



identity and  
democracy  
BUDAPEST  
EUROPEAN AGORA

# EUTH FOR DEMOCRACY

## Report 2021

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## Core Partners





## The idea behind the project

Looking back at this past year, it is clear that Europe will remember the Covid-19 crisis as a turning point in its recent history, and not only because of the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic.

These few months have in fact seen the culmination of a series of seismic shifts affecting our societies: from technological disruption to political polarization, to the climate crisis, disinformation and populism: the European project is in desperate need of repair.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was envisioned to tackle some of these rifts by unleashing the creativity and ambitiousness of participatory democracy, thus actively involving European citizens in designing the future they envision for the EU.

As a community of young people, a network of international European organizations, and a laboratory of civic engagement, ID-BEA through its EUth for Democracy project lends itself as the perfect vessel to allow European youth to mobilize and take active part in shaping the future of Europe.

As an exercise of transnational democracy, EUth for Democracy is perfectly equipped to act as an incubator of and as a spotlight for the ideas that can arise from the creative minds of young Europeans.

As a result, the project's main goal is to foster youth's knowledge about democracy and bring in new ideas to revamp it.

During the pandemic, the project was able to exploit the digital space to allow 100 young Europeans from 22 countries across Europe to meet, exchange, learn from each other and from a roster of distinguished guests, experts in diverse aspects of the democratic process.

The EU and its decision making processes are too often perceived as something far away and detached from its peoples: why not connect citizens with EU decision-makers? EUth for Democracy was envisioned as a six-month adventure, supported by our partners: Scuola di Politiche, Académie Notre Europe and the Jacques Delors Institute in which we launched a participatory process for the renewal of European democracy.

Participants explicitly adopted a project-oriented perspective to imagine, develop and present concrete ideas that are scalable and can be applied across the entire Union, taking inspiration from local and national issues and that can bring an innovative edge to the reform process.

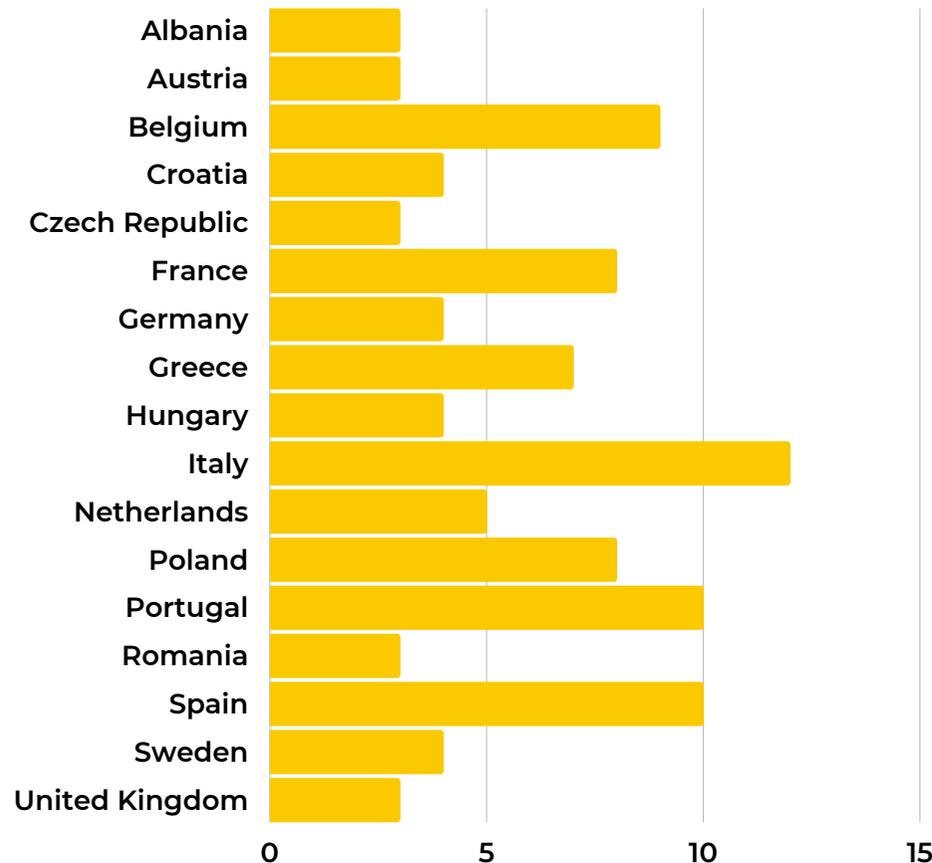
At the end of this process, all Country Teams (CT) were encouraged to share their proposals and create virtual events on the multilingual participatory CoFoE platform to present their work.



## The participants

100 participants (18-35 years old), living in EU Member States and neighbouring countries, constituted the 17 Country Teams and took part in the project to develop their proposals and invest in the EU's democratic future.

### The Country Teams



The 100 participants came from

**22**

**different countries:**

Albania, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Ukraine and the UK.

**21**

**different fields  
of study and work**



47 women and 53 men:

- 68% between 21-25
- 32% older than 25

**70**

**students and  
researchers**



**30**

**young  
professionals**



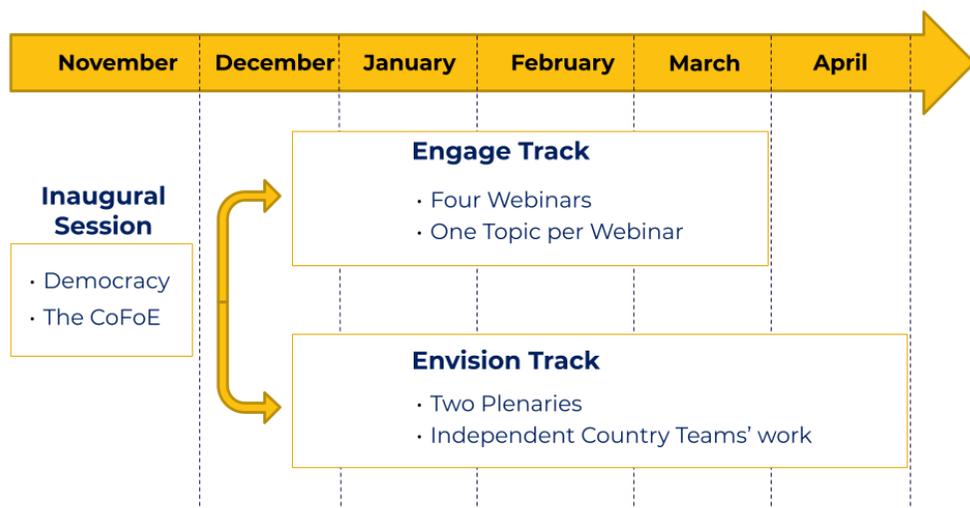


## The methodology

The project opened its application process in September 2020 with the aim of recruiting at least 3 people per Member State to form a Country Team (CT). Once formed, CTs carried out qualitative and quantitative research to come up with concrete suggestions on how to improve democracy in the EU.

Each CT was supported by a Country Reference (CR), who followed them in the process of developing and finalizing their proposals. All CRs shared a starting toolkit with their teams, as well as suggestions and guidance when needed. Establishing this process was essential to ensure consistency and to facilitate coordination and discussion among CTs.

After the Inaugural Plenary in November 2020, the project's roadmap included two parallel sets of activities: the Engage track and the Envision track sessions.



**The Engage track:** a series of four webinars with decision-makers, experts, and practitioners of democracy.

Through their perspectives and experience, our guests provided our participants with food for thought, who could then integrate what they just learned in the development of their CT's projects. During all Engage sessions, participants were encouraged to join in an active and interactive discussion with our guests, as well as expanding on the supporting resources provided prior to each session.

**The Envision track:** two transnational plenaries and the core of the participatory experiment.

Its goal was to support CTs in the development of their proposals through mutual exchanges with their peers. CTs worked 3 months to identify local, national or cross national issues that negatively impacted on the European democratic process and presented them during the first plenary session hosted in February. The following months leading up to the final plenary in April were spent on developing their final proposals, which included the identified issue, its impact on EU democracy and an innovative, feasible and scalable solution to address it.

The two plenaries were complemented by periodical moments of transnational and bilateral exchange among different CTs with the purpose of providing mutual feedback and to improve their proposals.

# The inaugural session

The inaugural session was the first opportunity for the participants to meet and exchange their ambitions and ideas. This plenary was developed through some of the methods at the forefront of online citizens' participation developed by the experts of Bertelsmann Stiftung, Dominik Hierlemann and Stefan Roch.

Participants were asked to discuss what worries them and what brings them the most hope about the future of European democracy. Issues directly connected to the rule of law, the rise of nationalism but also unequal access to and quality of education came up as the main trends.

Then, the participants were divided in multiple breakout rooms to discuss different topics related to the improvement of EU's democratic future, such as: "what tools should the conference on the future of Europe have?" and "how should citizens participate in the Conference?"



