, because this is a cooperative scheme in which I can participate and to which I can contribute, and therefore I have a real capacity to influence what happens’, explained Nida-Rümelin.

In practice, this would have to mean there are real, meaningful and effective ways for each citizen to engage and participate in the political process. Then the challenges of course are how to implement particular institutions and mechanisms that will lead to this meaningful and effective participation beyond the elections, how to really include every part of society in the participatory process, and how to achieve this not only within particular countries but also at the EU level.

In this last respect, Nida-Rümelin reminded the conference attendees of a proposal he made in 2012, along with sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas and economist Peter Bofinger, to advance towards a significant transfer of sovereignty to European institutions.

Back in 2012, in the midst of the Euro currency crisis, the three scholars suggested embarking on “the institutional underpinning of a collective fiscal, economic and social policy within the Eurozone, with the further aim of restoring to policy-makers their lost capacity for action in the face of market imperatives at a transnational level”.

The Eurozone was established also in part in the hope that it would accelerate convergence and integration, but this has not been the case because there has not been a corresponding institutional development to realise this integration, Nida-Rümelin argued.

There could be an EU-wide referendum – not several referenda at the national level – to ask people about advancing towards this kind of integration, he suggested. The EU could first establish some central institutions, some central mechanisms, and then ask citizens: do you want this to be the constitutional basis of Europe? And if this gets enough of an approval, then it is been legitimised. And if not, then at least we will have begun a conversation in the right direction, Nida-Rümelin argued.

For instance, he mentioned the political conflict between the region of Catalonia and the Spanish state could have used some kind of institutionalised form of dealing with these problems at the EU level.

---

However, leaving aside the discussion about the desirability and convenience of this transfer of power, and as noted in the discussions that followed his suggestions, it is far from clear how such an EU-wide referendum could help legitimise a transfer of power to EU institutions if, for example, this were clearly accepted in some countries and clearly rejected in others.

**Visions for democracy: participation and deliberation**

It is clear that citizen participation, for its own sake, is not enough for democracies to be legitimate and effective. And citizens themselves are aware of this. When it comes to different understandings of what democracy entails, people value more highly “discuss together to make a round of the different arguments, and then decide”¹² than merely “participate in public life beyond the elections”.¹³ This is according to the French Electoral Survey¹⁴, some results of which were presented at the conference by speaker Bernard Reber.

In the particular wave of this survey presented by Reber,¹⁵ 63% of respondents agreed with a vision of democracy that is “deliberative” and in which people discuss and decide together, and this deliberative democracy received an average mark of 7 out of 10. On the other hand, 55% of people agreed with the vision of a “participative democracy” that goes beyond the elections, and which received an average mark of 6.7. These two visions were preferred to “representative democracy”, in which decisions are left to elected representatives, an idea with which 37% of people agreed and which received an average mark of 6.7. The least appreciated vision of democracy expressed by the survey was “expertocracy” or “technocracy”, in which it is up to some experts to take the right decisions. A total of 32% of respondents agreed with this vision, which got an average mark of 5.2.

Interestingly enough, the vision of democracy receiving the highest degree of appreciation went to a democracy in which citizens “have the right to contest the decisions they judge as wrong”.¹⁶ According to the survey, as many as 68% of people agreed with this vision of democracy, which received an average mark of 7.3.

These are of course theoretical and analytical distinctions. In reality, a single democratic regime may be at the same time and in different degrees technocratic, representative, participative and deliberative.

Still, these results support the view that – at least in France – most people would not only like to participate in the political process beyond the elections, but would also like this participative process to be deliberative.

Again, in practice the challenge for governments and public administrations is how to implement mechanisms that guarantee meaningful and effective citizen participation. This may be an even more challenging prospect when trying to implement EU-wide mechanisms, not only due to the sheer size of the union, which has a population of more than 500 million and includes 28 different member states,¹⁷ but also to the cultural and political differences between these countries.

The fact that something is challenging does not mean it’s impossible, though. It is up to democratic nations, and to the EU itself, to explore and find ways to make citizens involved in the political process in a meaningful and effective manner, as this would increase the democratic legitimacy of these regimes.

---

¹² The original statement in French says: “discuter ensemble pour faire le tour des arguments, et décider ensuite”. Translation into English by Jose Miguel Calatayud.

¹³ The original statement in French says: “participer à la vie publique, au-delà des élections”. Translation into English by Jose Miguel Calatayud.


¹⁶ The original statement in French says: “se donner le droit de contester les décisions qu’on juge mauvaises”. Translated into English by Jose Miguel Calatayud.

¹⁷ In theory, after March 2019 there will be 27 EU members after the United Kingdom leaves the union.
And of course it is also up to concerned citizens themselves to educate themselves and organise to make use of the existing means already available to participate and to proactively propose improvements and new mechanisms to increase the effectiveness of their participation.

Otherwise, as has been happening in recent years, populist, nationalist and anti-democratic parties and movements may capitalise on citizens’ desire to feel involved in the political process.

**Visions for democracy: political citizenship and dignity**

When it comes to the level of engagement in the political process, political science distinguishes between different types of citizenship:

- **civic citizenship**, about national identity and who qualifies as a citizen of a certain state or territory;
- **social citizenship**, about the rights passively enjoyed by the citizens of a state or territory, and;
- **political citizenship**, about how citizens actively exercise their rights to become involved and to participate in the political process.

If there are enough people who assume and exercise their political citizenship, then this may lead to an active civil society in which people can educate themselves, get organised, and become a political actor to influence the political process in the public interest.

In this way, people can experience democracy by actively embracing their political citizenship, and by becoming directly involved in the political process of a democratic regime.

If not enough citizens go beyond exercising their civic or even social citizenships, then this can lead to purely electoral democracies: regimes where majority rule can be imposed over the ensemble of the society, and where other mechanisms of participation can be eroded by governments with autocratic tendencies. And those kinds of regimes may easily end up on a slippery slope towards authoritarianism.

In fact, sometimes and in some places we may lose track of what “democracy” used to mean and still means, where some fundamental rights and principles are not fully respected and democracy is no longer functional enough.

During the revolution in Ukraine in 2014, people taking to the streets kept saying that they were fighting for democracy because they wanted to live in dignity, as a member of the audience reminded conference participants during this session.

This vision of democracy as people being able to have a dignified life is important, and it is also very much up to citizens themselves to protect their democracies from being eroded to the point that some members of their society can no longer aspire to a dignified life.

**Reclaiming democracy: creating meaningful and effective participation pathways for citizens**

“Participation” has become a buzzword when it comes to suggesting solutions to the crisis of democracy. Citizen participation in the political process has to be somehow increased in order for democracies to regain their legitimacy, a sentiment with which most people at the conference seemed to agree.

But what do we mean by “participation”? And are citizens really that interested in participating in politics to begin with? After all, functional democracies already offer their citizens several channels to get involved in the political
process, both through elections and the political party system, and by other means, such as through an organised civil society.

However, social science offers evidence that, by themselves, elections, referenda and other conventional consultations do not make many people feel involved anymore. And, actually, these voting systems may even make people feel disenfranchised unless these democratic inputs are then turned into real political action through effective institutions, as explained Sofia Ranchordás, Chair of European and Comparative Public Law at the University of Groningen and a member of the audience.¹⁸

Citizens only participate if they think their voice counts and their engagement has a real influence on public policy. If this is not the case, then electoral turnout may remain low as disaffected citizens stay away from a political process they see as not being able or willing to involve them.

That does not have to mean that people are uninterested in politics. On the contrary, it may then feed the rise of populist and anti-establishment parties and candidates that are able to connect at a more personal level with these disaffected voters.

Citizens may also try and participate in politics through organised civil society, which may help revitalise democracy or may backfire and cause more disaffection if the political regime does not allow for this civil society to have an actual influence over the political process.

The results from the French Electoral Survey¹⁹ support the idea that citizens do want to become engaged, and that what they may lack are the proper pathways to do so, argued speaker Bernard Reber.

When asked about the functioning of their democracy, 48% of respondents said it should be improved in many respects, and 35% said it actually needed a radical change for it to become a real democracy. Only 9% said they thought democracy worked well and did not need any improvements, while the remaining 8% said democracy actually does not work and it would be better to find another political system.

For those who considered that democracy needed improving, the survey asked: “What could your role be in this transformation of democracy?”²⁰ “It is not up to me to contribute”²¹, said 26% of respondents. “I have some ideas I can defend, and I feel ready to propose some actions to change things”,²² answered 12% of the people. The large majority however, 62%, replied: “If there are some initiatives that I find convenient, then I would like to participate”²³.

One big question is of course how much these results can be generalised to other European countries and to the EU as a whole. But taking this data about France as a reference, then at least part of the problem comes from the existing opportunities, or lack thereof, for citizens to become involved in the political process, argued Reber. The willingness of the majority of the people to become involved in the political process in order to improve democracy offers a big opportunity for democratic regimes, both at national and EU levels, to develop and implement pathways that offer meaningful and actual political participation.

As an example of a participatory mechanism, Reber mentioned the Estates General in France (les États généraux). Taking their name from the representative assembly of the three “estates” or orders of the realm in pre-Revolutionary France, today the Estates General are thematic assemblies that may be called ad hoc or regularly, and which bring together experts, policy makers and regular citizens to discuss different matters affecting public policy.

¹⁸ University of Groningen. Staff. Prof. Dr. Sofia Ranchordás. Available on http://www.rug.nl/staff/s.h.ranchordas/ [last visited on 17 November 2017]
¹⁹ See footnote 12 above.
²⁰ The original statement in French says: “Quel pourrait-être votre rôle dans cette transformation de la démocratie?” Translation into English by Jose Miguel Calatayud.
²¹ The original statement in French says: “Ce n’est pas à moi d’y contribuer”. Translation into English by Jose Miguel Calatayud.
²² The original statement in French says: “J’ai des idées à défendre, je me sens prêt à proposer des actions pour changer les choses”. Translation into English by Jose Miguel Calatayud.
²³ The original statement in French says: “S’il y a des initiatives qui me conviennent, j’aimerais y prendre part”. Translation into English by Jose Miguel Calatayud.
For instance, in 2018, France will hold the Estates General of the Bioethics, during which those gathered will discuss whether the state should offer assisted reproduction effectively to all women, among other issues. From January 2018, public debates will be organised in all French regions, and by the end of June 2018 a so-called citizen panel may be established to work on this subject. In parallel to this process, the National Consultative Ethics Committee is consulting lawyers and scientific and religious organisations. This committee will work in collaboration with the Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Science and Technology Decisions, and at the end of the process the parliament will propose new legislation concerning the subjects discussed.

Reber said the effort put in place in France to run these participatory assemblies is positive but can be improved. He argued that these kinds of initiatives should be followed up with mechanisms that ensure the democratic input is translated into real political action. There has to be an institutional ecology: the process has to be institutionalised from the participatory beginning to affecting public policy in the end, for it to be meaningful and effective.

On their side, it is also up to concerned citizens to be more proactive by educating themselves, by looking for existing opportunities to become engaged, and by acting in an organised manner to affect public policy in the public interest.

At the same time, national systems and the EU itself must be better at managing expectations when it comes to what democracy is and how it actually works, or citizens may become disillusioned in these projects. When it comes to democracy in Europe, “we have to learn to live with some disappointment and to be a little patient”, said Reber.

SESSION 2: CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY AND EMERGING ALTERNATIVES

Introduction

Democracy is in a crisis of legitimacy and conferences like this one have been organised because citizens in many European countries – and beyond – feel real democracy has been stolen from them. Increasing inequality between elites and regular citizens, successive financial and political scandals, and the perception that traditional democratic institutions cannot keep up with an accelerated communicative pace and a state of permanent crisis, have led many people to resent this devaluated form of democracy and to ask for something else.

Populist, nationalist and anti-democratic parties and candidates feed off this frustration, and some have actually used democratic means – like elections – to get hold of power and then forget about the public interest.

