CYCLE ON THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPACE: "HEADING TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS"

POWER TO THE CITIZENS: WHAT CONDITIONS FOR A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPACE?

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O n 20 March 2014 in Paris, EuroCité, Europartenaires and Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute organised the sixth seminar of the cycle "European public space: Heading towards the European elections" , based on the theme "Power to the citizens: What conditions for a European public space?".

Over two hours of debate between the speakers and the public provided the opportunity to review the importance of citizens' participation in a European public space, whose implementation is more necessary than ever for the democratisation of European integration. This need questions in particular the way in which citizens are informed on this issue, but also on the obstacles and constraints that sometimes hinder them in the use of tools made available to them. After an introduction by **Renaud Soufflot de Magny**, deputy head of the European Commission representation in France, reviewing the already existing means of expression and the need to improve the participative dimension of the tools made available to European citizens, **Nicolas Leron**, President of EuroCité, moderated a debate between **Sandrine Bélier**, MEP Greens/EFA group and **Anne-Marie Perret**, president of the European Federation of public service unions and President of the Citizens' committee for the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) "Right 2 Water".

The discussion mainly focused on the following three issues.

1. Granting power to the citizens, an institutional response to a democratic deficit?

Democratic shortcomings, more so than a deficit, are regrettable in the functioning of the European Union (EU), and while means of consultation are less than perfect, they nonetheless exist, and are not simply an exercise in form (Soufflot de Magny). In this way, the election of European representatives (MEPs) and members of the Council by universal suffrage is a source of popular legitimacy within the European institutional triangle where only the executive is

"appointed", in close collaboration with the Parliament and the Council, as is the case with ministers from several member states. Sandrine Bélier nevertheless recalled that members of the Council are not normally elected by direct universal suffrage, as they are ministers who are "appointed in their country", which partially weakens the direct legitimacy of this chamber.

Furthermore, the powers of the European Parliament have increased considerably since 1979, which seems to be going hand in hand with a regular decrease in participation levels in the European elections. Such a state of affairs seems to be due in particular to the lack of awareness of European citizens, only 51% of whom[1] know that the MEPs are elected by direct universal suffrage.

There is a need to launch a real institutional initiative to assess the existing tools, to develop them, improve them, or create new ones (Bélier, Soufflot de Magny). In this way, Sandrine Bélier spoke in favour of the strict interpretation of the Lisbon Treaty concerning the nomination of candidates for presidency of the Commission, by making it an "election by indirect universal suffrage", understood as requiring a European-wide campaign by the candidate, who must be appointed by the party and elected to the EP. She singled out in particular Jean-Claude Juncker's nomination as Europeans People's Party (EPP) candidate for presidency of the Commission. Simplification of the EU's institutional structure also needs to take place, allowing citizens to better understand it, and the institutions need to be more legitimate and responsible.

In addition to the election of European representatives and the occasional referendum, two intervention

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tools available to European citizens appear to be underutilised:

- **The Committee on Petitions**: This committee is relatively unknown. It allows all European citizens to bring their claims to the European Parliament when they consider that their rights are not guaranteed by an institution or a national firm. MEPs have thus managed to assert their authority so that the Commission guarantees the Treaties, and to exercise their powers as part of the citizens' referral concerning the airport at Notre Dame des Landes in France, or in the case of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), bringing the European Parliament to refuse an international treaty for the first time.

- **The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)**: This is the result of bitter fighting at the time of its negotiation and it is one one the most complete tools allowing citizens to voice their opinion. It should however be assessed during the next parliamentary term in order to make it more efficient and more accessible.

Although these consultation instruments exist, they need to be developed and improved. Their underutilisation may be due to institutional engineering and information concerns, but they are also very complex to use and citizens find it difficult to claim ownership of them. All of these constraints and obstacles discourage even the most informed citizens, who are courageous enough to bring their claims before them.

2. Taking power: a real uphill struggle for citizens

The "bottom-up" approach, which underlies the principle of the ECI, implies that citizens can take hold of the power that the Treaties has given them. However, although this is indeed the principle, once

European citizens are aware of this possibility and have made use of it, few of them have the means and the network to bring an initiative to fruition (Perret, Bélier). Therefore, despite support from the European Federation of public service unions and the support of several MEPs for the "Right 2 Water" initiative, collecting the 1.7 million signatures and validating the ones finally collected "was a real uphill struggle" (Perret). It is difficult in particular to have a solid enough foundation to support the extremely strict framework that goes with the validation of signatures, but also to fit in as a representative of civil society and not of various lobbies.

It is therefore important to mobilise civil society actors. These can be the various institutions and federations, as well or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the case of this first successful ECI, which led to a communication by the Commission on 19 March 2014[2], even the strength of the European Federation of public service unions – with its 8 million members – had trouble bringing the initiative to completion. One can therefore easily imagine the difficulties that simple citizens established as committees might have. Furthermore, the cost of ECI follow-up is high, and it would be inappropriate to use European funds to pay people working on completing an ECI.