## THE SPEAKERS:



**Dominik Hierlemann**  
*Senior Expert  
Bertelsmann Stiftung*



**Stefan Roch**  
*Project Manager  
Bertelsmann Stiftung*



**Enrico Letta**  
*Secretary of the  
Italian  
Democratic Party*



**Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul**  
*Deputy Head Citizens  
Dialogues Unit EU  
Commission*

# The Engage Track

## WHEN ARE DEMOCRACIES LEGITIMATE?

17 December 2020

Representativeness, competence, effectiveness are among the essential components of well-functioning democracies. How do they make democracies more legitimate?

Covid-19 has forced citizens to re-appropriate social and political spaces, pushing states to empower their electorate with a higher degree of social responsibility. In this particular context, new technologies may be key to develop new democratic paths, challenging young people to invent radically innovative ways to manage the modern phenomena of internet democracy and digital citizenship.

Society is experiencing a democratic transformation and the European Union can and should be its long-term guardian, reinventing practices of civic engagement capable of adapting to technology's disruptive force.

### THE SPEAKERS:



**Alessandro Fusacchia**  
*Member of Parliament, Italy*



**Kalypso Nicolaïdis**  
*Professor of International Relations, University of Oxford*



**Paul Depla**  
*Mayor of Breda, Netherlands*

## INFLUENCE & INTERESTS: HOW TO FORM CONSENSUS IN A DEMOCRACY?

28 January 2021

In the complex process of consensus creation, what is the weight of different actors in shaping it? What is the role for intermediate bodies, businesses, NGOs, and media?

Both EU and national media have a fundamental responsibility in making the CoFoE more transparent and accessible to the people, providing explanations not only on the different debated topics but also on the background of the institutions and legislative processes at the core of the Union.

It is necessary for the EU to improve its communication strategy, finding a way to deconstruct the complexity that has always characterized its institutions, using direct language to showcase the vision behind the Conference making it an appealing event for the audience.

### THE SPEAKERS:



**Gaby Bischoff**  
*Member of the European Parliament*



**Jacopo Barigazzi**  
*Senior EU Reporter, Politico*

## The Engage Track

### HOW ARE NEW TECHNOLOGIES IMPACTING DEMOCRACY?

24 March 2021

Which are the democratic threats from new technologies?  
How can we use these technologies to improve democracy?  
How is disintermediation impacting the relationship between elected officials and their voters?

There are two main elements of political campaigns that have been impacted by tech: the targeting of voters and the ability to test political messages on several platforms. After Cambridge Analytica, everybody understood that our perception can be manipulated. It is fundamental for the EU to be a global trendsetter in order to avoid new tech's negative impacts including unsupervised autonomous systems targeting users.

The dichotomy safety/privacy is false and without the right to privacy there is no path for freedom.

#### THE SPEAKERS:



**Eva Kaili**

*Member of the European Parliament*



**Valerio Riavez**

*Co-Founder of Electica and Lecturer at Sciences Po*

### WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

20 April 2021

How can we ensure that our democratic models can adapt to a changing world? What are the current global trends in democratic processes?

Deliberative democracy through citizens' assemblies, panels, juries and more has ushered in a myriad of participation processes. Deliberation means considering different perspectives and dialogue throughout different groups and trying to find a common ground. Politicians and civil servants alike have gained a better understanding of how the involvement of citizens can impact policy-making.

These instruments should be designed in a way that puts citizens at the center of the project. Such processes can make politics more transparent and legitimize evidence-based policy-making.

#### THE SPEAKER:



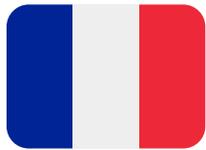
**Claudia Chwalisz**

*Leader of the OECD's work on innovative citizen participation*



## The proposals

### The winning Country Teams



**CT FRANCE**  
"EDDY Accelerator"



**CT GERMANY**  
"European Civil Action Program"



**CT NETHERLANDS**  
"Out of Brussels, Into Europe"



**CT SPAIN**  
"A European Strategy for Mental Health"



**CT SWEDEN**  
"Education and Participation: the Pillars of Democracy"



[Read here all the proposals](#)

All proposals were evaluated prior to the final Plenary by **Michele Bellini**, Director of the Budapest European Agora, **Sébastien Maillard**, director of the Jacques Delors Institut and **Christine Verger**, deputy director of the Jacques Delors Institute, on a scale of 1-10 against the three main criteria:

- **Feasibility:** how the proposals can be implemented and scaled-up to the EU level.
- **Uniqueness and innovativeness:** how creative the proposal is compared to the rest of the projects and how innovative the proposal is compared to what is available at the European level.
- **Relevance:** to what extent the proposed solution addresses the identified problems in the scope of EU democracy.

The final results were computed by averaging the experts' grades with the peer voting conducted on Wooclap, which accounted respectively for 70% and 30%.

How did the group perform on our three criteria (0-5)?



*"The initiative gave me an amazing opportunity to contribute to the redesigning of the European democracy, to get to know people across the EU who are equally enthusiastic about the EU and its democratic processes as I am and to gain new valuable knowledge and experience, which enriched me as a person"*

Ivana Verveger (Team Croatia)

## AFTERWORD BY OUR DIRECTOR

We have often heard that we are living in extraordinary times. This past year and a half has completely revolutionized the way we all see the world as individuals and citizens and the challenges of the pandemic have been met by our societies with unprecedented social and economic measures. In this new normal we have been forced to adapt to democracy, the role citizens can play in its processes, and the quality of our European institutions have become even more pressing matters.

With EUth for Democracy, we wanted to leverage on the experience of the Budapest European Agora to create an extraordinary opportunity, which allows young Europeans to unleash their creativity and enthusiasm, ever so necessary to face the challenges of our time. Our participants came from all over the continent, a diverse and rich region with different political systems, cultures and values. Yet each of them shared a strong commitment to the democratic history that has made Europe what it is today. As put by François Jullien, Europe is made in its contradictions, in the extreme differences that compose its heritage. It's exactly through dialogue, exchanges of perspectives and collective thinking that we are overcoming the current crisis. Two years ago we would have never imagined to see the Agora branch out into what it has become today. It is thanks to the ingenuity and engagement of our participants that we are proud to have launched this new, exciting adventure and we cannot wait to see it all.



*Michela Felleggi*  
 Director, ID Budapest European Agora

*"Whereas in digital form, the Budapest European Agora has allowed me both to apperceive European Affairs and to recognize myself in them, opportunities like this in fact reveal us to others and even more to ourselves. The EUth for Democracy Project was one of the most proactive, collective and interested occasions of my academic career."*

David Haznedari (Team Albania)



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**Contacts**

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EU<sup>th</sup> for Democracy  
French Country Team



**EDDY**  
**Accelerator**

**Andrea** Bochicchio  
**Angelica** Maiorano  
**Anna Maria** Rottmann  
**Ioana-Daria** Lupu  
**Joan** Caminal i Gimenez  
**Wafa** Jemal



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## Problem Outline

As a European team representing France on the occasion of the EUth for Democracy project, we initiated our brainstorming process to identify the problem we would like to tackle, and it soon became apparent that we had to account for a number of clichés in terms of democratic practices. Whilst seeking to formulate our problem, we agreed that in a broader sense, the European Union (EU) is facing a collection of democratic deficits, which could mean that the issue of democracy in the EU could be approached from multiple layers, and that we needed to identify the trigger of such deficits in order to address it.

We therefore structured our initial discussions around the deconstruction/demystification of clichés regarding democratic deficits in the EU and identified two areas from which the problem could emerge, namely communication and education. Due to fake news abundance and miscommunication at local, national and EU levels (institutionally), it seems that messages are distorted and the credibility of EU actors is undermined. Ultimately, citizens in EU countries find it difficult to feel they form an active part of the EU, which results in lack of involvement, criticism and propensity to cede to populist and/or anti-EU discourses.

Through enhanced discussions and exchanges, we concluded that the major problem we see regarding democracy in the EU revolves around **European education** and misinformation. Our reasoning was informed by the different EU countries we have lived in, and the observation of a select group of citizens who usually tend to partake in EU-related discussions, events or actions, as they share, more often than not, a similar educational background and interests.

This led us to question ourselves about the reasons beyond such participatory shortage which fuels democratic deficits, and an explanation might well be the **insufficient knowledge** (or its absence) of key aspects regarding the EU. In fact, there needs to be a clear, accessible manner to inform citizens at all ages about the EU (mission, raison d'être, vision, agenda and relevancy, today and tomorrow). In other words, we need to educate people and nurture their interest in what sometimes comes across as an old-fashioned structure that struggles to convey a shared identity and to foster a sense of belonging for European citizens.