Democracy risks losing its normative dimension and becoming a set of merely technical ways for vested interests to gain, and remain, in power. Concerned citizens, and indeed all pro-democracy forces, need to work for democracy to re-emerge as a legitimate and effective system that is able to involve people from all parts of society in the political process and to produce social justice.

These challenges to liberal democracy, and how to respond to them, were the subjects of this second session of the conference, with speakers Katrín Oddsdóttir, human rights lawyer and Chair of the Icelandic Constitution Society;²⁷ Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Political/Cultural/Digital Media Sociologist at the University of Aberdeen;²⁸ and Katarzyna Mortoń, Coordinator of the Committee for the Defence of Democracy ASBL.

The theft of democracy: forgetting the normative vision

As noted in the first session, too often democracy is conceived of in purely technical terms: as a set of mechanisms for participation and representation, implemented by a particular bureaucratic structure, and protected by some legal guarantees.

²⁸ University of Aberdeen. The School of Social Science. Dr Cristina Flesher Fominaya. Available on https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sossci/people/profiles/c.flesher [last visited on 19 November 2017]
But democracy is about how power should be organised and distributed in a society, and therefore democracy cannot be divorced from a normative vision of how a good society should be, argued speaker Cristina Flesher Fominaya.

In that normative stance, first of all, democracy cannot be uncoupled from a vision of socioeconomic equality and inclusion. Democracy should mean governing in the interest of all citizens, and placing their access to a dignified life above the interests of the political and economic elite. There cannot be democracy without social justice, Flesher Fominaya insisted.

Addressing injustice is not about redistributing resources to certain groups that some want to favour, she said, rather it is a commitment to the wellbeing of all citizens, and for the whole of society to have access to the rights and services that so many fought so hard in the past centuries for us to achieve.

If we separate the technical and the normative aspects of democracy, then we may end up with a paradox in which undemocratic forces use some democratic means to come to power, and then proceed to dismantle the rights and protections embedded in liberal democracy in order to remain in power themselves. We have seen that before in Europe, and we are seeing it again today, warned Flesher Fominaya.

There have been attacks on the welfare state across Europe and an increase in wealth inequality. We are clearly moving in the wrong direction, she argued, and the political scenarios we are facing today are a result of this process and not a switch in political preferences.

Not many people realise the full cost of this inequality. “In societies where there is more equality, where there is more gender parity, they are inevitably better off in every way, not just economically but also in terms of quality of life”, she said.

However, even developed societies scoring very high in equality and justice indicators may then fail to implement proper democratic safeguards if citizens get too complacent, as the case of Iceland shows. The fact that it fared very well in every social, political and economic international indicator did not stop Iceland from crashing financially and then politically between 2008 and 2009. A subsequent investigation into the causes of the crisis showed how this had been the result of a collusion between the economic and governing elites, which had been helped by the lack of citizen involvement in the political process.

The theft of democracy: vested financial interests

Democracy has been stolen from the citizens by the power of wealth, stated speaker Katrín Oddsdóttir. Money has so much power over democracy these days, so much influence over the traditional political actors, that it skews democracy and makes people become distrustful of traditional democratic institutions.

“The 2007-08 financial crisis and what we are calling the crisis of legitimacy of democracy in Europe are completely intertwined with each other,” argued Flesher Fominaya in a similar vein. When you see governments bailing out private banks with public money, that is when you see clearly political and financial elites colluding, she added.

After the financial crisis, many people became really angry and took to the streets in several countries. “Millions of people participating and demanding ‘real democracy now’. Just think about those words: ‘What? Real democracy now? What do you mean? You get to vote, you have guarantees, you have the courts, you have the Constitution and the Constitutional Court … What do you mean, real democracy now?’ So the process has completely triggered an entire re-questioning and re-signification of the term ‘democracy’ in a post-crisis context”, Flesher Fominaya described.
This renewed meaning of democracy has to be about socioeconomic justice, and about a deeper and more transparent and accountable way of participatory democracy, she concluded.

One of the countries where people took to the streets was precisely Iceland where, after the crash, citizens took it upon themselves to try and prevent the same thing from happening again. In part thanks to the protests, Iceland created a Special Investigation Commission to investigate the process leading to the crisis and named a special prosecutor to investigate the possible wrongdoings and legal responsibilities within that process.

After a year and a half, the Commission issued a 2,300-page report that held the main Icelandic banks and senior politicians responsible for the crisis. Quite a few bankers were tried and jailed and the former prime minister was found guilty of failing to hold emergency meetings during the run-up to the crisis, and was cleared of other charges that could have sent him to jail.

When the Icelandic government agreed to cover some of the funds lost by foreign investors – mostly from the UK and the Netherlands – in the collapse of the banks, there was an outcry from Icelandic citizens. Two referenda were then organised to ask the people about this, and in both cases the people said no to Iceland paying that money. The stakeholders gave up on negotiating and took the case to the European Free Trade Association court, which then agreed with the Icelandic citizens and said their country was not obliged to cover those financial losses.

All this helped to build the myth that Icelandic citizens had completely reclaimed their democracy after their country’s financial and political crash. However, the story is more complicated, and the capacity of vested interests to influence the political process is more pervasive than it may look.

In late 2017, a series of document leaks revealed the “often opaque links between Iceland’s small but powerful political and business elite”, an elite that held on to power after Iceland’s economic recovery. In April 2016, the Prime Minister (PM) from the same centre-right Progressive Party that had been in government in the run-up to the crisis, resigned after his name appeared in the so-called Panama Papers. Elections were then called and won by the former finance minister, whose name was also in the Panama Papers. Eight months after it was formed, this new government also collapsed over the alleged cover-up of a scandal involving the father of the new PM. Iceland then had its second general election in a year on 29 October 2017, and one month later Katrín Jakobsdóttir of the Left-Green Movement became the PM after assuring the backing of the Progressive Party and the conservative Independence Party, the two main parties and considered the representatives of the political and business elites in modern Icelandic history, which in that way are still keeping hold of power in Iceland.

---

The theft of democracy: feeding on anger and resentment

Still, it is not all about the economy and about financial and political elites colluding to remain in power no matter what.

Many citizens in Poland, which was once seen as one of the EU success stories, are shocked at the political turn in their country since the right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS in Polish) came to power in 2015, said speaker Katarzyna Mortoń. Since then, PiS has embarked on a series of illiberal reforms that are widely seen as limiting checks and balances and as generally eroding democracy.³⁹

As an extreme example of the outrage many people in Poland felt at PiS’s actions, Mortón told the story of Piotr Szczesny, a 54-year-old man that on 19th October 2017 started distributing leaflets in the centre of Warsaw in which he accused the Polish government of breaking the rules of democracy and limiting civil rights. And then he set himself on fire in front of the iconic Palace of Culture and Science in the city centre. After 10 days in a coma, Szczesny died on 29th October, the day before this conference started.⁴⁰

Later, on 6th November, several hundred people marched in silence in Warsaw in his memory. “Many people live in the conviction that politics does not concern them. Politics is us, we ordinary people create politics”, said one of the marchers.⁴¹

Szczesny had been suffering from depression, and there has been a debate about how much this influenced his extreme action. But the fact that many in Poland share Szczesny’s views and understand his impotence to affect the political situation signals a failure of democracy in allowing every citizen to participate effectively in the political process.

Mortón argued that, even though Poland was doing well economically, PiS got its support from many people who were angry anyway because they felt they were not part of the political process, which they saw as being imposed over them. This gave PiS 37.6% of the vote, which was then enough to grant it a simple majority in parliament.⁴²

“There is an emotional layer to this that often we, [the] people sitting here, forget”, she said. “Or politicians addressing the issue forgot to have the right attitude [when] they speak to people, they patronise them with numbers and data, [and this] causes an anger that is very hard to take back”.

Mortoń argued Poland is now divided into three groups:

- one that does not care about politics;
- one that did not benefit from the Europeanisation, felt disappointed and thought their dignity had been taken away, and is now happy with the illiberal government in place;
- and one that did benefit from this Europeanisation and embraced human rights and liberal causes like feminism.

---


As an example, she mentioned the Erasmus programme as something that was very positive, but that only reached those who were already engaged and spoke foreign languages; while many other people felt excluded from this and other EU-linked programmes, which fed social divisions within the country.

Mortoń lamented that it is always the same kind of people participating in conferences like this one, and said she was looking forward to the day when someone from a Polish village would sit where she was sitting, when every citizen from every group in society would have access to these events and activities.

Even if from a liberal perspective the rise of far right-wing parties is dismissed on ideological grounds, we have to admit their support comes from a wide range of disenfranchised citizens who are facing precarious living conditions, feeling left out of the political process, and who are motivated at least in part by fear and distrust, commented also Flesher Fominaya.

In order to reclaim their legitimacy, democratic regimes need not only social justice but also to find ways of including all parts of society in meaningful and effective participatory processes. Otherwise, anti-democratic parties and leaders will keep feeding off those people who are disenfranchised and feel left out of the political process.

**Remaking democracy: upgrading the normative dimension**

As societies and economies change, we need to update both the technical and narrative commitments of our democratic model, argued Flesher Fominaya.

These days, democracies need an actively feminist, anti-racist and pro-economic justice agenda. And not only for ideological reasons or because some may think that is the right thing to do. But because anything else perpetuates a system of profound injustice that breeds disenfranchisement and stops our societies from achieving their full potential, she elaborated.

The normative dimension of our democracies has to be respected, and the fundamental rights and principles liberal democracy is based on, like freedom of expression and the right to protest, have to be seriously protected, she urged.

Transparency and accountability must be assured through independent media, as well as safety for whistleblowers and a curtailment of invasive surveillance by the state. And we need mechanisms that enable citizens to efficiently fight corruption, fraud and the revolving doors, Flesher Fominaya said.

A robust democracy must also close the gap between citizens and those who are supposed to represent them: more ways to participate are needed, and this can be helped by advances in digital technology, she continued.

Finally, we also need to rethink the political party system, which provides politicians with incentives to think only in the short term and to break electoral promises. That results in crucial matters of policy being changed back and forth every few years. And politics becomes a scenario for partisan conflict and for governing for minority rather than majority interests – one where processes of citizen participation are ignored by the governing elites, Flesher Fominaya argued.

To put it simply, she concluded, democracy must mean more than just voting for somebody every four years. Still, the challenge remains: how to realise this vision of democracy in practice? What mechanisms can be implemented – and how – to ensure meaningful and effective citizen participation, and what kinds of institutions can be deployed – and how – to protect the fundamental principles and conditions of democracy from erosion and capture by vested interests?
Remaking democracy: bursting the liberal bubble

Everyone in a society should be aware of how the political process works, how they could effectively participate in it, and how they, too, can benefit from development and economic growth. This means liberal elites need to come out of their bubble to be able to reach every citizen out there, Mortoń argued.

This could be helped by a proper follow-up to many activities and programmes funded and organised by the EU and other political bodies, she said. Did we target the right people? Did these people then pass on the message to others? Did we reach those who had never heard of these EU programmes? That is a key part of the process of making people aware of all that democracy entails, which she explained has been forgotten.

Mortoń lamented that people – including herself – meet in these conferences, attend brilliant talks, get inspired and leave thinking something was achieved, while actually this can also be seen as a mostly selfish exercise.

She said people in her movement are now wondering whether they have been strategic enough, whether they have turned their work into a lifestyle and whether they are normalising alarming situations by always saying that things are going wrong. Because when things do get worse, citizens do not hear the alarm, since they have become used to seeing the activists making noise all the time.

To help fix that, Mortoń said, the way these programmes are run and deployed should be measured and checked, and programme-makers should consult with people who are on the ground, for instance working with citizens supporting policies that restrict civil liberties – like freedom of the press – or erode democratic checks and balances – like separation of powers –. These on-the-ground activists should be funded and involved in the programme-making process.