Sandrine Bélier recalled that when the ECI terms and conditions were being negotiated, the MEPs were most insistent on allowing the signatures to be sent electronically and not through forms to be sent to the Commission. The limit of one quarter of member states participating in the ECI was also the result of a compromise between the Commission's proposal of one third and the Parliament's proposal of one fifth, as was the duration of signature collection. She felt that given the strictness of the rules governing ECI, the simple fact that it ends up before the Commission should suffice to allow the latter to take legislative measures accordingly, and was therefore disappointed in the Commission's apprehension concerning the "Right 2 Water" initiative.

Renaud Soufflot De Magny underlined that in any event, the successful conclusion of the first ECI, "Right 2 Water", although at this point in time simply marked by a non-binding "communication" from the Commission, is a "mini-revolution" within European legislative architecture.

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All nevertheless agreed that it would be necessary to assess the effectiveness of the process during the next parliamentary term and to make adjustments. As for funding, it has been envisaged, for example, to set up procedures for the reimbursement of costs involved, for the ECIs that come to a successful conclusion. Debate with the public brought things even a step further: if each European citizen was given a European "identity number", it would be much easier to check the validity of the signatures, for example, and such a measure would also help to develop awareness of European identity among EU citizens.

3. Neither populism, nor technocracy: how to communicate with citizens to give them the means to build a European public space?

As Sandrine Bélier highlighted, we are experiencing a paradoxical situation between the proliferation of ideas and proposals that exist at European level, and the total disconnection on the ground regarding citizens' knowledge of European initiatives, regulations or tools. Citizens' lack of information and their disappointment in the ability of their politicians to really take the desires and needs of the people into account, are the cornerstone of this state of affairs.

The "sense of alienation" felt by citizens, who believe that politicians are either corrupt or powerless, is obvious. Only 29% of Europeans believe that their opinion matters in the EU and 69% feel either poorly informed or misinformed. Anne-Marie Perret explained for that matter that in order to raise public awareness of the ECI, a German comedian had to advertise it to German citizens when communication by the European institutions or even civil society could not reach them effectively.

- **The role of MEPs**: MEPs have a responsibility towards voters, and several tools are available to them to remain in contact with EU citizens. In addition to guaranteeing the transparency of parliamentary work, MEPs can transmit citizens enquiries, and can organise citizen hearings. They therefore have the power to act, they can be held accountable, they can be questioned and they can lead debate with citizens. It is therefore also their responsibility to allow citizens better participation in European democratic life. Sandrine Bélier also mentioned the responsibility of MEPs who do not become involved in the European Parliament, and she condemned the differences between the nominal and the real influence of the political parties in the Parliament[3] which proves the need to make the MEPs accountable in a stricter manner.

- **The role of political parties**: Whether national or European, few political parties take the time to speak of the issues at stake with the European elections, or are even audible on the topic[4]. This reluctance to envisage political issues at European level also stems from the culture in and of most nation-states, which are not ready to take debate to European level.

- **The role of national political leaders**: A qualitative leap forwards could take place in the area of national policies for several member states. Sandrine Bélier raised the possibility that, for example, as part of French local elections, local elected representatives could accept the responsibility of Europe as regards the funding they receive in terms of cohesion or territorial policy. In the same way, a parliamentary break could be given to French deputies during the European elections, which is not currently the case whereas it is the case for local elections.

- **The role of the media**: The fact that the conventional media, and television in particular, which are the main source of information in many member states, do not talk about Europe, does much to misinform citizens. It is not a question of producing ad hoc media on Europe, but of integrating a European dimension into all topics addressed. The debate which is due to take place on 14 May 2014 between candidates for the presidency of the European Commission and be rebroadcast in all member states on 15 May, is a first step towards better media coverage of Europe. It also

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highlights the numerous difficulties stemming from the coordination that is necessary for this broadcast to run smoothly, and particularly difficulties in complying with the various national laws in terms of broadcasting debates at election time.

The question of developing a public space through the Internet also raises issues of the neutrality of the web in terms of digital freedom if this area of virtual communication is destined to become one of the main interfaces of the European public space. In fact, for the moment one can find several types of expert media on the web, but very few neutral media. As for social networks, these are a more effective way to spread citizen-based initiatives, as highlighted by a political science student present in the room who had launched an ECI with her fellow students, collecting over 60,000 signatures in just three months by simply using social networks.

But although it is necessary to improve communication about the European Union[5], and to become closer to its citizens, one should not fall into the traps of populism. When a film director who had come to participate in the debate suggested that the institutions recruit "street performers" to better communicate with the citizens who are incapable of using the tools available to them, Sandrine Bélier and Anne-Marie Perret recalled that the European project is a complex one, and that by oversimplifying things there was a danger of one's speech becoming demagogic or populist. They preferred to believe that citizens are able to understand the mechanisms underlying European decision-making, if the right actors go to the bother of explaining them.

1. "One year to go to the 2014 European Elections", Eurobarometer EB/PE 79.5, Brussels, December 2013.
2. European Commission, Communication on the European Citizens' Initiative "Water and sanitation are a human right! Water is a public good, not a commodity!", COM (2014) 177 FINAL, 19.03.2014.
3. Yves Bertoncini and Valentin Kreilinger, "What political balance of power in the next European Parliament?", Policy Paper No. 102, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2013.
4. Yves Bertoncini and Valentin Kreilinger, "Is the European party system ready for 2014?" Synthesis, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013.
5. Nicolas Leron, "How to communicate on the European elections", Synthesis, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, January 2014.

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