## How we got to the solution

The major differences in education practices across Member States drew our attention as we started to think about the solution we could develop to address the lack of European education that fuels mistrust and a certain feeling of disappointment or lack of interest in the EU. Since the EU has a complementary competence in the field of education, it would be difficult to approach the problem from the perspective of a European education curriculum, and it would be unrealistic to assume that Member States would agree on a shared agenda in this respect. Consequently, we opted for a different route, one that would require focus on education pre- University students across the EU in an unconventional manner that would not require treaty changes or Member States' alignment on a shared European Education policy to be implemented in countries.

Our first approach was to realize a survey aimed at both students (and parents of primary school pupils) and teachers to map perceptions regarding their knowledge about democracy and the EU.

## Survey Findings

The survey was conducted among pupils and teachers from different Member States during the 18th March and the 7th of April 2021; 117 pupils and 96 teachers from Albania, France, Germany,

Italy, Romania, Spain and Switzerland participated. Given the limitation of time and resources, we recommend setting up a second survey for a deeper understanding.

The **pupils** survey highlighted two matters of concern: on the one hand, gaps in knowledge of the EU and democratic processes; on the other hand, increasing deficits in smaller cities. For the former, it should be stressed that only pupils who believe they have a good knowledge about the EU want to participate in activities that allow them to deepen and broaden their knowledge. For the latter, it emerged that there is a direct proportional relationship between the size of the city and the perception of democracy as a fundamental value: the bigger the city, the more democracy is perceived as important and there is a willingness to take part in activities of promotion and encouragement of it. Therefore we concluded that there are in fact areas of marginalisation that need to be addressed by providing educational and training tools that encourage participation.

The **teachers** survey revealed that it is of primary importance to foster knowledge about the EU and democratic processes. In fact, it emerged that a majority of teachers with specific democracy competences would use some of their time to share them with pupils (89,83%). The majority of these teachers believe that it is extremely important that at least one day per year is dedicated to activities on democracy and another day is dedicated to activities about the EU. On the other hand, once again a correlation has emerged between the city size and the degree of participation in European and democratic activities. Even in this case, the bigger the city, the more likely teachers have been involved in a European project. Moreover, in the biggest cities there are more teachers with specific competences to teach pupils about democracy and its meaning.

These **results** allowed us to deduce that there are disadvantages mainly localized in small environments, so there is the need to take initiatives to promote the sense of belonging to the EU by encouraging the knowledge of the democratic processes on which the EU is based.

## **EDDY Accelerator**

The European Parliament has made access to digital education a priority in the attempt to bridge the education gap within Member States and across the EU (European Commission 2020). Based on the vision for the European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan announced by the European Commission in 2020 (European Parliament 2020), our proposal comes as an addition by accounting for the pre-university population.

The **EDDY Accelerator** targets EU pupils aged 6-18 (primary school to high-school) with the aim to provide training and a hands-on experience of democracy as a founding pillar of the EU. Launched by the *European Agency for Education* (to be created under the leadership of the EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth), the EDDY Accelerator will take place yearly and facilitate the experience of democracy, how it is relevant to an EU citizen, and how it is expressed structurally and functionally from the perspective of EU processes, institutions and dynamics with Member States. It will be a free programme with 2 major components: a European Day of Democracy for Youth (to be created) and a European Democracy Driver for Youth - a tournament organised every school year via one digital platform accessible within EU countries.

## **European Day of Democracy for Youth - EDDY**

Democracy is the basis for life as a citizen in the EU. To highlight this value and the participation it implies to young people, we would like to introduce the **European Day of Democracy for Youth (EDDY)**, aimed at all pupils aged 6 to 18 and their teachers living within the EU. It is a voluntary program. To boost the motivation of its participants, different types of inducements will be thoroughly implemented.

We are targeting pupils because we are convinced that this is the best way to reach a diverse and socially heterogeneous audience. We want to give everyone the chance to learn about democracy and their rights, regardless of their social and family background. As EDDY is also the kick-off event of the yearly program (see following section), it takes place in early October. The aim is to hold the day on the same date in all European countries to promote a sense of European cohesion.

The purpose of this day is to teach pupils about participatory democracy. Thus, simulations are carried out in small groups where pupils experience what it means to live democracy, benefit from freedom of expression and learn how to negotiate and compromise.

In order to address pupils in an age-appropriate way, we distinguish three groups:

- **Ages 6-10** - We propose discussions with the teachers about topics close to everyday life, such as classroom rules. Due to the young age of this group, most of the time will be spent on playful activities such as games, team-building and creative activities related to democracy.
- **Ages 11-14** - We suggest discussions and debates about relevant topics on a local level, e.g. town issues or changes students would like to see in their community. Teachers can help moderate the discussion.
- **Ages 15-18** - This age group will simulate democracy more in-depth and explore more complex subjects, e.g. rule of law. Also, students will have digital exchanges with same-age pupils coming from other EU countries, to foster discussion, cultural diversity, curiosity and EU identity.

In order to actively involve teachers in the program and to simplify the organisation as much as possible, detailed pedagogical materials and videos will be provided by the *European Agency for Education*, and external mediators could be associated as well.

## **European Democracy Driver for Youth - EDDY Tournament**

The **European Democracy Driver for Youth (EDDY Tournament)** will promote EU democracy-related values (topic announced by the *European Agency for Education*) in an innovative manner. It will involve an interactive platform and educational content that uses gamification to stimulate and incentivise participation, and will be open for individual pupils and/or school enrolment, respecting the same calendar. The EDDY Tournament will follow the model of a EU sports championship leveraging youngsters' propensity to partake in initiatives where they can compete, form teams, meet peers to develop team-driven behaviour patterns.

The **educational content** will be provided and adapted for each age group by EU experts every year. The platform and the educational content will be available in all EU languages and optimised for mobile experience following a **three-track structure**:

**Learn Track:** gamified content designed to provide basic information regarding democratic values associated with the EU. Badges will be collected throughout the **Learn** track and points will be considered for the **Engage** track in order to form teams that bring together students with diverse profiles.

- **Ages 6-10 | 1.5 month (October-November)**  
Modules on familiarisation with community and citizenship, geographical settings and functioning of communities (simulate simple scenarios in which decisions are made), and introduction of the concept of democracy.
- **Ages 11-14 | 2 months (October-November)**

Modules on community traits (values, traditions), diversity within regions, countries and at EU level, decision-making within different community types, democratic approaches to decision-making, basic legal frameworks (local/national/EU).

- **Ages 15-18 | 3 months (October-December)**

Modules on EU & Member States (institutions, roles, treaties, cooperation), how member states cooperate in a democratic manner, how democracy governs activity, democracy at play (when democracy succeeded in the EU and when it failed).

**Engage Track:** a case study announced by the *European Agency for Education* to tackle one issue. Participants from different backgrounds will be mixed to learn about working on democratic participation. Team members will work individually via the platform to prepare for interactive group sessions moderated by trainers in the local language (exception for ages 15-18). Students will be grouped randomly to form:

- **Ages 6-10 - School/City teams | 1 month (January-February) | 3-5 participants / group | 2 sessions**  
**Ages 11-14 - City/Region/Country teams | 1.5 months (January-February) | 4-6 participants / group | 2 sessions**

Case-studies will be accessible on the platform, whilst moderators will guide participants. Pedagogical Officers will be in charge of the administrative procedures and maintain contact with pupils and parents.

- **Ages 15-18 - Country/European teams | 2 months (January-February) | 5-7 participants / group | 3 sessions**

If participants are grouped together from the same country, the working language will be the country one. If participants are grouped from different countries in the EU to access an European track, each student will have the opportunity to express themselves in their mother tongue and simultaneous translation will be ensured by the organisers as done in EU institutions in the local language, either for participants within the same city/region or at country-level.

**Act Track:** team-work on the issue to propose a solution. The objective is to provide hands-on experience regarding the application of democratic principles in EU matters, and participants will capitalise on the **Learn** and **Engage** tracks. Guided by the trainer, pupils will develop their solution in sessions delivered via the platform.

- **Ages 6-10 | 1 month (March-April) | 2 sessions**  
**Ages 11-14 | 1.5 months (March-April) | 2 sessions**

The solution will be recorded by the trainer based on the participants' contribution during the 3 sessions and introduced into a digital catalogue available on the platform and crediting all participants for their input. Teams will be considered for a set of Prizes (top 3/city or region // top 10/country) awarded for: Relevancy, Innovation, Feasibility, EU-scalability (how the solution can be rolled out/replicated in other EU countries), Sustainability. Solutions will be translated in all the EU languages and the digital catalogue will be published on the European Day of Democracy for Youth.