In the end, we need to foster critical thinking in everyone, we need people to have adequate tools to analyse the information they are being bombarded with in this time of communications overload, as otherwise people can be manipulated by all sides, she argued.

To help remake democracy, introduce critical thinking in kindergarten and in schools. Go to ground-level, hold these conferences in the villages. Go and talk to the local partners, bring there – to the people on the ground – the knowledge, the tools, the awareness, she urged.

Remaking democracy: the wisdom of the crowd

All these problems, including the crisis of democracy itself, should be crowdsourced. We should not try and be ourselves the clever and privileged ones here in this conference figuring out how to fix this, argued Oddsdóttir along similar lines.

As an illustration of how crowdsourcing and the wisdom of the crowd can be applied to very complex endeavours, she spoke of the constitutional process the citizens of Iceland embarked upon after the financial and political crisis.

The writing of a new constitution was one of the people’s demands during the protests following the crash, and so it was that parliament started a process to involve citizens in drafting a new text. As a part of this, in November 2010, about 950 people, drawn at random from the national registry in a way that guaranteed a representative sample of Icelandic society, participated in an official National Forum. These people gathered for one day to discuss what values defined Iceland and should be the basis of the new constitution.

“[T]he people who participated have described this as some sort of almost religious experience, because they

got the space and the time to talk about something that actually matters to each other, and not by listening to people arguing on the TV or whatever (…) but just face to face, like normal citizens”, Oddsdóttir said.

Later in the same month, a vote was held to elect the 25 members of the Constitutional Assembly that would write the new constitution, of which Oddsdóttir herself was one.⁴⁴ This group, which was finally formally established as the Constitutional Council in April the following year, was given just four months to write the new text. The fact that there was so little time was a reason to open up the process to all citizens interested in participating, Oddsdóttir explained.⁴⁵

Through Facebook and a dedicated website, people could follow weekly updates and engage with the process by commenting and suggesting changes. Oddsdóttir said that, at the beginning, the Council members were afraid these online participants would just rant about everything and insult each other. But then the online comments turned out to be positive and actually helpful, with many of the people’s suggestions making it in to the last draft.

“When you give people trust and you say, ‘You can participate, it will seriously affect the product we are working on’, they actually repay the trust with dignity”, Oddsdóttir said.

The 25 members of the Constitutional Council decided to adopt a consensus methodology, so that they all had to accept and agree with every point of the new constitution they were writing.

Finally, the Council managed to do the job on time and present the draft to parliament. The new constitutional text was quite progressive and introduced several changes to the electoral and party systems, such as having a “one person, one vote” mechanism (according to the original Icelandic constitution, different candidates need different amounts of votes to become MPs depending on the population of each constituency), introducing term limits for the positions of prime minister and president, and allowing 15% of voters to put bills to parliament or call for a referendum on proposed laws. It also said all non-privately owned natural resources were to become national property.⁴⁶

An independent review of the text by the Comparative Constitutions Project hailed it as “one of the most inclusive documents in history in terms of the extent to which citizens are incorporated into decision-making”, which “would also be at the cutting edge of ensuring public participation in ongoing governance”.⁴⁷

Parliament then submitted this constitutional draft to a non-binding referendum in October 2012, in which the majority of voters in a not-very-high turnout accepted this as their new constitution.⁴⁸

And then, nothing happened.

Ever since then, parliament has failed to adopt this new text as the official new constitution of Iceland.

It is a paradox, because you have people very proud of being elected as representatives by their nation, and afterwards these same representatives ignore what this same nation tells them, said Oddsdóttir, who, as the chair of the Icelandic Constitution Society, is pushing for the new constitution to be adopted in Iceland.

---


Systems which hold power will always resist change, that is why they are systems, as otherwise they would be something random – and the EU is no exception to this rule, Oddsdóttir argued.

As frustrating as the limited outcome of this process has been, she noted that the Icelandic Constitutional process could be seen as an experiment that proves the wisdom of the crowd. States can trust the people, their citizens, with figuring out complex issues like legislation, even if the elites’ and the experts’ tendency is not to.

Implementing meaningful and effective participatory processes by giving that kind of trust to the people is the only way forward, for nations and for the EU, Oddsdóttir concluded.

There is indeed room for experimentation along these lines, both for nation-states and for a supranational body like the EU itself. Adapted to different local contexts and levels – local, regional, national, transnational –, forums like the National one held by Iceland and like the Estates General held in France could increase the ownership of democracy by citizens.

However, they could also backfire and generate frustration if the state or supranational institutions fail to turn this democratic input into real and political action with actual consequences.

And still the challenge remains of how to implement these participatory processes in places not only much bigger than Iceland (which has a population of about 346,000 people⁴⁹), but in contexts that are much more complex and where there are much bigger social, cultural, economic and political differences than in Iceland, which is quite a homogeneous society when compared to other countries and regions.

Remaking democracy: going back to the squares

These forums and citizen assemblies can include online conversations, but at some point there must to be face-to-face interactions, several speakers agreed. That was why the National Forum held in Iceland made people feel so liberated by being able to speak in person to each other and to many strangers even if just for a day, Oddsdóttir said.

“The millions of squares” in all cities and countries all over Europe should be turned back into a place where people can talk to each other and to strangers, and where they can have meaningful conversations, she argued. That would have to be properly organised and would cost money, but it should be done and it would need to have actual political effects.

Oddsdóttir argued that academics participating in conferences like this one may then be brilliant at turning what has been talked about into policy proposals. But, before that, these academic discussions should be turned into meaningful conversations involving all kinds of citizens, since having these conversations would turn the process into an inclusive and citizenship-owned one.

This participatory process has to be institutionalised and bigger or more complex issues could be broken down and discussed point by point and at municipal or regional levels first. But the people on the ground, the conversations in the public squares, have to be part of it, she insisted.

In fact, in recent years people in many countries, in Europe and beyond, have been reclaiming their squares as political spaces. One of those countries is Spain, where in May 2011 people took to and then occupied squares all over the country, most notably in the Puerta del Sol right in the centre of Madrid.⁵⁰ This was a coming together

---


of several different factors that had been building up for decades, and that coalesced into this one broad movement demanding democracia real ya (real democracy now), according to Flesher Fominaya.

There was a shared anger about different particular issues – corruption, inequality, unemployment, the dismantling of public services, a housing crisis – and different groups were able to channel this rage into a positive way to demand more democracy, she said.

Those protest movements, which also happened in other places, gave many a feeling of belonging and of really participating in the political process for the first time.

But there is also the question of how effective those gatherings can be when it comes to achieving political change, as a member of the audience pointed out. In some cases they may even lead to a backlash that is political or, in the case of some authoritarian regimes, even violent.

Another important question, also noted by a member of the audience, is whether those kinds of protests can be counterproductive, in the sense that people are angry, they take to the streets and share their anger, and then feel that they have done their part and do not remain involved in the political process.

A case where a protest movement did achieve a political change, at least in the short term, was precisely Iceland, but because the situation there was rather particular, argued Oddsdóttir.

There had been such a big financial and then political crash that since the very first day there was the feeling of, ‘This is a big moment’. Because the crisis had a financial dimension, it also made people start talking about financial and regulatory issues in which they had not shown interest before. In a way, the tipping point for achieving change was already embedded in the Icelandic square protests, she said.

We tend to expect short-term political change out of all those protest movements and that is not realistic, argued Flesher Fominaya. We cannot just measure the square protests by immediate or clearly visible changes in politics and public policy, as they can also have very big cultural and less immediately visible consequences, she said.

Again in the case of Spain, the Indignados movement (the indignant ones) that emerged from the May 2011 protests produced enough demand and support for different citizen initiatives to be created in order to fight corruption, the dismantling of public services, the housing crisis and other social and political issues. It also led, argued Flesher Fominaya, to an increased demand for alternative and independent media; and in the mid-term it created the necessary conditions for alternative parties both on the left and the right, which broke what until then had been a rigid two-party system.

That example from Spain shows that reclaiming democracy from the squares, from the bottom up, can in the mid-term change the social and political atmosphere, and can create conditions for political initiatives in the public interest. But the maintenance of such change requires that enough people remain active in those citizen movements for enough time to keep the momentum going. Otherwise, the inertia that systems possess can prevail.

Of course, as both Oddsdóttir and Flesher Fominaya noted, the regimes questioned by those protests are not going to just sit there, but they will react in order to keep their share of political power. Change does not work just in one direction, it is push, and push back, push, and push back. It requires time and a sustained effort, said Flesher Fominaya.

But once the people have taken to the streets, and once some of their demands have been met by politicians who previously did not want to meet them, then the people already carry that knowledge as something that is theirs, Oddsdóttir said. And this means that, from then on, the people can give those in government a hard look that reminds them who in the end holds the power, and this can help keep the government in check.
SESSION 3: DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND BEYOND: WHAT ROLE FOR THE EU?

Introduction: the democratic ideals of the EU

“The functioning of the EU is founded on representative democracy. Being a European citizen also means enjoying political rights. Every adult EU citizen has the right to vote in European elections. EU citizens have the right to vote in their country of residence, or in their country of origin.”⁵¹ That is how the EU defines “democracy”, one of its core values.

However, for a while now the expression that has come to describe the EU in practice is “democratic deficit (…), a term used by people who argue that EU institutions and their decision-making procedures suffer from a lack of democracy and seem inaccessible to the ordinary citizen due to their complexity. The real EU democratic deficit seems to be the absence of European politics. EU voters do not feel that they have an effective way to reject a ‘government’ they do not like, and to change, in some ways, the course of politics and policy.”⁵²

Today, this deficit has expanded into the crisis of legitimacy of democracy. The idea of democracy itself, and particularly of liberal, European-style democracy, has come under attack on several fronts as being illegitimate. And maybe even worse, there are many, within Europe and abroad, who do not even bother with questioning or attacking democracy because they have become completely disillusioned and disenchanted by it.

But it is precisely in times of challenges like now that the EU has to rise to the occasion. And by being ambitious, brave and intelligent, the EU has to come out of the crisis relegitimised by embodying a stronger democracy and a more engaged citizenship.

Those were the questions engaged in this session by speakers Bjørn Hvinden, Director of the Centre for Welfare and Labour Research at the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences,⁵³ Balász Dénes, Director at Civil Liberties Union for Europe,⁵⁴ and Maria Raquel Freire, Associate Professor of International Relations at the School of Economics of the University of Coimbra.⁵⁵

---

Democracy at the EU level: transparency and accountability

The way the EU does law-making is extremely complicated, and the problem lies in the lack of transparency during the law-making process, said speaker Balázs Dénes, who added that this lack of transparency had already been noted in 2015 by Emily O’Reilly, the European Ombudsman. 66

To illustrate that point, Dénes spoke of the Data Retention Directive, criticised by human rights and civil liberties activists, who were concerned that it violated the right to privacy, before it was adopted in March 2006. Its adoption forced EU members to adapt their legislations to implement the Directive, something that again was criticised by rights advocates and also questioned by national courts, as it was the case in Romania, where the Constitutional Court declared the Directive violated constitutional rights. And, finally, in April 2014 the Court of Justice of the EU declared the directive invalid for violating fundamental rights. 67

Dénes argued that the EU could have spared itself the effort of going through that process, and at the same time not violate its citizens’ fundamental rights, if the law-making process at the EU level were transparent and open to civil society.

Furthermore, he warned that a similar situation was under way concerning the proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on copyright in the Digital Single Market. 68 This law-making process had been going on for a year by the time this conference was held, and concerned rights activists were not getting answers from the EU about how it was being done, and about how the EU was reacting to what happened with the Data Retention Directive, Dénes described.

The only available information was what had been leaked, said Dénes, who did not think something like this would happen at the national level, where he considered it unthinkable that no information about this type of legislative process would be made available to the public. “From this perspective, it’s no wonder that people do not really feel the ownership of the EU”, he said.