- **Ages 15-18 | 2 months (March-April) | 3 sessions**

Each team will have a trainer to provide guidance, nevertheless the team will be responsible to organise the 4 virtual sessions. Team members need to appoint a team leader who will be accountable for ensuring the fair and equitable participation of the team members. The **Act** track will include **one plenary conference** of the EDDY Tournament, with speakers specialised in the topic that pupils are working on. At the end, teams will submit their solutions

and they will be analysed by a panel of high-level EU experts, following the same criteria outlined for the other two age groups. The top 3 teams will be invited to present their solutions within a plenary session of the European Parliament in June, involving a 3 day- trip, all-expenses funded for each team member and their adult companion. The trainers guiding students during the **Engage & Act** tracks will be selected by launching calls for teachers in the EU who will be trained to develop their digital pedagogical know-how.

## Cooperations, communication and partnerships

In order to successfully implement and roll out the EDDY Accelerator,, the most important concern is to cooperate with as many schools as possible. Therefore the *European Agency for Education* will send the programme and materials in advance to schools all over the EU. In addition, participating schools will be awarded a certificate and pupils will receive a digital EDDY-pass, with a badge for each participation. If a school is not yet participating in the EDDY programme, students can take the initiative and contact the *European Agency for Education* to initiate the programme in their region. All pupils can attend the EDDY Accelerator regardless of their school's participation.

In addition to the cooperation with the schools, it is fundamental to build a long-term communication strategy and establish media partnerships. For communication, print advertising, and a targeted, group-specific digital communication via social media will be carried out.

Potential media partnerships could be established with ARTE, Euronews and Politico Europe. Other partnerships could be established over time to promote the programme, keeping in mind the age and interests of the target group, while choosing partners.

## Conclusions

We believe that our project fits the 3 requested criteria:

### Relevance:

- the EDDY Accelerator aims to provide tomorrow's citizens with a solid knowledge of Democracy in the EU and launch a common European education initiative - within the limits of institutional competence;
- this solution bridges gaps in national education systems by simulating democratic processes and discussions and a program that progressively leads pupils to act within democratic environments.

### Innovativeness:

- the EDDY Accelerator uses innovative pedagogical digital participative methods to introduce pupils within all schools to EU democracy by spreading accessible knowledge and opportunities related to these themes;
- the EDDY Accelerator aims to complement the EU Agenda for Education with a project focusing on reinvigorating democracy as a cornerstone of the EU via education, at a time when disinformation, fake-news and socio-economic divide – Euroscepticism included - are rising among youth (The European Economic and Social Committee 2019);
- both the competitive nature of the EDDY Tournament, and the creation of a unique European Day of Democracy for Youth, are keystones to the project's success.

## Feasibility:

- the EDDY Accelerator would be developed by the *European Agency for Education*, which would be established beforehand (this could be challenging) and would be responsible for the technical support, data security and overall content management on the platform;
- it requires minimal resources (internet connection) for its participants and is accessible via any mobile/desktop device from everywhere;
- the training for teaching staff can be financed via the Digital Education Action Plan and will contribute to achieving the agenda set for the European Education Area by 2025;
- the EDDY Accelerator is independent of any kind of regulatory or legislative decisions from the Member State.

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# European Civil Action Program: Common experience for a European Republicanism

Nikola Hajdin, Johannes Limam. Andrea Caravita di Toritto, Johannes Stupperich

## 1. The Issue

### A. The problem we lack identification with one another

The European Union has allowed for unique institutional infrastructure and entanglement between its member states which have contributed to the achievement of its most important goals as set in the founding documents of the European Community (Treaty of Rome) and the European Union (Treaty of Maastricht). These goals have been the assurance of peace and generation of economic growth for convergence between the countries. It is undeniable that the EC and the EU have been tremendously successful in achieving these goals.

However, at least as of the creation of the EU, member states wanted to become more: A political and a democratic union. Since then, there has been much criticism focusing on democratic deficits of the Union (cf. Streeck 2017, Habermas 1996, Deutscher Bundestag 2008). It is our strong belief that the Conference for the Future of Europe needs to be the starting point for setting up this political and democratic European Union.

In our opinion, the fundamental problem of a European political union is the lack of a feeling of belonging together, of sharing a common denominator, what one may call a **European Republicanism**, built on common experience or at least the impression of sharing some experiences and institutions, inevitable for a **common demos**. The prerequisite for European Democracy is not a unitarian state nor new overarching institutions but the feeling of belonging together created by the impression that a Danish shares values with a Greek and a French with a Hungarian.

The precondition for this is an opportunity for Europeans, especially young Europeans to come together. According to the European Commission (2004) 40% of Europeans did not want to learn another foreign language. Apart from age, educational attainment played an important role in the readiness to learn a foreign language, being the prerequisite for common experience (65% of those having left school after 15 did not want to learn another language compared to only 23% of those who were educated until 20 and beyond).

Only few citizens have profited from long term experience in another European country. Asked about the EU achievement they benefited the most from, Citizens rank the possibilities of living, working, and studying in another EU country among the lowest (European Commission 2019). Citizens feel that they benefit more from less border controls when travelling, cheaper calls using a mobile phone and improved consumer rights when buying a product from another country in the EU. This is not to say that the latter, more economic benefits, are no important achievement for the EU. They are a good basis for an economic union, but a weak fundament for a European Democracy because they do not allow for long term experience with people from other EU countries. And here again, opportunities to study, live and work in another EU country is

related with income and educational attainment. This partly explains the schism found in EU support, for example in Germany, between the highly educated which are in favour of the European Union, and integration and see how they profited from it, and those with lower educational attainment and middle class who are more critical, more prone to sympathise with populist opinions on the EU and sense that they have profited less from EU integration or even suffered (Albert et al. 2019).

Hence, the issue we are facing is the following: European Policymaking so far has not provided a sufficient fundament for common experience which would lead to an identification with people from other European countries, which is the prerequisite for a European Demos and hence for European Democracy. In addition, there is a **schism in the feeling of belonging together** between a stratum of highly educated and high-income persons and the socially disadvantaged with lower educational attainment and lower income.

In conclusion this means that a scheme needs to be proposed enabling especially young people to come together, learn foreign languages and exchange with other young Europeans to establish common experiences. Given existing schemes such as Erasmus or the European Solidarity Corps and their deficiencies, a new scheme needs to be more comprehensive and more targeted and adapted to the life reality of the socially disadvantaged.

### B. European experience: Only for the well-educated?

We identified the problem partly by looking at our own biographies and interaction with other Europeans and by analysing the above cited data.

Looking at our own biographies we recognised that interaction with others from European member states was enabled through education, especially studies in other European countries. This, however, means that students who receive less support and encouragement to study abroad, a problem which is not only related to economic but also cultural capital (for a more detailed explanation see El-Mafalaani 2020) and those who opt for vocational training do not have the chance to get in touch with persons from other European countries.

On the other hand, we got in touch with other Europeans through international conferences on political topics such as the framework in which we also developed this proposal. In our opinion, this may serve as suggestive evidence for those being interested in other topics (such as Sports and Arts) having not the same chances on a European experience. This impression is also shared by politicians at communal level, in discussions we had with members of the municipal councils e.g., in Karlsruhe and Nancy and therefore was a further encouragement for developing a solution to tackle this problem.

However, this evidence is of course only suggestive, which is why a further analysis of quantitative data was necessary the results of which are presented in the first part. That is why the twofold approach of examining our own biographies and municipal experience and combining this with the quantitative survey analysis helped not only to identify the problem but also gave some pointers to the design of a solution.

### C. Democracy through a feeling of belonging

The question of why this problem deserves attention was to some extent already answered in the first part. The European Union aims at becoming a political union, and it understands itself to share important values. The perception of sharing values, however, highly depends on common experiences between the human members of this

European Union, for which the EU does not sufficiently provide so far and if at all in a quite unequal way favouring the better of and the highly educated. It is our firm conviction that a European Democracy can only be built upon **the fundament of feeling belonging**, of creating a feeling of togetherness between the European people. If the Conference for the future of Europe therefore wants to be the starting point for the construction of a truly political union, it needs to provide for a European demos. The proposal outlined in the following section may be an important pillar for this construction work.

## II. Offering a broad European experience

### D. The European Civil Action Programme

To counter this problem, we propose the creation of the European Civil Action Program. Its main task shall be to **organise projects aiming at young people between 15 and 30**. Projects may range from voluntary social work, over environmental tasks and manual labour to programming depending on the interests of those who registered. These main projects shall be accompanied by attractive side events (such as excursions to culturally interesting places etc.) and a language course in the language of the country in which the project happens. Participants can only register for projects which do not take place in their home country to guarantee a European experience for everybody.

Concretely the European Civil Action Program is responsible for the organisation and the publication of the programmes on their website. Instead of going through a registration process, those who are interested can just register for a programme which is the most interesting for them. Costs shall be overtaken by the European Union. Evidently, there need to be concrete age restrictions for specific programs. 15-year-olds will need more guidance than adults, which is why the institution is responsible for the care and support of minors. Hence, although the overall institution aims at reaching young people between 15 and 30, **projects need to be designed for specific age groups** paying attention to respective levels of care and skills.