When it comes to accountability at the EU level, Dénes brought up the case of police intervention during the Catalan referendum of independence on 1 October 2017, which had been deemed illegal by the Spanish state. According to international and European rights organisations, in at least several cases the police acted in a disproportionate way, 69 with almost no reaction from the EU. 70 He said he was aware of just two interventions: one during a debate in the European Parliament, during which the Commission First Vice-President, Frans Timmermans, issued a statement implying it had been a “proportionate use of force”; 71 and another by Michael O’Flaherty, director of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), who during a trip to Hungary said the FRA thought “it would be good if all players of the conflict would be considered and they would respect different opinions, [and that] at this point the maximum we can do is to express this.” 72
Dénes said he understood the complexities both the European Commission and the FRA faced when it came to speaking out, but that if one saw all this from the perspective of the citizens and the media, then those tepid reactions were not what people would expect from the EU.

The so-called refugee crisis shows a particularly tragic example from real life of the lack of transparency and accountability, and of the complexity, in the way the EU functions as supranational body.

On the 2nd September 2015, the picture of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old whose dead body had appeared on a Turkish beach, was shown in many newspapers across Europe. The boy and his family, who were Syrian refugees in Turkey, had tried to reach Greek territory by boat. His mother and brother also died, and only the father survived the attempted journey.⁶³

The image of Alan Kurdi dead shocked many and caused an outpour of solidarity: “donations to charities surged […], the UK promised to take in 20,000 Syrians; France, 24,000, while Germany temporarily opened its doors without conditions”⁶⁴ After difficult negotiations, a summit of EU leaders in Brussels approved a deal to impose refugee quotas to accept, over a two-year period and between several other European countries, the 120,000 people who had arrived in Italy and Greece.

However, the UK refused to take part and decided to accept refugees separately on its own terms. And the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary voted against that mandatory quota, and the latter simply closed its borders to not let people in. One year later, only 5,142 people had been relocated from Greece, instead of the 66,400 promised.⁶⁵ Between January 2017 and March 2018, 29,784 refugees were resettled to Europe, still very far from the quotas approved in 2015.⁶⁶

Shortly after Alan Kurdi’s death, the EU signed a deal with Turkey that went into force in March 2016. European leaders meeting in Brussels, “blithely disregarding their international obligations, agreed that every person arriving irregularly on Greek islands – including asylum-seekers – should be returned to Turkey”, as it was described by Amnesty International, which called the months following the deal “Europe’s year of shame”. In exchange for keeping those migrants and asylum-seekers, Turkey was to receive 6 billion euros from the EU “to assist the vast refugee community hosted in the country”.⁶⁷

That whole way in which the EU reacted to the refugee crisis showed the democratic deficit of the EU. Discussions were held in an opaque manner and decisions were taken without consensus and without fully respecting human rights and humanitarian principles, which are fundamental values every democracy should observe. In the meantime, since the beginning of 2016 and up to 14th May 2018, at least 8,878 people have died or have been reported missing trying to reach Europe through the Mediterranean.⁶⁸

Democracy at the EU level: participation

The EU needs for its citizens to see clearly the opportunities to participate in the political process. Then citizens need to see they are having a real influence in the public policy made at the EU level, and finally citizens need

⁶⁴ Ibid.
⁶⁶ In 2017, 26,435 people were resettled to Europe, according to the official data by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (report available as a PDF file on https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/61936 [last downloaded on 14 May 2018]). Between January and March 2018, 3,049 people were resettled to Europe, according to the latest figures available at the time of writing (report available as a PDF file on https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/61936 [last downloaded on 14 May 2018])
to see that the policies they have supported are making an actual and positive difference, said speaker Bjørn Hvinden.

However, when it comes to citizen participation at the EU level the options are quite limited. On his part, Dénes reminded the conference of the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), included in the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, launched by the Commission in 2011, and effective since April 2012.⁶⁹

An ECI is “an invitation to the European Commission to propose legislation on matters where the EU has competence to legislate”. It “has to be backed by at least one million EU citizens, coming from at least 7 out of the 28 member states, [and] a minimum number of signatories is required in each of those 7 member states”. To launch an ECI, “citizens must form a ‘citizens’ committee’ composed of at least 7 EU citizens being resident in at least 7 different member states”, and ECIs cannot be run by organisations.⁷⁰

Even though it was generally welcomed as a positive development, democracy and citizen participation advocates have criticised the ECI for its shortcomings.

At the time of writing, out of the 65 attempted ECIs,

- 17 had been refused by the Commission on the grounds that they did not fulfil the required conditions;
- 14 had been withdrawn by their organisers;
- 24 had not received the required number of statements of support within the 1-year time limit;
- 6 were open for collection of statements of support, and;
- only 4 had been successful.⁷¹

Apart from the complicated process and of how few of the attempted ECIs have made it to the final stages, their main limitation is, in the words of the ECI Campaign, an independent organisation working for the successful implementation of the ECI, that “of the [at the time] 3 successful ECIs that have been submitted to and processed by the Commission, none of them have been answered with a direct legislative proposal. The result of this is that ECI organisers and citizens do not feel that they are being taken seriously and the tool is increasingly perceived as toothless, as having no real impact on policy- and decision-making”.⁷²

It was in part thanks to that criticism, shared by other civil society organisations, that the Commission made an official proposal for the revision of the regulation on the ECI, published in September 2017.⁷³

However, and again in the words of the ECI Campaign, while the “proposal entails a number of technical changes that make the tool more accessible and user-friendly for citizens, the key challenge remains unaddressed: how to respond to successful ECIs in a way that does justice to the ECI organisers and the 1,000,000+ supporters they represent?”⁷⁴

Even though organisations themselves cannot run an ECI, Dénes said part of the blame for the very limited success of the ECIs lies in European NGOs, which have also failed to do more to support this participatory channel. Effective participation requires the active work of civil society, and this is one of the requirements of democracy at both national and supranational levels, he said.

---

⁷⁴ See footnote 22 above.
When it comes to more conventional ways to participate in the political process, like voting in the elections to the European Parliament, one of the reasons why there is such a low turnout in some countries is that, however noble their citizens may find the idea of the EU, and however supportive they can be in general of the EU, they just do not think the European Parliament is a strong enough player in the political process, Dénes argued.

In the latest European Parliament elections, in 2014, the turnout in Belgium was 89.64% and in Luxembourg 85.55%, the two highest participation levels. However, in Slovakia, only 13.05% of the people voted, in the Czech Republic it was 18.20%, in Poland, 23.83%, and in Slovenia, 24.55%. In total, in 14 out of the 28 member states, voter turnout didn’t reach 40%.⁷⁵

Overall, in regard to participation, there has been a downward trend since the elections in 1979, and the turnout has not passed the 50% threshold since 1994.⁷⁶

The future of the legitimacy of the EU depends very much on whether we can convince people that their participation matters, and on how much we can manage to involve people in the political process, Dénes concluded. And to make people more involved, the way forward is to increase transparency and accountability at the EU level, and provide more and more efficient and clearer ways for people to participate.

Still, participation does not have to mean only political participation, noted speaker Maria Raquel Freire. To explain her point, Freire mentioned the example of the Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes as pathways that have been allowing millions of Europeans to become involved in the EU through education, training, sport and youth exchanges and activities.⁷⁷

The Erasmus (between 1987 and 2014) and Erasmus+ programmes (which from 2014 comprises Erasmus and six other prior schemes) are hailed by many as two of the greatest successes of the EU.

---


⁷⁶ Ibid.

However, many others, including second session speaker Katarzyna Mortoń, have also pointed out that in most cases these programmes only reach those who already have the socioeconomic resources and language skills to take advantage of them. As a result, other large parts of the population that actually might benefit even more from these kinds of programmes are left out.

Therefore, the challenge remains for the EU to actually reach out to all citizens, and to provide effective means of participating in the political process, as well as in the whole of EU life, for all people in all parts of society.

**Democracy at the EU level: representation and the role of national governments**

Whether it is because of lack of interest or because of lack of will, national governments and parties do not do a good job of selling the EU to their citizens, nor of informing their people about what their countries get out of being members of, or related to, the EU, said Hvinden, himself from Norway, a country that is not a member of the EU but has a very close relationship with the union.

Often, national politicians and governments blame the EU when they have to do something they do not like. And these same politicians then take the credit themselves when they have to do something people like and in which the EU had a role, argued Hvinden.

When it comes to legislative proposals at the EU level, national governments sometimes also take advantage of the lack of transparency in that law-making process, argued Dénes. Often, it is very difficult to know which governments are behind which proposals, and also which ones are pushing for a particular proposal and which ones are resisting it. While at the national level it would be much harder for governments to get away with this lack of transparency, he said, it is actually very easy for them to do it at the EU level in the name of coordination and compromise.

But we should not see the national and the EU political dimensions as separated and different ones, argued Hvinden. Because national institutions are the result of people’s votes and EU institutions are the result of bringing together national institutions, and therefore are also the result of people’s votes. National democracies and EU democracy are not separate things; they are intertwined and closely interrelated, he said.

In addition to that, we also should be careful and not exaggerate or overstate the supposed distance between the so-called elites and the so-called grassroots or people on the ground, Hvinden also warned. To the extent that our countries are democracies, as imperfect as some of them may be, their governments are in a way an actual representation of what the people on the ground do think and care about.

One could extend Hvinden’s argument to the EU level: to the extent that the EU is a democracy, and as imperfect as it might be, then its institutions are also an actual representation of what the people on the ground, and their national governments, do think and care about.

This is a valid point, but one that we should be careful about. In some cases, as it was discussed in the earlier sessions, purely electoral democracies may result in majoritarian antidemocratic governments that did not get more than 50% of the votes, and that in not very high turnouts. Besides, actual fairness of elections conventionally deemed free and fair cannot really be achieved unless there is actual equal access for all citizens to the political process, as it was also noted during the conference. Therefore, it is debatable how actually representative of the people some governments are, and that may need to be discussed on a case by case basis. Also, and in a more general way, it has to be noted that for the last years there has been a public debate about the merits and demerits of the elections and the traditional party system to produce legitimate and effective governments – even when those systems work as they are intended to.⁷⁸

---

When it comes to representation at the EU level, the role of the Commission is a tricky one, acknowledged Hvinden, as it does not speak with a single voice, and for instance usually the ‘finance people’ won’t agree with the ‘social policy people’.

Hvinden sees the root causes of this general lack of democratic representativeness of the EU bodies in the EU’s own history, because even if the idea is to advance towards political integration, there are several member states that are reluctant to give away more of their sovereignty and that want to keep these inter-government structures in place. And that may make it more complex for the EU to act as a single democratic body that is supposed to represent the interests of all EU citizens above the national level.

These issues of representation and sovereignty are key to the future of the EU, which must act to resolve them if it wants to stop carrying them as a legitimacy burden.

**The EU’s democratic legitimacy: deep democracy VS surface democracy**

While at the EU level and in some member states the official policy may be to push for deeper democracy, that is not the case with some other members, and particularly in the east, where the situation is that of surface democracy, argued Freire.

Deep democracy is when you want to break the surface and really go down to make democracy happen at all levels, Freire explained. On the other hand, we speak of surface democracy when democracy is understood simply in technical terms, and particularly as having elections that are superficially seen as free and fair.

In some of the EU member states, some local elites that gain power through electoral means then legitimise non-democratic measures and institutions, while at the same time they say they are respecting democracy, Freire argued. But then what they are actually imposing is just this limited view of surface democracy, which forgets the normative dimension and does not really respond to the spirit of what liberal and rights-respecting democracy is expected to be about.

Socialising this more maximalist vision of deep democracy in member states where the regimes understand democracy in purely technical and electoral terms presents a huge challenge to the EU, she said.

It is sad but true that it is much easier to change laws and legal mechanisms than it is to change people’s minds, agreed Dénes. For example, candidate states may change some of their laws in order to gain access to the EU, but the sociopolitical reality of the country does not immediately change just because the government approves some new laws.

In that scenario, what can happen is that a candidate becomes a member state, EU mechanisms that were monitoring this country stop applying to it, and then undemocratic actors within that country may go on doing corrupt business as usual, he said. Yet now in an even more legitimised and comfortable way, because now their country is an EU member state. Therefore it is indeed frustrating that the EU does not keep deploying the same mechanisms it uses to promote democracy within candidate states when these become member states, Dénes insisted.

**The EU’s democratic legitimacy: delivering and enforcing ‘democratic rule’**

Human dignity. Freedom. Democracy. Equality. Rule of law. And human rights. Those are the core values of the EU. They “are common to the member countries in a society in which inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination prevail, [and] an integral part of our European way of life”.

---

Among its goals the EU aims to “promote peace, its values and the well-being of its citizens”, “offer freedom, security and justice without internal borders”, and “combat social exclusion and discrimination”. Among its goals the EU aims to “promote peace, its values and the well-being of its citizens”, “offer freedom, security and justice without internal borders”, and “combat social exclusion and discrimination”.⁸⁰

The EU often fails to speak with a single voice, and there are clear democratic shortcomings about its external action. But it cannot be denied that, during the last decades, the EU has helped move most of its member states towards those ideals, and that it has also at least partially achieved some of its goals.

For instance, when it comes to practical mechanisms, one of the things the EU has achieved is strengthening the legal protection against discrimination, sometimes even against the resistance of some member states, said Hvinden. There is now a system of litigation, through the Court of Justice of the EU, which citizens can access, and which state members cannot prevent citizens from using.⁸¹

However, one response to that positive example is that nor can it be denied that progress has not been even, there is much still to do, and those advances can be reversed.

The EU invests a tremendous amount of effort to deliver on its promises, especially when it comes to candidate states and to countries that are about to become EU members, said Dénes. But then, and since the union is based on the bonafide of its members as equal actors, when a state becomes a full member then the tools the EU has to intervene in such a country suddenly become rather limited, he argued.

Again taking as an example the police intervention during the Catalan referendum on independence on 1st October 2017 that the Spanish state had deemed illegal, Dénes said if that had happened in a candidate state then the response from the EU would have probably been much more visible and stronger.

That brings to mind for instance the case of Turkey, a candidate state since 2005, which “French, German and EU officials […] criticised after a week of ‘shocking’ police violence” during the 2013 Gezi Protests in Istanbul.⁸² More recently, the EU said the measures Ankara was taking after the failed coup (d’état) in 2016 were “unacceptable”.⁸³

When comparing Turkey with the political crisis in Spain, as different as those two situations are, it does seem that too often the EU has double standards when it comes to reacting to what full members do, on the one hand, and to what candidate states and other countries do, on the other.

More worrying than failing to condemn acts of alleged police brutality is when the EU does not condemn, let alone intervene, when a member state makes less visible curtailments of fundamental rights, said Cristina Flesher Fominaya, speaking here as a member of the audience.

This was the case of Spain, she said, where in 2015 the government changed the Penal Code to criminalise some instances of the right to protest and of freedom of expression.⁸⁴ The EU should be aware of national legal mechanisms that try to silence dissent, and not only of the visible signs of repression like police violence. This is in fact not only about statements and verbal condemnations but also about how the EU has very limited tools to intervene more directly in countries that may be breaking the rule of law or other democratic principles, as could be the case of Hungary and Poland, Dénes agreed.

⁸⁰ Ibid.
During 2017, both these countries defied rulings by the EU imposing quotas on taking asylum seekers from Greece and Italy. The EU threatened to fine Poland and Hungary over this issue, and the Commission also warned it could impose sanctions on Poland due to the government’s attempt to take control of the national courts,⁸⁵ but in practice there is not much the EU can actually do about that, Dénes lamented.

Still in the case of Poland, and speaking as a member of the audience, Katarzyna Mortoń lamented that the programmes the EU uses to engage with the national civil society are designed for “regular situations”, while in fact and in her view Poland was in a “democratic emergency situation”, for which these programmes are just not useful.

To make things more complicated, she said that while at the international level activists from civil society may be very well trained, the grassroots movements on the ground at national level do not usually have the capacity or the skills to deal with these “emergency situations”.

Dénes agreed with that view, and brought in the example of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), a joint effort by some member states and EU institutions that functions as “a grant-giving organisation that supports local actors of democratic change in the European Neighbourhood and beyond”.⁸⁶

Why can the EU not have something like the EED that would work within the EU? Or why can the Fundamental Rights Agency (EU FRA) not have a stronger mandate that allows the EU to intervene when a member state violates fundamental rights or democratic principles?, wondered Dénes. An actor like the EU FRA will not be able to fulfil its mission unless it has a strong enough mandate and the adequate tools to implement it, he said.

But in pragmatic terms it may not be that simple. If the EU gave itself those powers to intervene in member states, then we could have countries threatening or actually doing a Brexit and leaving the EU, warned Hvinden. The EU cannot be like a club you can get in and out as you like, we should not accept a kind of system in which members were able to blackmail the club by threatening to leave, he said.

Less dramatically, it could also be the case that the EU tries to intervene but then fails to actually improve the situation. And then that would make the EU lose credibility as a political actor, added Hvinden.

In any case, those are issues that seem to concern in general most EU institutions and mechanisms, and which aim at the real meaning of the EU as a political body. In fact, one could wonder: what is the point of having a democratic vision, and the mission of defending and promoting democracy, if then you lack the adequate means to enforce that?

**The EU’s democratic legitimacy: the perception from abroad**

The crisis of the legitimacy of democracy, and particular situations like the EU’s failure to put up a united front and to deal according to international humanitarian principles with the so-called migrant and refugee crisis, are also having an impact in the way the EU is perceived by actors from abroad, said Freire.

Actually, countries like Russia seem to be actively using every chance they get to question the legitimacy of the democratic model defended by the EU, and the legitimacy of the EU project itself.

---


At the time of writing, new revelations had suggested Russians actors used information warfare and online operations to try and seed discord in the UK, and in the EU as a whole, during the Brexit campaign.⁸⁷ It seemed they had also tried to take advantage of the political crisis in Catalonia to make the EU and European democracies look bad.⁸⁸ And there had been similar, though apparently more limited, Russian attempts to try and interfere in the French presidential elections⁸⁹ and in the German elections⁹⁰, with the aim of destabilising those two core member states and the EU in general. In all cases, European countries and the EU were presented as dysfunctional, and their democracies as neither legitimate nor effective at dealing with situations of crisis.

Questions remain about the actual impact and influence of such campaigns, and also about the possible involvement of the Kremlin itself in them. But it is nevertheless worrying how foreign actors and political rivals of Europe, as is also the case with China, may be taking advantage of a weakened EU to try to erode its democratic status, and to even try to gain influence in its policy-making process.⁹¹

Enriching democracy in the EU: engaging with the people

It is clear how, for most people, it is very hard to understand what is going on at the European level, argued Hvinden. And that is the basic barrier for most citizens to appreciate what they are getting and what they may be entitled to get out of the EU.

Citizens need to be confident that the business of government at the EU level takes place in a proper way; that it is transparent, accountable, understandable and not corrupt, he added. Otherwise they will not perceive the EU as democratic.

There is a big issue with how the EU communicates itself and how it gets communicated by other political actors and by the media, added Mortoń, speaking as a member of the audience. She said the EU should explore new ways to engage with people. Including, for example, social media channels to try and communicate in very simple terms what the different EU bodies – the Council, the Commission, the Parliament, different EU agencies… – are up to, as a way to try and reach people on the ground, who would never go and check the raw information by themselves. And to also try and reach people who think differently than those in the progressive and liberal bubble.

But the thing is the EU already uses these social media channels to try and engage with the public. Only in English and to list but a couple of examples, the Commission had at the time of writing 826,000 followers on its Facebook page,⁹² and 942,000 on its Twitter account.⁹³ The European Parliament had more than 2,382,000 followers on Facebook⁹⁴, and 449,000 on Twitter.⁹⁵

Not only the EU, but these days every NGO and civil society organisation has its own social media accounts too, from which they try and spread information as much as possible.

---

The problem here may have a double dimension:

- that it simply is hard to communicate complex policy issues like the ones the Commission and the Parliament – and all EU institutions – deal with; and that maybe social media, with its constant updates and very short messages, is just not the best medium to do that;

- and that on social media people tend to follow public figures and organisations they already like and which they already agree with, which questions how social media can be used to try and break out of one’s bubble to reach people who hold different views.

Still, that does not mean that the EU and pro-democracy organisations should not explore, and hopefully find, new ways of conveying their messages more efficiently and to wider audiences, as Mortoń urged.

Besides that, traditional media, and particularly the mainstream media, also play a key role when it comes to enabling particular narratives and to spreading different discourses. In these days of so-called fake news, the democratic responsibility of traditional media to produce an accurate discourse about the EU and its political process becomes even more acute than before.

The fact that now more and more people are getting their news on social media, not caring where and how the information originated, and whether it is real information or rather corporate or institutional communications, propaganda or advertising, should make the development and implementation of media literacy programmes a key objective of the EU and any pro-democracy organisation.

Another strategy the EU could embrace is funding and developing programmes for people on the ground who could act as nodes or multipliers to spread the information in the offline world, Mortoń added. In this respect, Hvinden said that the Commissioners were now travelling around to meet with citizens, and that he saw that as a positive development.

However costly and laborious reaching out and adapting its message to all parts of the society may be, it does seem very important that the Commission and other institutions make the effort to engage appropriately with people both online and offline. Otherwise, it will be those spreading misinformation by taking advantage of the complicated nature of the EU who will fill the public sphere with their own narrative and discourses.

**Enriching democracy in the EU: institutionalising citizen participation**

Even when many people are feeling disenfranchised and turning to nationalist and illiberal parties and candidates, and even while we are discussing the crisis of legitimacy of democracy in the EU, there are still other people and initiatives making it clear that they want to get involved in a pro-democratic Europe. Such is the case with Pulse of Europe, as a question by a member of the audience raised.

Pulse of Europe is a movement that originated in Frankfurt in late 2016, and was reportedly launched by two German lawyers who started organising weekly meetings on Sundays to discuss the EU from a pro-democracy point of view. Soon, those citizen gatherings gained traction and spread to other German cities and then to other countries.

“At stake is nothing less than the preservation of an alliance to secure peace and to guarantee individual freedom, justice and legal security”, according to the website of the movement, which describes itself as non-partisan, independent and not receiving financial support from European or other political institutions or organisations.⁹⁶

---

By mid-March 2017, thousands of people gathered in more than 40 cities across Europe, called by Pulse of Europe, to show their support for the EU and to highlight their common values before the elections in the Netherlands and France.⁹⁷

Since that time, however, the movement seems to have lost momentum or at least visibility. Dénes said the question is how to make those kinds of initiatives sustainable, and that EU institutions have a responsibility to work together with those kinds of groups. Not necessarily by funding them, but by showing them possible paths and tools to get involved in the political process.

The fact that the Commission recently opened up a process to reform the European Citizens’ Initiative is another opportunity, for the EU and concerned citizens and organisations, to try and come up with a meaningful and effective way of affecting public policy at the EU level from the bottom up.

And, finally, Hvinden also recalled French president Emmanuel Macron’s proposal from September 2017 to organise a series of “democratic conventions” during 2018 in the member states willing to do so.