Depending on the availability and motivation of the participants the projects may last between 2 weeks and 12 months. The 2-week time span may be the most interesting for students, who are time constrained through school holidays, whereas those who just finished school and do not want to start working, vocational training or studying may opt for the one year stay so that the European Civil action Program offers projects for every desire.

Many programs of the European Union for the young lack sufficient visibility, which is why one of the specificities of this proposal is European Civil Action Program shall **get in contact directly with local actors**, who work together with the young people. This may be schools, companies offering vocational training, social workers clubs and universities. This guarantees sufficient visibility of the projects. Specifically, the European Union should designate experts among social workers in many places, who can advise young people on programme choices. By getting in touch with social workers the program is also a chance for the socially disadvantaged to profit from the European Union and make friends all over Europe. As the data we have cited show, so far, the socially disadvantaged report that they have not profited from the European Union and are also the least likely to feel a sentiment of belonging together. In addition, the German Youth Welfare offices have called for enlarging projects such as the Freiwilliges Soziales Jahre (FSJ) and Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr (FÖJ) and target it at young people also from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to open new perspectives especially in

the pandemic (Der Spiegel 2021). Hence, the programmes must be explicitly targeted to the socially disadvantaged. This helps to establish a common demos in the European Union but will also have **positive spill-overs for social cohesion in the member states**.

Apart from setting up contacts with local actors, the European Civil Action Program can also rely on an existing infrastructure in some member states and private initiatives. In Germany there is the FSJ and FÖJ, whereas private initiatives such as the Riverdale Foundation are actively looking for support. The institution we plan may use these existing projects, up to now sometimes restricted to nationals, to allow young people from all over the European Union to take part in them. The only criterion would be that our institution can only support stays in another European country than the country of origin to guarantee that everybody can profit from a truly European experience.

In the context of this institution, special attention shall be given to those participating in vocational training. On the one hand, this is because in many, especially Southern European countries where vocational training is less prestigious, participation in the latter is correlated with lower educational attainment. On the other hand, there is to our knowledge no program such as ERASMUS for students at fostering a European network among trainees.

However, such a network has existed in the past. Going back to the Renaissance era it was common that trainees wander around Europe to learn about different approaches from different masters all over Europe. This has several positive effects. Firstly, insights from different masters change perspectives on many problems and may therefore stimulate creativity of trainees especially for manual work, hence also the initial company being responsible for vocational training in the home country would profit from such a programme. Secondly, such as ERASMUS for university students, a European exchange program for trainees enables the **establishment of friendships** and gaining an understanding for different European cultures. Hence, it would perfectly correspond to the goal of fostering a European community as a prerequisite for true European democracy.

Given the differentiated systems of education within the European Union, organising an international exchange seems to be problematic. However, we are convinced that the advantages outweigh the problems. The European Civil Action Program could even lobby for harmonisation of programs for vocational training on a qualitatively high level. As already said before the institution is in contact with companies organising vocational training, which is why they can also collect registrations for exchanges. While firms would pay wages to exchange trainees as they do for normal trainees, financial assistance may not be of primary importance. However, in collaboration with the companies the institution would need to provide advice on the destination country and the company. It may also help to arrange flats for living in the country. To enhance the European experience of the trainees and allow for social contact right from the beginning, The European Civil Action Program is also responsible for organising get-togethers with other exchange trainees in the same city or region.

As suggested by the data presented above language is still a problem but shall not prevent trainees from having their European experience, which is why the European Civil Action Program shall also organise language courses prior to the exchange. Contrary to the main program for young European between 15 and 30, exchange trainees would need to be familiar with the local language right from the start depending on what profession they are preparing for.

After having gained sufficient experience, the European Civil Action Program might then extend its projects also to other beneficiary groups such as the elderly during their pensions or the unemployed. Therefore, the scope of the task of the institution may grow with time. Its core exercise shall be to **bring Europeans together no matter which social characteristics** since without getting together and sharing common experience, the EU can never grow into a truly functioning democracy.

### E. Bonding through living

When thinking about the solution to the problem described above, we thought about what holds people together, we thought about why, even though we travelled through many European countries we feel attachment to some places more than to others, why some places feel more as *Heimat* to us than others. We concluded that this was not because one was born at a particular place or because we spoke a specific dialect or language. We sensed that **belonging together means sharing experiences and building friendships**. With this proposal we want to enable young women and men to make European experience spanning a network of friendship to feel that they belong and owe to a diverse and enriching European community.

### F. Implementation

The feasibility of the project can be seen by many existing national and private initiatives. The German FSJ has been cited as well as the Riverdale foundation. The United States has made good experience with the Civilian Conservation Corps. However, the implementation of the project crucially relies on the attribution of funds to the concrete projects as well as to social workers which propose fitting projects to the beneficiary public. Money, however, should not prevent the EU from investing in its democratic fundament.

When designing the future of Europe, questions of a stronger integration between European member states must be tackled. If the European member states want to grow together, this will entail the transmission of competencies to the supranational level and requires democratic control. **Democratic control does not only rely on the institutional infrastructure. It relies on the understanding of a population, however diverse, to belong together.** The solution aims at the feeling of belonging together and is the necessary condition for European democracy.

It is undeniable that the present proposal features some similarities with ERASMUS and the European Solidarity Corps being both successful programmes. We want to build on this success but also propose a novel dimension to the quest. First and foremost, ERASMUS and the European Solidarity Corps are not designed to foster Republican values among the European citizens. By construction they can only contribute little to a feeling of togetherness among the European citizens by overcoming national frontiers as well as social class barriers. Profiting from ERASMUS depends on educational attainment, and even if there is monetary support by the European Union, participation in ERASMUS correlates with high income and high cultural capital. Hence it allows for an exchange between the highly educated, prone to become high income earners within the EU. Our programme on the other hand brings young people (and upon extension people from different age groups) together to construct their Europe. It is primarily not a programme of fostering intercultural education, but a programming bringing together Europeans under a common roof to engage in tasks they consider worthy.

This, one might argue is also the task of the European Solidarity Corps, creating togetherness and a common European feeling already by its focus on solidarity. However, the European Solidarity Corps fails on the scope. It organises programmes up to four months, especially in regions in need for economic support less discovered by young Europeans than commonly known holiday destinations. It is a nice opportunity to spend a summer. The project we offer carries several advantages over the European Solidarity Corps. Firstly, our proposal shall be embedded in the local infrastructure of community and social work in European countries and will therefore be more reactive to the beneficiary's public desires and can thus better motivate young people with all social backgrounds to join the programme. Secondly, it shall not be limited to summer stays. With the programme targeted at vocational training we want to set the fundament for more ambitious projects, bringing together not only young people but also the elderly, unemployed people, manual workers. Because **Democracy is about building a place of coming together** – an agora. Thirdly, by its experience with many projects. The institution will also be able to concentrate knowledge and establish best practices. Launching an institution overseeing many projects and learning from best practices makes for a more successful future than a group of unrelated projects.

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## Out of Brussels, Into Europe

### Netherlands Country Team: Fee Kirsch, Stella Letschert, Nino de Lange, Michiel Hoornick

Before you lies the final deliverable of the Country Team of the Netherlands, to be presented at the plenary session of the EUth for Democracy Project on Saturday 24 April 2021. We are a group of five students and young professionals currently living in three different European countries (Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands). Our backgrounds range from economics, defence, law and governance. Based on our different experiences of living and travelling through Europe, we understand how connected our lives are to that of fellow Europeans. The market economy, climate change policies and vaccination strategies affect us both directly and indirectly; and are all part of a wider effort that transgresses the Italian, Belgian or Dutch borders we live in. It does not take much imagination to see that despite the differing national contexts, approaches and sensitivities - we are in fact dealing with *European* issues. Do we, as citizens of the European Union (EU), however perceive these issues to be typically European? As a starting point for this deliverable, we observe a disconnect between the common issues that we as a union are facing - and public opinion at the national level.

Issues that European media outlets cover on the news, are mostly brought through a national perspective. In consideration of the Future of Europe<sup>1</sup>, there is the need to recognize that the everyday reality of one member state (say, Sweden's wave of forest fires) is connected to the everyday reality of that in another member state (of say, air pollution in Austria). This is why we propose to establish **a network of journalists who bring local European perspectives to national European news programmes**. The network's sole task is to produce add-on segments on a variety of topics that national media platforms can make use of. In Part I, we explain how we arrived at the problem we wish to tackle. In Part II, we present our idea and elaborate on the defining characteristics of our proposal. We identify cross-border curiosity and an increased sense of European identity as benefits to our proposal.

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<sup>1</sup> Our proposal is designed in the run-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). With this paper, we wish to contribute to the debate on the EU media landscape and EU correspondence.