Those conventions would be citizens’ debates to discuss EU policy proposals. “The peoples of Europe will be consulted and will debate on principles proposed by the governments”, president Macron said, and then a “roadmap for Europe in the next 10 or 15 years” would be elaborated based on these citizens’ discussions.⁹⁸

It remains to be seen whether other European leaders will take up Macron’s proposal, and what exactly those “democratic conventions” may end up being in practice. By December 2017, they had been renamed “citizen consultations”,⁹⁹ and democracy scholars have criticised the proposal as “archaic, elitist and out-of-touch with the latest developments in democratic innovation”, and have predicted that “the only result of these gatherings will be a wish list of unrealistic demands – easily ignored after the box of ‘citizen consultation’ has been ceremoniously ticked.”¹⁰⁰ But the hope remains that at a fundamental level this could indeed be another way forward for the EU to get its citizens involved from the bottom up in the political process.

Learning from the possibilities and challenges emerging from initiatives like the Icelandic National Forum and Constitutional process, the Estates General in France, and the square movements that took hold all over Europe from Athens to Madrid, a series of citizens’ forums to discuss how the EU should move forward could indeed help reinvigorate and re-legitimise democracy at the EU level by moving citizen involvement into a more meaningful dimension.

However, the key to it, as noted several times during the conference, would be to institutionalise that process, and to follow it up with real political action based on the democratic input produced by those citizens’ debates. Otherwise, the EU might be playing its last participative card just to generate more frustration and disenchantment.

---


SESSION 4: RESEARCH AND INNOVATION: BUILDING A STRONGER DEMOCRATIC EUROPE

Introduction: the democratic relevance of science

Misinformation about science and scientifically irresponsible public policies have very real consequences. This is just one example: “There have been repeated calls for [the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)] to address nutrition-related health, particularly obesity and non-communicable disease in the EU. However, aligning agricultural policy such as CAP with nutrition is complex, not least because the aims of agricultural policy are predominantly economic, presenting a challenge for developing coherence between agricultural trade and health policy.”¹⁰¹

Researchers do not in fact live in an ivory tower but in the middle of society. Because of this, they are in a position to assume a critical responsibility when it comes to talking to both citizens and policy makers in order to contribute to evidence-based policies.

Research and innovation (R&I) plays a key role in building a stronger, more democratic Europe. The knowledge and reflection R&I generates are crucial to inform and shape decision-making processes that will influence the future of democracies in Europe. And the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) should be a fundamental part of this research, as they can provide a normative framework and the insights about society needed to pursue democratic policies.


Citizenship + Research + Policy making: research that is relevant for society

What knowledge is relevant for society? What are the relevant issues to research from the SSH point of view? Who decides this? How can we define what is relevant and what is not?

In democratic societies, the answers to those questions would be the result of conversations between citizens, the academic community, and policy makers. Those conversations would be guided by a normative vision that respects human rights and other principles of a democratic and inclusive society, and would be open to review in accordance with those principles.

In reality, however, it seems we are still working on it.

In March 2016, the European Commission created a group of experts, chaired by speaker Ramón Flecha, and tasked this group with coming up with methodologies that could be used to assess the relevance of Framework Programme 8, Horizon 2020, and to evaluate its social impact.¹⁰⁵

Those methodologies had to be democratic, in the sense that they should also include what citizens who are not usually interested in research thought; able to analyse change, because people’s priorities change very quickly; and also cheap, Flecha explained.

During its work, the group aimed to answer three basic questions:
- Is Horizon 2020 in line with the EU and international priorities?
- Is it in line with the needs of EU citizens?
- And how well adapted is it to subsequent technological or scientific advances?¹⁰⁶

Those questions guided the development of four methodologies:

- An expert explanatory approach using text mining to detect the key topics in the legal documents of Horizon 2020.
- An expert explanatory approach using human content analysis to extract concepts and keywords reflecting challenges for the society based on the capabilities of the human mind.
- An automated text mining approach to extract topics from the legal documents of Horizon 2020, and from the set of Strategic Policy documents published by the EU and other international institutions.
- And a social media approach, using sources like Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia and YouTube, to identify the most relevant social needs and technological and scientific advances expressed by citizens.¹⁰⁷

When it came to the second question, whether Horizon 2020 is in line with the needs of EU citizens relating to the degree of their matching with the keywords in the H2020 work documents, the group found the relevance of most H2020 sections to be “high”. The relevance was “medium” in just a few lines of research:
- Health, Demographic Change and Wellbeing;
- Secure, Clean and Efficient Energy;
- Secure Societies – Protecting Freedom and Security of Europe and its Citizens;


¹⁰⁷ ibid, pages 6-7.
– Science with and for Society (for which the relevance was “high” in 2013-2014 and then went down to “medium” from 2014 up to now), and;
– International Cooperation (for which the relevance was “medium” in 2013-2014 and then went up to “high” from 2014-2016).

Overall, the report concluded, this “method revealed that most of the sections of H2020 are still relevant today.” Apart from those already noted concerning citizens’ interests, the report said H2020 would be more relevant also if these other topics were more present:

– trade and investment flows;
– working conditions;
– effects on income, distribution and social inclusion;
– dignity;
– fight against corruption;
– response to public health emergencies;
– refugees;
– single currency;
– violent extremism;
– and women.

Following up on the work of this group, Flecha and some colleagues of his argued in another paper for generalising the use of the fourth approach, that of collecting citizens’ views from social media. They proposed this methodology ‘for identifying the relevance of research goals through collecting citizens’ voices on Twitter and Facebook combining two approaches: top down, starting with already defined research goals priorities, and bottom up, departing from the social media’. This way, they wrote, “researchers could integrate this methodology in their daily work and be more in line with the needs expressed by citizens in social media.”

Once we have developed the appropriate algorithms, we can use them to check quickly and cheaply, every day if we like, how people’s priorities are changing, Flecha argued. This could be potentially more democratic than polls or other forms of consultations, he said, because people who do not care about science also tweet every day.

That is a very interesting way of trying to gather whether publicly-funded research does indeed respond to the public’s interest. However, there are also some issues to keep in mind regarding that approach.

First of all, active Facebook and Twitter users might not be very representative of society at-large, and in some places and regarding some contexts they may in fact represent only a narrow part of the society. Also, it is still not clear how much what people share publicly on social media does reflect their actual thinking and point of view.

Besides those points, we should in general be cautious when using algorithms to comb through big amounts of citizen-generated data. And a highly responsible and critical approach should be the norm, as it has been noted in the ongoing debate about the impact of algorithms in the public domain. ‘Algorithms are aimed at optimizing

¹¹⁰ Ibid, pages 161-162.
everything. They can save lives, make things easier and conquer chaos. Still, experts worry they can also put too much control in the hands of corporations and governments, perpetuate bias, create filter bubbles, cut choices, creativity and serendipity, and could result in greater unemployment”, the Pew Research Center said in a report published in February 2017 and appropriately titled “Pros and Cons of the Algorithm Age”.¹¹²

When it comes to researching subjects that citizens find relevant and are interested in, there is another proactive approach: get citizens involved in the research process at the very beginning, and even at the programme-designing phase, as Flecha himself also insisted and as this report will explore in the section below: “Research with a democratic input”.

**Citizenship + Research + Policy making: research for knowledgeable politics**

As already noted above, knowledge and the generation of knowledge play a relevant role in democracy. Not only scientific research should cover those issues the society considers relevant, but as a part of the policy-making process decision-makers need to understand the people, how they think, how they feel, how they act. Therefore, researchers need to deliver insights based on that knowledge to policy-makers, who then can produce policies that are well informed and culturally sensitive, argued speaker Fiorella Battaglia.

That need to understand the people becomes more acute in times of crisis and of social change. And that is precisely the aim of RE.CRI.RE, a research project Battaglia herself is involved in.¹¹³

RE.CRI.RE stands for “Between the representation of the crisis and the crisis of representation”. It is a project funded by the EU within the Horizon 2020 programme, and its aim is “analyzing cultures of European societies and the impacts of the socio-economic crisis on them, in order to frame better policies at local, national and European level”.¹¹⁴

That project also seeks to understand how people make sense of their experience in Europe, because that is part of the problem in our present situation, Battaglia argued. To study how people understand their experiences, the project assumes the hypothesis that people are rational, except not in the conventional homo economicus sense¹¹⁵ but rather according to the model on which behavioural economics is based, and which takes into consideration how people apply their rationality in practice to real-life situations.¹¹⁶

One question about those kinds of projects, which try to bring research about society to policy-makers, is whether they could have tried to involve regular citizens from the beginning, and in a more active role than just as the object being studied.

That was precisely the case, for example, of the WORKALO project, of which Flecha was the main researcher. It was part of FP5 and was “concerned with the creation of new occupational patterns for cultural minorities, especially the case of the Roma”.¹¹⁷

Within the project, there was an Advisory Council (AC) that included Roma people as representatives of the majority of the collective in Europe, and also Roma NGOs and other organisations working with Roma people. “The main idea of the AC was to incorporate the voices of groups which have been traditionally excluded from research in a more formal way. One of the criteria for inclusion was to integrate people without academic qualification. The

---


¹¹⁴ Ibid.


AC therefore gives voice to community members who would find participation in a multicultural research team difficult".¹¹⁸

The AC took on a consultative role for the researchers, who showed their work and engaged in a dialogue with this council, including about the data analysis, the conclusions and the policy recommendations. “The AC served the purpose of guaranteeing that the findings and recommendations were relevant to the lives of the majority of the members of the studied group. The initial reluctance and resistance found among certain researchers in terms of being challenged by non-academic people was overcome through the realisation that the final outcomes [would] be much more rigorous.”¹¹⁹

In this project, the role of the Roma involved through the AC went beyond the research itself. They also participated in the dissemination of the results and “presented the findings in seminars and conferences, and discussed these with non-Romani people”.¹²⁰

In September 2004, during “a round table in the final conference held in the European Parliament, a member of the AC, an illiterate Romani woman, presented the overall results of the project. Members of the European Parliament, [European Commission] scientific officers and other stakeholders were present, and a Spanish MP made a commitment to that woman and to her people that he would bring a proposal to the Spanish Congress for the Roma population to be recognised in Spain (…). Prior to that moment, Members of the European Parliament, who were in the audience, also promoted a European Parliament resolution that contained some of the WORKALO recommendations.”¹²¹

That research has also contributed to strategies developed all over Europe to try and create educational and employment opportunities for the Roma, said Flecha, who used this example to highlight the potential of having the citizens who are the object of the study involved in an active role in the research from its very beginning. As another and quite different example of how involving citizens in research may lead to advances in policy-making, Flecha also mentioned the case of Ojo con tu ojo (Beware of your eye, in Spanish)¹²², which is a case study in SOLIDUS, a research project within Horizon 2020 in which Flecha is also involved.¹²³

Ojo con tu ojo was a campaign led by Ester Quintana, a woman who lost an eye due to being hit in the eye by a police rubber bullet during a demonstration in Barcelona in November 2012. The campaign succeeded in getting the authorities to ban the use of rubber bullets by the Catalan police.¹²⁴ Flecha argued that this was the case thanks to the fact that Quintana had been empowered by having participated in research projects. “Before (Quintana), four other people were injured losing their eyes (…), but none of them had succeeded in their legal allegations against the use of rubber bullets by Catalan police”, said a conference paper presenting the results of SOLIDUS.¹²⁵

Beyond having regular citizens involved in research, and thinking more in general and in the long term, everyone at the conference seemed to agree that civic education should be present in schools in order to produce a critical and responsible citizenry. Subjects like precisely citizenship, democracy and the EU should be taught early, at least at high school level if not before, it was mentioned during this session. Doing so could result in citizens engaged with both science and the political process, which in the end would lead to knowledgeable politics.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.
¹²⁰ Ibid.
¹²¹ Ibid (pages 28-29).
However, it is also clear that, when it comes to public policy, education tends to be a minefield in which almost every attempt at national or subnational reform is passionately contested. Many times, it is not rare that authorities – usually non-democratic authorities – try to impose their sectorial or partisan views – and not those based on science and pursuing the public interest – in the education curriculum.

So it would seem that introducing a high quality civic education is as desirable as complicated, and probably even more if the aim is to do it in the whole of the EU.