## PART I - PROBLEM DEFINITION

### “Nationalizing” European news

As the mayor of the Dutch city of Breda, Mr. Paul Depla notes during the first *EUth for Democracy Engage Track Webinar*: ‘Citizens want to be involved in issues that impact them directly’.<sup>2</sup> When we however look at how Europe is reported in member states’ news segments, ‘the focus seems to be not so much on European issues – as on the EU legislative process’, albeit Politico reporter Jacopo Barigazzi.<sup>3</sup> Yet not unlike local themes, EU issues directly impact the lives of its 450 million citizens. This is where the interest and knowledge gap of European affairs amongst EU-citizens comes into play. Too often, as *The Guardian*-correspondent Natalie Nougayrade notes, ‘Europe’ is equated with the ‘Brussels bubble’ where members of national governments meet.<sup>4</sup> What is left is media reports on events from a mostly *national* point of view.

European news reporting knows a long and diverse history. Each of the 27 member states has its own channels and programmes that cater to specific audiences. Style, length and - not to be forgotten: humor - is country specific. By promoting media exchange across Europe, it is in no way suggested to standardize news reporting schemes in a one-EU-way format. Rather, the objective is to counter the dominant national lens of news reporting in today’s European media landscape. Because

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Depla (2020) Statement during the EUth for Democracy Engage Track Webinar: When are Democracies Legitimate?

<sup>3</sup> Jacopo Barigazzi (2021) Statement during the EUth for Democracy Engage Track Webinar: How to Form Consensus in a Democracy?

<sup>4</sup> Nina Rijnerse (2021) *Koffiehuis Europa* (trans. *Coffeehouse Europe*): <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/koffiehuis-europa>.

explaining the matters at hand from a national reporter in the context of a national country, prevents the possibility to view an issue broadly and refinedly. Additionally; the ability to learn from other member states! In such a way, it can happen that even though we are one Union - we tend to focus on the narrow effects specific to our own country.

## PART II - THE SOLUTION

### Bringing local European stories to your home

For more easy-access and fun everyday European media content, we propose to create a **network of local journalists to produce a (weekly) 10 minute local euronews segment** that can be added to existing local and national media programs. The idea is that these thematically changing snapshots offer fellow Europeans a quick peek into the lives of (far-away or close-by) neighbours. In this way, a maximum number of people get a piece of Europe on their media '*plat du jour*'. Local journalists will be central in developing content, as we want to go beyond national narratives and instead focus on regional and local stories. This ensures a broader perspective that not only goes beyond the headlines but also beyond the nationalist framing of news and events. The content of these segments will consist primarily of street interviews and reporting, but will also provide comical relief and informative snippets. The goal is that Europeans hear from different parts of Europe every week, covering capitals and the countryside. What we observed on national media outlets, asking bystanders on the street about issues that occupy the weekly news cycle is a popular way to poll the public opinion and bring the national and regional discussion in an accessible language. Doing this on a Europe-wide scale, but through national tv channels, will contribute to a broader sense of 'Europeanness' in everyday life.



### The philosophy behind the idea

Fundamental to our proposed solution is the hypothesis of the 'filter bubble' effect.<sup>5</sup> Representing a state of intellectual isolation, this effect explains why politically diverging groups are not able to find ground for common understanding. The filter bubble effect works through a mechanism of biased information provision and is a tried concept that contains a mechanism that we both propose to harness yet hope to

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<sup>5</sup> Brent Kitchens, et al. (2020) Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: The Impact of Social Media.

mitigate through its use<sup>6</sup>. It might be an impossible undertaking or a naïve ideal to strive for holistic information coverage. But we aim to fight this mechanism by offering a wider pool of sources and thus perspectives.

### Using the lens for good

Influencing the perception of information knows gradations on a spectrum. On one side of the spectrum is information manipulation. This is a negatively perceived form of information filtering. It implies active engagement with the information at hand through the fabrication of facts and experiences. We like to focus on the other side of the spectrum and focus on the more passive modalities in which access to information and views on that information are facilitated. We identified this solution by looking at the media landscape in the Netherlands where television shows that bring the current affairs to the broader people have been found to be able to actively communicate with a broader public as well as influence, on occasion, agenda setting or even policy making. This mechanism we intend to harness in our proposed solution.

### Fighting the lens of bad

At the same time media outlets that introduce biases through active manipulation or cherry picking of facts are increasingly regarded as sources of political instability. Those that see merit in information based theories of political influence propose that through widening the media landscape and offering more perspectives on the same issues, we might be able to educate citizens better and as such enable them to make better informed decisions. This is the same idea underlying the Erasmus+ enterprise. As such we hypothesise that by providing media coverage through the lenses of the different European member states' citizens we can be able to create better understanding and more support for the Union.

### What will this look like in practise?

The most important aim in this project is that the weekly news segments are light, easy-to-make and easy to access. What do we mean by this?

**Light:** Our number 1 requirement is that the content is light and funny. If a week is dealing with a heavier topic, we aim to make it as entertaining and digestible as possible. The length of the show is intentionally short for minimum time investment by the audience. Ten minutes allow just enough time to offer real content and nobody can say they don't have 10 min in a day/week. Instead of the dry lecturing mode that we often find in relation to EU content, we want to offer tongue in cheek jokes and

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<sup>6</sup> A detailed discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. Suggested further reading: Natalie Jomini Stroud (2011) Niche News: The Politics of News Choice.

refreshing statements from Europeans that don't make it to other country's national news shows.

**Easy-to-make:** Next, the segment format is designed to be adaptable to both low and high budgets. Instead of starting big and setting up a pan european broadcasting station, we want to rely on already existing local and national journalists and their stations. In that way we can start with a collaboration between 3-5 different countries and slowly expand the network around the news segments. By financially supporting a few journalists at the head of this network, we ensure that the coordination and production runs smoothly. Building this network of both local and national journalists and their (home) broadcasting station, will ensure a self-sustaining long term partnership that could result in many other cool media projects about what it means to be European.

**Easy access:** We aim for tv broadcasting where possible, because we want to involve a broad demographic that is not exposed to Euronews and foreign press on the daily. Of course, we do not aim to involve all countries from the start, but we want to kick off this initiative with a handful of countries and slowly expand with more national networks and journalistic ties. We believe that using existing programs and adding our segment to these established and trusted news services will greatly benefit the viewing numbers. Naturally, for member states that do not have a tv connection yet, the program can be watched via the official Youtube channel.

#### What content can we expect?

We want to highlight crossborder problems and their crossborder solutions. This way we successfully display the immense diversity in opinion and in approach in different countries when it comes to solving problems that concern all Europeans. The content is aimed to create a better understanding of our neighbours struggles and successes. So one episode could deal with tax evasion, another with the wolves returning to many European countries. Yet another could take 10 minutes to look at how different countries deal with animal welfare in intensive livestock farming. For all of these topics, there would be a street interview part and an informative rundown by a journalist. Other topics we are considering: biking infrastructure, drugs & organized crime, youth unemployment.

#### What content will not be featured

It's important to stress that this show will stay away from centering around the EU institution. While they may have a supporting role, the main goal is to get in contact with ordinary citizens. Furthermore, we want to emphasise that the show has a neutral position towards the EU. Even if the EU is the sponsor of the network we want to be an independent voice for the European people.

## Pilot to the first episode: a short timeline

As an example of how our idea in practice would look like, figure 1 describes the pilot that we propose. Each episode will be made by a team of journalists on rotation. The coordinator of the network will discuss and decide on this week's topic and reach out to around 2-5 country journalists that suit the theme best. They work together on the script and set out to collect street interviews. The sketches and stunts are co authored and later filmed in the most convenient available location.



### Description of a plot

9 minutes informative

The presenter of the 'hosting' country of that week's episode introduces today's topic. \*this is a designated journalist from the Member State where it is streamed\* He will bounce back the mic to the \*international/local\* journalist during the show.

Two kids read the eurobarometer that matches today's topic: *paternity leave*. (Topical because earlier that week the European Parliament had announced some changes) The tone is set.

Back to the presenter, who makes a lighthearted comment about all his colleagues who were on the streets of Europe trying to find out what people think about that week's topic

Queue to the map of Europe (important because this way even people who 'forgot' where certain smaller european cities are, learn their location in Europe) This week we zoom in onto Coimbra, Ljubljana, Lundt and Tallinn.

A journalist on the street asked locals in the designated cities about what it means to them to be a young father and to (not) get to spend time with your children.

Back to the map, back to the streets, this repeats itself until we have enough opinions.

Presenter gives a concluding remark (possibly connects it to EU the institutions, but only if it's not too heavy)

1 minute entertainment

Sketches about the topic. Graphic touring bus through Europe. Maybe a joke on a joke about country stereotypes.

## Conclusion

Throughout this proposal we have shown the relevance, feasibility and innovativeness of our project. For clarity, let us conclude by highlighting all three one last time.