**Mission Democracy: the SSH in multidisciplinary research**

Multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity have been buzzwords in research, education and policy for years now. So much so that sometimes they are used interchangeably even though technically they have different meanings: “Multidisciplinarity draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within their boundaries. Interdisciplinarity analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries”.

For practical reasons, in this report only the term “multidisciplinarity” will be used, and with the general meaning of “research or other teamwork involving multiple scientific disciplines”.

Before discussing how the SSH may engage in multidisciplinary efforts along with other sciences, we have to note that even the Social Sciences and the Humanities sometimes do not get along that well between themselves either. Sometimes philosophy is not acknowledged in this multidisciplinary approach, said Battaglia, herself a philosopher. For instance, she found that a philosopher may be working with law researchers, but then they cannot find a journal that is interesting both for philosophy and law researchers.

First, it is important that the Social Sciences and the Humanities be able to work together in multidisciplinary endeavours. That said, the SSH must find ways to participate in multidisciplinary efforts with the other sciences, too.

One way of integrating the SSH in a wider scheme of knowledge generation along with other sciences could be to embrace a vision in which empirical research is guided by normative theory, which in turn is reviewed by empirical research, defended Battaglia. The goal being to end up gaining knowledge that has a normative dimension and it is not separate from the real world.

Multidisciplinarity also comes up when talking about innovation. As will be discussed in the next section, the European Commission should embrace a multidisciplinary approach, in which the SSH are fully integrated, when designing the next Framework Programme, FP9.

**Mission Democracy: the Lamy Report, innovation and missions for FP9**

Design the EU Research and Innovation (R&I) programme for greater impact. Adopt a mission-oriented, impact-focused approach to address global challenges. Capture and better communicate impact. And mobilise and involve citizens. Those are some of the recommendations of the report of the independent High Level Group on maximising the impact of EU R&I Programmes. It was published in July 2017 and is known as the Lamy Report,
taking its name from the chair of the group, Pascal Lamy, President Emeritus of the Jacques Delors Institute and former Director General of the World Trade Organization.¹²⁸

That was the first time the Commission set 12 people to come up with a vision for the next Framework Programme, said speaker Milena Žic-Fuchs, herself a co-author of the report and a member of what has become known as the Lamy Group.

The report’s main recommendation is to double the budget for R&I in FP9, said Žic-Fuchs. The present budget was set at €74.8 billion euros,¹²⁹ and the Lamy Report asks for at the very least €120 billion euros in current prices for the next budget.¹³⁰

The other main point of the report is about redefining innovation. “When looking ahead to the future of Europe in a globalising world, the contrast is striking between Europe’s comparative advantage in producing knowledge and its comparative disadvantage in turning that knowledge into innovation and growth”, says the introduction to the report. “At the heart of Europe’s slow growth lies its innovation deficit. Europe does not capitalise enough on the knowledge it has and produces”.¹³¹

The thing with the EU is that, even though it has a very high quality scientific output, and also in terms of the number of papers published, it trails well behind partners like the US, Japan and South Korea when it comes to turning its output into actual innovation. And when it comes to achieving innovation out of research, the idea that came up was multidisciplinarity, explained Žic-Fuchs. Because innovation occurs when you bring together different knowledges and not just a single one.

So what different cultures of knowledges do we need to bridge this gap between scientific output and innovation?, she asked. To get innovation, we need to change our mindsets when approaching research, we have to be strategic about it, and we need to have the SSH integrated into this process from step zero, she said, because the SSH are necessary to define the appropriate research questions.

Innovation leaders “develop strategic missions where they see societal and market potential and actively direct public investment accordingly”, says the report, which then calls for adopting a mission-oriented and impact-focused approach to address global challenges.¹³²

“The post-2020 EU R&I programme should thus translate global societal challenges (social, economic, environmental) into a limited number of large-scale research and innovation ‘missions’”, the report goes on.¹³³ These missions should be easy to communicate, able to mobilise many actors and investors, and induce action across disciplines, sectors and industrial silos.

Missions should also be open to all actors. Those responsible for EU policies about industry, agriculture, energy, transport, ICT, culture… should be involved in programming research and innovation. And actors like cities and regions “could act as ‘innovation laboratories of change’ in piloting new ideas and concepts”.¹³⁴

¹³³ Ibid.
¹³⁴ Ibid, page 16.
Missions should be ambitious and have a break-through potential, failure should be allowed, and unexpected pill-over benefits should be encouraged.

And, finally, missions should fully integrate by design the SSH, stressed Žic-Fuchs as well as the report. “Where missions concern the big social questions of our time (…), SSH researchers will initiate and lead them.”¹³⁵ We need the SSH on-board, and real multidisciplinarity, already in the articulation of the questions themselves, which is what has been missing in Horizon 2020, she insisted.

The Lamy Report only identified a few potential missions to illustrate this concept, and none referred to the crisis of democracy, even though “democracy” was in fact discussed as a possible mission, according to Žic-Fuchs. “Science and innovation are also key to preserving the values of enlightenment and democracy and to tackling the societal challenges of our time”, the report states.¹³⁶

There are already societal issues discussed in the Lamy Report, said Žic-Fuchs: education and critical thinking; language and communication, and face-to-face communication; citizen science, citizenship and civil society.

So how do you articulate all these points about societal issues? How do you articulate them into possible research questions to make a whole for a mission that could potentially be called “democracy”? Žic-Fuchs asked.

This is the challenge for SSH researchers and this is the time to stand up and speak up for the Social Sciences and the Humanities, she said to the audience. In part, because the SSH came too late to FP8, and were not even mentioned in the green paper on a common strategic framework for R&I funding that informed FP8 back in 2011.¹³⁷

Žic-Fuchs said she had already identified an issue that could be developed into research questions to build a mission about democracy: inequality. She said that, through informal interactions, she had come to think of inequality as an issue that European citizens presently worry a lot about.

As well as proposing and conceptualising particular research issues like inequality for FP9, SSH researchers in Europe should be more generally involved in the whole R&I process. Including when it comes to the more physical science or technical research, as the descriptive and normative vision the SSH may provide could guide what questions the other sciences may ask, and help frame how they do it, as a member of the audience noted. Žic-Fuchs encouraged everyone to propose well-articulated research questions relating to democracy, and to propose multidisciplinary endeavours. And to do it as soon as possible, she insisted, because the Lamy Group was still in place, because FP9 is being conceptualised during 2018, and because possible projects and a hypothetical mission about democracy could end up being financed in the next Framework Programme.

**Mission Democracy: research with a democratic input**

If the idea is not only to bridge the gap between research and policy-making, but also between the citizenry and research, then researchers should somehow manage to get citizens’ views on what questions are most relevant to study, Žic-Fuchs said.

That has been done already in several parts of the world, within and beyond Europe, explained Žic-Fuchs. Take, for instance, the Netherlands, which embarked on an initiative to get this public input into research.

¹³⁵ Ibid.
In April 2015, the Knowledge Coalition of the Netherlands, consisting of the most important knowledge-based institutions for scientific research,¹³⁸ invited the public to submit questions about science. “This resulted in 11,700 questions submitted by the general public, academic institutions, the business community and civil society organisations.”¹³⁹

Next, the Knowledge Coalition appointed five academic juries to cluster and assess these questions. That was followed by three conferences called science4science, science4competitiveness, and science4society, which aimed to order and aggregate the questions around those three perspectives.¹⁴⁰

At the end, that process produced 16 “example routes” composed of 140 overarching scientific questions, which make up the current Dutch National Research Agenda.¹⁴¹

In support of that example, a member of the audience said she had been involved in that process in the Netherlands. The calls for citizens to submit questions were also made on popular TV shows, and featured prominent ministers and researchers, she added, and such an approach invigorated scientists and citizens alike. It is indeed good to ask people for questions, she continued, but then it is necessary that someone works on transforming that input, which will include questions too broad or not operative – i.e. how to end poverty –, into properly researchable questions. The Dutch project dealt with that situation by having discussion groups involving researchers and other stakeholders working on how the received questions could be further developed into research programmes, she said.

Now that those kinds of initiatives are becoming trendy, there is the risk of focusing too much on involving the public, and seeing that part of the process as “the Holy Grail” or like an end in itself, she said. And if something like that is tried at the EU level, we should not get stuck on celebrating how democratic that is, but we should be ready to move on and then do the research itself, the member of the audience warned.

Another example of involving the people in research programme-making can be found in New Zealand, Žic-Fuchs pointed out.

In late 2012, the government there started a project to formulate, from both the science sector and the public, the research priorities New Zealand should embark upon. When it came to engaging citizens, the government created what it called the Great New Zealand Science Project. The public was encouraged to make research proposals through a TV campaign, an interactive website and a Facebook page (today the latter two have been rebranded as the Curious Minds project¹⁴²). That campaign “resulted in 138 eligible submissions posted to the websites and 616 further ideas and comments discussing the submitted challenges”.¹⁴³

“The public submissions highlighted the lack of use of science in informing many decisions and demonstrated a strong desire to see greater public commitment to research in social, health and environmental domains”, and this suggested that “there is a broad understanding that science can contribute much more effectively across many domains to the betterment of New Zealand”, a government report about this project stated.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
At the end, and after collating the inputs from both the science sector and the public, the authorities identified 10 research areas to make up what they call the National Science Challenges, which have provided the framework for publicly-funded research in New Zealand since then.

In order to gain democratic input and the citizens’ involvement in research programming, the EU should explore ways to do something similar in Europe. It can use the lessons learnt from those two and other examples, and use them as a blueprint to consider building its own Europe-wide initiative.

**Mission Democracy: research for social impact**

After gaining democratic input into what questions should be researched, another fundamental issue is how to then produce research that has a positive social impact, and also how to measure that impact.

How will policy makers pick up on research that may have a positive social impact? The answer is researchers should not go and pitch these research projects to policy-makers but to citizens, argued Flecha. Because if citizens think this research is relevant to them and it has a positive social impact, then policy makers will pick up on this themselves.

Flecha gave the example of INCLUD-ED, a research project he led within FP6 and that developed educational strategies for inclusion and social cohesion.¹⁴⁵ This project reportedly achieved the reduction of absenteeism and early school leaving, and an increase in school performance in deprived areas.

When it comes to policy-making, the Ministry of Education of Portugal, which was not one of the countries involved in INCLUD-ED, learnt of the project results and by late 2017 was creating a plan to implement them, said Flecha. Yet, if the researchers themselves had come and pitched the results of the project to the Portuguese government, probably nothing would have happened, he argued, because policy makers might have felt that the researchers were trying to sell their particular product.

We need a very good set of indicators that can measure the social impact of SSH research, he continued, in order to be able to disseminate appropriately and widely the information about this impact, so that it can be picked up by citizens and then by policy makers.

Ideally, one would like to have a centralised and systematic way of measuring, visualising and comparing the social impact of different research programmes, which otherwise may get lost in the immensity of all the information being generated these days.

In this respect, Flecha spoke of SIOR, an “open access repository to display, share and store the social impact of research results”.¹⁴⁶ SIOR was developed within the IMPACT-EV project, led by Flecha and funded by FP7.

“Social impact are the social improvements achieved as a consequence of implementing the results of a particular research project or study”, says the SIOR project website. And through SIOR “researchers can provide evidence of how their research has been useful to help meet these social targets, for instance, contributing to create employment, increase access to health, reduce carbon emissions or reduce poverty, in a particular locality or at a broader scale”.¹⁴⁷

---


¹⁴⁶ University of Barcelona. SIOR. Available on http://sior.ub.edu/jspui/sior.jsp [last visited on 22 November 2017]

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
SIOR can also be used to disseminate this kind of knowledge, said Flecha, for example by mentioning the impact of research about a particular issue on the Wikipedia page about this very issue.

For instance, if citizens worried about corruption but who do not care about research go and look up “corruption” on Wikipedia, there they will find information on ALACs, another project from FP7 that reportedly led to an increase in the number of citizen complaints against acts of corruption received and documented.¹⁴⁸ At the time of writing, that Wikipedia article did in fact refer to and link to the information about ALACs on SIOR.¹⁴⁹

As important as research that has a social impact is, we should not become obsessed about only starting impact-oriented research projects, said Žic-Fuchs. A positive aspect of the mission approach proposed by the Lamy Report is that citizens and researchers can propose and embark on a mission that explores risky questions that may produce nothing, and still this would not be penalised. In fact, we need this open approach to research to generate innovation, she insisted.

**Mission Democracy: SSH researchers need to take on an active role**

Why is it that there is such a big gap between SSH researchers and scientists from other disciplines? That was a recurring question over this session, and indeed at some point it was explicitly asked by a member of the audience.

One reason for this gap is that many citizens and policy makers do not see how the SSH have contributed to society in the last two centuries, answered Flecha. And the other is that SSH researchers themselves have not cared enough about creating excellence, about looking at what the benefits of their research are for society, and about explaining these benefits to citizens and policy makers, he added.

There is also the problem of the other sciences’ point of view, Flecha continued, as researchers from physical sciences think the SSH are not scientific enough. And even though those other scientists will also probably care about democracy, they think that the SSH are opinionated and that every SSH researcher says a different thing about democracy.

And the SSH themselves have sometimes contributed to that, Flecha argued, because SSH researchers have tried to present as science what in reality is their personal ideology. So SSH researchers should be really strict, do proper science, care about the evidence, and be proactive at showing how the SSH can improve democracy, he concluded.

And they also should go and attend the ESOF events, if possible starting by the one in July 2018 in Toulouse, Žic-Fuchs urged the people in the conference.

ESOF, which stands for EuroScience Open Forum, “is the largest interdisciplinary science meeting in Europe. It is dedicated to scientific research and innovation and offers a unique framework for interaction and debate for scientists, innovators, policy makers, business people and the general public.”¹⁵⁰ And at former ESOFs, Žic-Fuchs lamented, there was nobody from the humanities and a very few people from the social sciences.

Science gatherings like those are very good to do networking, and to find out what is going on in other fields of research and what other type of researchers are doing, and this all is great to actually foster multidisciplinarity, Žic-Fuchs said.

---


It is key that these interactions happen face to face, and it is even better if they happen when people are young and at the beginning of their research career, she emphasised. As an example, Žic-Fuchs told the story of the Junior Summit “Water: Unite and Divide. Interdisciplinary approaches for a sustainable future”, held by the European Science Foundation in August 2012.¹⁵¹

At that summit, 36 young researchers from different disciplines were “holed up” together in a house in northern Italy for several days to discuss the subject of “fresh water” from all their different points of view, as she put it.

At first, researchers from different disciplines would not even talk to each other, said Žic-Fuchs. But by the end of their stay they had agreed to contribute to a special, multidisciplinary issue of a journal dedicated to water,¹⁵² and today 75% of them work on multidisciplinary endeavours, she told the conference. When asked whether they would have followed this same path on their own, they answered no, said Žic-Fuchs, who chaired the committee that supported that summit.

SSH researchers need to make the other science domains understand why it is so important that SSH is present from the beginning, she urged. And they have to be able to provide excellent and precise examples for scientists and researchers from other disciplines and policy makers to understand the necessity of the SSH.

There are in fact particular subjects that clearly show the necessity of linking the natural sciences researchers, the SSH researchers, and policy makers. One of those subjects is global warming and climate change.

“Europeans have become increasingly concerned about climate change and a large majority believe that taking action will boost the EU economy and jobs, according to a new survey”, the European Commission said in September 2017.¹⁵³ And, still, by March 2017 there were only three European countries, Sweden, Germany and France, that were actively “pursuing environmental policies in line with promises made at the Paris climate conference”.¹⁵⁴

When it comes to global warming and climate change, it seems clear that the SSH should be involved since the beginning in the research along with natural sciences researchers. The SSH can provide the adequate framing and insights about the social, political and economic contexts, which may then make it easier for policy makers to pick up on the research results.

Another example is public health. “Anti-vaccine movements are believed to have contributed to low rates of immunisation against the highly contagious disease in countries such as Italy and Romania, which have both seen a recent spike in infections”,¹⁵⁵ the World Health Organization (WHO) warned in March 2017. “Every day, misinformation about vaccines continues to proliferate on the internet”, said then Isabelle Sahinovic, the WHO Vaccine Safety Net coordinator.¹⁵⁶ Worryingly, a controversial ruling by the EU Court of Justice in June 2017 was interpreted by some as giving anti-vaccine campaigners carte blanche to sue the medical authorities in the EU.¹⁵⁷

---


¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

As it happens, public opinion studies have shown that people holding anti-vaccine views are not convinced of the effectiveness of vaccines when merely presented with the scientific facts, and that actually their anti-vaccine views may be reinforced as a result.¹⁵⁸

Scientific research does not happen in a vacuum but in a particular social, political and economic context, and the way research results are communicated influences both public perception and the policy making process. By being involved along with scientists from other disciplines since the very first stages of research, and by providing insights about the complexities of the social and communicative context, the SSH may help produce socially relevant research outcomes that will contribute towards having an evidence-based public opinion and policy making process.

CONCLUSION

Session 1: citizens need to experience democracy

At a superficial level, during the discussions there seemed to be a general agreement on the causes of and solutions to the crisis of democracy in Europe:

- Many citizens have become disappointed in conventional democratic institutions and in the traditional governing elites.
- This disappointment has paved the way for nationalist, populist and anti-establishment parties and candidates to gain power, which has led to social divisions.
- Purely electoral democracies may lead to governments imposing a majority rule that ignores the rights of minorities, restricts civil liberties, and erodes checks and balances.
- Yet, this all could be solved and democracy could be revitalised if only more citizens participated more directly in the political process.

However, speakers and members of the audience warned that participation for its own sake doesn’t guarantee legitimate outcomes, and it can even further disenfranchise citizens if no real political action follows such participation.

For democratic regimes to regain their legitimacy and, with it, the trust of the citizenry, people from all parts of society need to have clear pathways to participate in the political process in a meaningful and effective way. EU institutions can still play a key role in this respect, both by establishing EU-wide mechanisms of participation, and by being a supranational democratic authority to which citizens can refer if their national systems fail to provide them with enough democratic guarantees.

An interesting point was that this session was not actually supposed to be about the EU. But the fact that the discussions still turned around the role of the EU in the crisis of democracy and its possible solutions shows how difficult it is to talk about matters of policy in abstract terms and without referring to existing political entities. The fact that the EU is the unavoidable reference when it comes to discussing democracy in Europe reinforces the responsibility of the union and its institutions to become real and effective guarantors of democracy at the national and supranational level.

Even though most people say they “tend not to trust” the EU and their national governments and parliaments, trust in them all has been increasing in the last few years, and by the time of writing stood at 41% (+10 percent points from autumn 2013, when it was the lowest in the last 14 years), 36% (+11), and 35% (+12), respectively and according to the latest Eurobarometer.¹⁷⁷

Both the EU and national democratic regimes should capitalise on this upward trend and take advantage of this momentum to explore and find meaningful and effective ways to increase citizens’ engagement in the political process. The alternative to re-engaging citizens is less democracy in Europe, which is to say there is no alternative.

**Session 2: making an improved democracy happen**

There cannot be actual democracy, not even in its minimalistic technical view defended by some, unless all citizens have equal access to the political process. And there cannot be equal access to the political process for all citizens unless there is social justice, as it was generally agreed during the second session.

In a time of growing socio-economic inequalities, democracy’s workings may have been wrested away by financial and other vested private interests, as it was discussed at the conference. But if citizens want to regain an inclusive and functional democracy, then what they need is not just a return to “what was there before”, but actually more participatory opportunities, so that they themselves can help create a better democracy.

In a context of increasing social and economic complexity, traditional politics is having a hard time keeping up with an accelerated informational ecosystem and with all the changes taking place and many citizens feel that conventional democratic institutions fail to give them an actual voice and an actual vote on how things should be in their societies.

New ways of involving citizens from all parts of society in the political process must be found and implemented. Not only because this is what democracy should entail, and not just because democracy requires an inclusive society to really take root. But also because the highly complex social, economic and political environments we find ourselves in, and the growing transnational challenges our societies are facing, require a corresponding collective intelligence to deal with it, as emerged from the discussions in session 2.

Small and socially secluded elitist groups simply cannot respond in time and provide adequate answers to these highly complex problems. But democracies that manage to involve citizens from all sides of society in a meaningful, effective and responsive bottom-up process should then hopefully be able to do the job.

http://ec.europa.eu/commission EUROPEAN COMMISSION 52

Session 3: emerging from the crisis as a more democratic EU

As the saying goes, “every crisis is in fact an opportunity”. The EU should be able to use these different crises – of migration, of democratic legitimacy within the EU, of external actors questioning the validity of the European model – and their effects to actually become more united and more coherent on all these issues, as speaker Maria Raquel Freire said optimistically.

The EU is not only the sum of its member states, but also the sum of its citizens. And it needs to involve these citizens in the political process if it wants to gain its democratic legitimacy and turn the “democratic deficit of the EU” into an obsolete expression.

The EU has to be brave and test new ways of opening up the political process. It has to embrace transparency and accountability, for which it can use advances in digital technology, as it was discussed during this session.

Crucially, the EU has to implement citizen participation pathways that are clear and effective. It really has to, as there is just no alternative, no other way to emerge from the crisis as a united and more democratic EU.

The European Parliament, the only body directly elected by the citizens, needs to be upgraded and to take on a more meaningful and authoritative role in the political process.

The European Citizens’ Initiative – which quite a few conference attendees didn’t know about before this session – has to become an actual way for citizens to engage in policy-making at the EU level.

And local, regional and national and transnational citizen forums should be tried and tested, following up on those that have been held already in several European countries like Iceland and France. These forums may include online channels but, as discussed in the earlier sessions, must also include at some point face-to-face interactions between people from all parts of society.

And these forums should be institutionalised from the bottom up to the point where democratic input would be turned into visible political action. Otherwise, participants can become even more disenchanted than if these citizen debates did not exist.

Session 4: turning scientific research into democracy

There is no doubt that scientific research plays an important role in democratic societies. And there cannot be any doubt that the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) play, or should play, a key role in configuring scientific research.

The SSH have to regain, or to gain, a more prominent role in general scientific research, it was agreed by speakers and members of the audience. And if multidisciplinarity is the way, then the SSH have to be there at the beginning of the process, at step zero, as speaker Milena Žic-Fuchs insisted.

The SSH should engage in conversations with the other sciences (and sectors) in order to come up with and frame the appropriate research questions, that need to be democratic – as in involving the people’s democratic input – have a positive social impact, and also be ambitious and explore risky issues in order to generate innovation.

In fact, one way for the SSH to engage with the other sciences and sectors in a multidisciplinary approach can be through providing the normative vision to guide the research. This vision should respect the principles of democracy, like human rights, inclusion and equality of access to the research process and to the political process.

At the time of writing this report, the publication of the first draft of Horizon Europe with its inclusion of a democracy cluster had not yet taken place.
As a very potent global actor in science, the EU should work towards achieving this vision, and should provide citizens and researchers with the adequate resources to do so. More precisely, and in line with the recommendations in the Lamy Report, a research mission concerning democracy should be developed into FP9.¹⁷⁸

But it is not just up to policy makers and scientists from the physical and technical disciplines to suddenly realise the importance of the SSH. It is actually up to SSH researchers, scientists and academics, and also to concerned citizens, to take on an active role to engage with other actors to promote the role and defend the relevance of the SSH in scientific research and, more generally, in the political process, as the speakers urged those attending and following the conference.