**Relevance:** As set out in Part I, we observe a lack of understanding of the different and common issues across the national border. Combatting the 'Filter Bubble' that we described earlier, forms the basis and inspiration of our project. The value of our proposal does not derive from the European institutions. Rather, its relevance is created by creating an understanding between the citizens that make the European Union.

**Innovativeness:** So far no comparable project like ours exists. In the media landscape, we see cross-European cooperation schemes among newspapers, online European media outlets such as Politico and Euronews, media translation services, subregional media platforms (Balkan, Nordic), financial funding and journalism prizes. The gap we aim to fill, however, is that of pan-European local news - local stories with a clear importance from a European level - brought to Europe's citizens. We also miss the personal touch in European news. Too often, news is brought to the political level and covered in Brussels jargon, whereas the issues that are the heart of it have a direct effect on European citizens.

**Feasibility:** We propose to slowly build the network of journalists and move forward as a '*lean start-up*'.<sup>7</sup> Essential to this idea is both experimenting and realistic thinking. Keeping our core idea in mind, we want to try out different pilots and see what works best. Starting small, we believe that we can convince the necessary partners to make this a wide-scale success.

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<sup>7</sup> Harvard Business Review (2013) *Why the Lean Start-Up Changes Everything*: <https://hbr.org/2013/05/why-the-lean-start-up-changes-everything>.

*'La soledad se admira y desea cuando no se sufre,  
pero la necesidad humana de compartir cosas es evidente'*

*'Solitude is admired and desired when one does not suffer,  
but the human need to share things is evident.'*

Carmen Martín Gaité (1925 - 2000)

Project proposal for

## A European Strategy for Mental Health

Establishing a long-term framework to tackle the 'second pandemic'

18 April 2021

Madrid, Spain

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## 1. The Issue: Loneliness and the Neglect of Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the deteriorating levels of mental health in Europe and unveiled its 'silent killer'<sup>1</sup>: loneliness. In 2018, it was estimated that more than 30 million people in the EU frequently feel lonely<sup>2</sup> and in the first six months of 2020, feelings of loneliness in Europe tripled<sup>3</sup>. In the case of Spain, an estimated 6.4 percent of the Spanish population were referred to mental health professionals during the first 12 months of the pandemic, with four out of five people reporting symptoms of extreme anxiety or depression<sup>4</sup>. The **unseen public health crisis of loneliness**<sup>5</sup> has been exacerbated by social isolation measures introduced to limit the spread of COVID-19<sup>6</sup>, which has seen citizens suffer from severe psychiatric symptoms associated with increased sentiments of loneliness<sup>7</sup>. It is often said that Europe is forged in times of crises thus, if a better future is to be forged in a post-pandemic world, coordinated action is needed at the European level to cope with the impending 'second pandemic' of mental health<sup>8</sup>, to tackle social inequalities and to safeguard European democracy.

Young people and the elderly have been disproportionately impacted by loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is well documented that young people have been more prone to suffer from mental health issues since lockdown measures began<sup>9</sup> and, in Spain, the number of young people suffering from loneliness has more than doubled in comparison to 2019<sup>10</sup>. Amidst the worst economic recession since World War II<sup>11</sup> and a job market in which citizens aged 55 and over are two-to-three times more likely to find a job than young Europeans<sup>12</sup>, it is now more important than ever to support and invest in mental health and particularly in youth, lest young people 'may never fully recover' from the crushing effects of the pandemic<sup>13</sup>. A growing body of literature reinforces the **close relationship between democracy and mental health**<sup>14</sup> and if Europe is to strengthen its democracy, this process should not be separated from supporting the well-being and health of its citizens.

A well-functioning democracy relies on an informed, engaged and healthy citizenry able to participate in social, political and economic dimensions of society. Loneliness transcends discomfort and isolation; **loneliness can negate commitment, reduce eagerness to participate in democratic processes and actively feed political disaffection**<sup>15</sup>. As things stand in Europe, many citizens find themselves more isolated and disconnected from their communities than ever before, faced with various hurdles that impede civic rights, participation in democratic life and access to critical economic and social support. The continued inability of Member States to address the social, political and structural inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the need for coordinated action on mental health at the European level<sup>16</sup>. Currently, we are certainly *not* all in this together.

Progress has been made in the EU in recognising the threats posed by loneliness for mental health but little-to-no concrete action has been taken at the European level. In the 2021 Green paper on ageing, the Commission recognises the importance of considering 'the causes of and impacts of loneliness in policy making' concerning the elderly<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, President von der Leyen became the first President of the Commission to mention the words 'mental health' in a State of the Union address in 2020<sup>18</sup>, albeit in the context of the environment. Despite an online conference on mental health being organised by the Commission in the lead-up to an important 2021 Global Health Summit, loneliness is notably absent from the priorities of both the online event and the summit itself<sup>19</sup>. Likewise, even though the European Commission has convened a number of reports touching upon mental health issues since the turn of the millennium, **scarce legislative action has been taken at the European level** and the only significant document

remains the 2006 Green paper on improving mental health.

The 2006 Green paper highlighted the ‘significant losses and burdens to the economic, social, educational as well as criminal and justice systems’ caused by poor mental health<sup>20</sup>. It recognised that ‘a comprehensive strategy on mental health does not yet exist at Community level’ but, if it did, ‘[it] would strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of current and future initiatives’<sup>21</sup>. The 2008 European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being built upon the forward-looking principles of the green paper and, among other things, recognised the need for coordinated action on mental health at a European level with the assistance of stakeholders from a wide range of sectors<sup>22</sup>. To this day, these are the only dedicated comprehensive documents that the Commission has released on mental health. Although a 2018 Science for Policy Brief recognised the unequal burden of loneliness in Europe, the document fails to propose concrete action and merely calls for more research and consideration to be given to loneliness for future evidence-based policymaking<sup>23</sup>.

**European institutions do not regularly gather, research or compile measurable data at present on the state of mental health of European citizens.** Although the European Commission, the EU ScienceHub<sup>24</sup> and occasional Special Eurobarometers have touched upon the subject in the past, the lack of comprehensive, longitudinal data on mental health in Europe undermines international research, complicates the initiation of European legislative processes and disregards the threat of loneliness to the health of citizens and European democracy. It is high time that loneliness is treated with the urgency a ‘silent killer’ deserves and not as an unfortunate, temporary social inconvenience.

## 2. The Solution: A European Strategy for Mental Health

A European-wide strategy for mental health is required to ensure that loneliness does not become the forgotten crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to create a sufficiently informed, comprehensive and visible strategy, two key steps have been identified:

1. Researching and evaluating the state of mental health in Europe;
2. Launching a European Strategy for Mental Health.

### Step 1: Researching and evaluating the state of mental health in Europe

In order to grasp the depth and scale of the mental health crisis, **the collection of empirical data at the European level relating to mental health is needed.** The acquisition of empirical data exploring levels of loneliness across EU Member States should be included in this process. The 2006 Green paper on improving mental health, previous policy briefings from EU institutions and the relevant Special Eurobarometer surveys on mental health carried out (editions 248 and 345) demonstrate the competence of the EU for action at the European level. The benefits of collecting measurable empirical data on mental health are threefold: to measure the pulse of European opinion and stimulate discussion on mental health, to guarantee up-to-date quantifiable data at the European level while establishing reliable European data comparability, and to enable Pan-european research to feed into information policy at the European level that can inform policy documents such as the Communication on a European Strategy for Mental Health proposed in this document.

The **creation of centralised European data collection processes on mental health** would provide added-value to national health information systems while establishing a comprehensive European framework to feed into proportionate, informed action on mental health. Not only would dedicated European data collection processes enable EU institutions to better assess increased levels of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, it would empower the EU to better evaluate and respond to future mental health crises.

The European Commission Eurobarometer surveys present the ideal opportunity to carry out pan-European longitudinal data collection processes on mental health. **The Standard Eurobarometer survey should incorporate a dedicated segment on mental health and include questions measuring loneliness.** The inclusion of dedicated questions on mental health and loneliness in the (biannual) Standard Eurobarometer surveys would recognise that the irregular Special Eurobarometers carried out previously on mental health were insufficient for the comprehensive research needed to inform European policymaking.

**The European Commission should carry out a Special Eurobarometer on Loneliness by the end of 2022** to assess the short-, mid- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on loneliness in Europe. The realisation of a Special Eurobarometer on Loneliness would, alongside the introduction of a Minister for Loneliness in the United Kingdom in 2018<sup>25</sup> and in Japan in 2021<sup>26</sup>, mark a historic moment in the struggle to combat loneliness. Previous Eurobarometers exploring mental health have placed a disproportionate focus on physical symptoms and emphasised the economic cost and visible aspects of mental health, thus future Eurobarometer research must also ensure that psychological and emotional symptoms are recognised in their questions and that mental health issues are not kept invisible.

Through establishing longitudinal empirical research processes on mental health and loneliness, EU institutions would acquire sufficient data and information to take action at the European level and introduce a European Strategy for Mental Health.

## **Step 2: Launching a European Strategy for Mental Health**

The Commission should **publish a Communication on a European Strategy for Mental Health by 2023**. Principles 9 and 10 of the *European Pillar of Social Rights* establish the right to work-life balance and a healthy, safe and adapted working environment respectively, which should be remembered when drafting a common European strategy. A citizen-centric approach should be adopted that places citizens, European decision-makers and civil society organisations on equal footing as co-policymakers. Deliberative democratic methods such as citizens' dialogues and innovative e-democracy tools<sup>27</sup> offer the opportunity, alongside a comprehensive pan-European social media campaign, to empower citizens to share their views, recommendations and experiences surrounding an array of different mental health topics. It is particularly important that citizens who have experienced loneliness or mental health associated issues, as well as relevant civil society organisations, are supported in taking an active role in this drafting process.

The short-term goals of a European strategy for mental health would be influenced by the extensive research realised at the European level (see Step 1) and contribute towards **identifying common priorities to foster the well-being and mental health of European citizens**. Critical and contemporary health issues, such as the sharp increase in feelings of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, should be addressed in the strategy. Furthermore, the specificities of Member States and their different social welfare systems should be taken into account to encourage proportionate investment and commitments to access, effectiveness and support for mental health care.

The long-term aim of a common European Strategy for Mental Health is **to implement legislative change to tackle loneliness and mental health associated issues**. Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU states that public health is a shared competence between the EU and Member States, enabling the Commission to legislate proportionately with respect for subsidiarity in order to support efficient and sustainable health systems and to facilitate access to better and safer healthcare while keeping citizens healthy. With this competence in mind, the Commission should consider introducing a Regulation establishing a

European Agency for Mental Health if irregular application and consideration of a common European Strategy for Mental Health emerges among Member States.

The Communication on a European Strategy for Mental Health should consider the following pillars of mental health, in no particular order:

**1 - Cultivating Mental Health through Education.** A Europe that cultivates civic knowledge of mental health topics and facilitates an environment for mental health issues to be discussed without shame or stigma should be encouraged. Educational campaigns should be directed towards establishing a culture of self care and mental health support should be provided in state institutions including, but not limited to, schools, universities, prisons and healthcare facilities. When the direct involvement of mental health professionals is not possible for citizens, an effective, timely referral mechanism should be established. Coupled with this, a robust communications strategy at the European level should be launched to stimulate transnational discussion on mental health and to tackle the stigmatisation and discrimination of mental health.

**2 - Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace.** A Europe is needed that invests in the well-being, support mechanisms and health of its labour force. Member States should be encouraged to better monitor labour practices that have a detrimental impact on the mental health of workers, such as establishing specific programmes to preserve work-life balance and prevent discrimination, intimidation or harassment in the workplace. To achieve this goal, a revision of the 2010/18/EU Work-Life Balance Directive should be considered by the Commission through the form of an implementing act in order to reflect the social and economic realities of the gig economy<sup>28</sup>. A threshold of maximum overtime hours for employees per day should be promoted and regular employee well-being evaluation processes should form a compulsory part of internal reporting processes and a prerequisite for access to governmental funds or subsidies. The Commission should also build upon the European Parliament Resolution to introduce the **right to disconnection**<sup>29</sup>, reiterating that the EU is a project that celebrates fundamental human rights and rejects an emerging culture of constant availability demanded by employers.

**3 - Right to Mental Health Support.** Mental health support should form a central aspect of the support given to unemployed citizens, persons without stable housing or undocumented residents at national and European levels. The Commission should promote a holistic, intersectional approach free of judgement to mental health support and emphasise the fundamental right for all citizens to seek, access and receive mental health support irrespective of their background and without detriment to their personal and professional life.

**4 - European Resilience: Fighting Loneliness Together.** The EU should treat loneliness as an issue of policy, encouraging Member States to adopt national legislation addressing loneliness. Adoption of loneliness strategies could include initiatives to enable everyday services to connect with people at risk of loneliness, strengthening local infrastructure, developing community spaces and ensuring that loneliness is considered in the housing and planning system; reducing stigma, supporting community groups and promoting digital inclusion.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the declining levels of mental health in Europe and brought the public health crisis of loneliness to the fore. In order to steer through the COVID-19 pandemic and realise the fair, green and digital European future envisaged in the Conference on the Future of Europe<sup>30</sup>, European democracy requires an engaged citizenry whose health and

rights are promoted and protected. Through incorporating regular surveys evaluating mental health and loneliness at the European level and implementing a coordinated European Strategy for Mental Health, the European Commission would bolster social inclusion, consolidate European democracy and construct a more informed, resilient Europe better equipped to navigate future crises.

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## **Education and Participation: the Pillars of Democracy**

**Team Sweden: Ardit Hysa, Elena Baschieri, Rolf Kusch, Tove Sternehill**

### **Introduction to the Issue**

The issue we have identified is connected to inclusion and identity among EU citizens. There is a lack of awareness and information about the tools that are available for citizens of the Union to participate in the complex transnational democracy that is the EU, which in turn undermines the transparency and legitimacy of the European democracy and its institutions. In addition, this impedes the creation of a European identity, as people are less inclined to identify with a system they do not understand or have access to. Our aim is to address this problem by focusing on increasing the access of information and participation for all EU citizens.

The lack of access to information is especially problematic in peripheral areas and for demographic groups who lack access to digital sources of information. The reliance on websites and social media, and the excessive use of technocratic language, makes it difficult for a significant proportion of the EU population to access this information, let alone understand it. This is a problem that the EU needs to address in order to be able to reach its citizens.

A report from the PEW Research Centre (2019) shows that 62% of all Europeans believe that the leadership in Brussels does not understand the needs of its citizens, which exemplifies the issue of trust and alignment within the EU population. This disconnection is visible in a report from the EU (2018) which shows that 35% of the EU citizens identify themselves by their nationality only, 55% of them define themselves first by their own nationality and then by their European citizenship, only 6% define themselves first as European citizen and then by their own nationality, and only 2% would solely define themselves as European citizen.

Our experience from Sweden is that the European Union is seen as one of many multinational organisations, which is purely political, rather than an identity or something that the citizens themselves are participators of. This can be seen within the Swedish education system and in mainstream media debates, which are prone to have a focus on national-, bilateral-, or global issues. It is amplified by the perceived distance between the citizens and the discussions that take place within the EU Parliament.

We believe that it is important to address these problems of information, transparency, and inclusion by providing information that is accessible to all EU citizens. By improving the general understanding of the Union and the tools that are available for participation, we aim to increase the overall engagement, strengthen the EU-consciousness, and improve the European democratic system and its community as a whole. It is our goal to support the trend that shows that younger generations feel more attached to the European Union (European Union, 2018) because we understand that creating a cohesive community takes time. Therefore, we believe that it is important to invest in the future by providing the current and future generations with the necessary information and tools to navigate through the EU democratic system and address contemporary issues, which will increase the legitimacy of the EU and its institutions.

## Solving this Issue

We believe in the notion that the simplest solution is almost always the best, and we have therefore strived to come up with simple but effective solutions to our problem – which in part is caused by the complexity of the EU system. We have hence identified two solutions that would increase the access to information and participation in the European Union's institutions.

## Solution 1: Writing a Children's Book

Our first solution is directed to the future generations and comes in the form of a children's book. This book is meant to inform and prepare European youths to get involved with its democratic values from an early age. Membership in the European society is not something a person is born with; it is something you gain by participating in said society. A child's identity is determined by its interactions with others and the cultural values it engages with, which is learned through a symbolic system of codes and metaphors (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 148-157). These codes determine the feeling of belonging, awareness, and identity. Thus, the question becomes: How can we expose the next generation to comprehensible information and enable them to explore and understand their role in the European democracy and society? How do we provide them with the opportunity to engage and develop an identity as a European?

Several studies have shown that books have an important role in the development of children's early literacy and personality. As children read, they acquire a tremendous amount of topical knowledge, they learn how to create imaginary worlds beyond the boundaries of space and time, and they discover the power of the written language (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Durkin, 1966; Wells, 1985). Therefore, we think that a children's book focused on the values and conceptual tools associated with democracy can be an asset in encouraging greater participation in future generations of Europeans. This book would include data that represents both the centre and periphery of the Union, providing easy access to information that will embed the basic idea of the EU democracy in the consciousness of both children and their parents.

## How

The context of the book will be determined first, from the data gathered across the EU on the needs of the citizens and second on the scientific literature on how to create a future generation rooted in the basic idea of democracy. We suggest that chapters should be concerned with topics such as: culture and values, history, the rule of law, institutions, and what the EU does for its citizens. The writing will be done through the cooperation of authors from all over the Union in order to provide a broader perspective and representativeness.

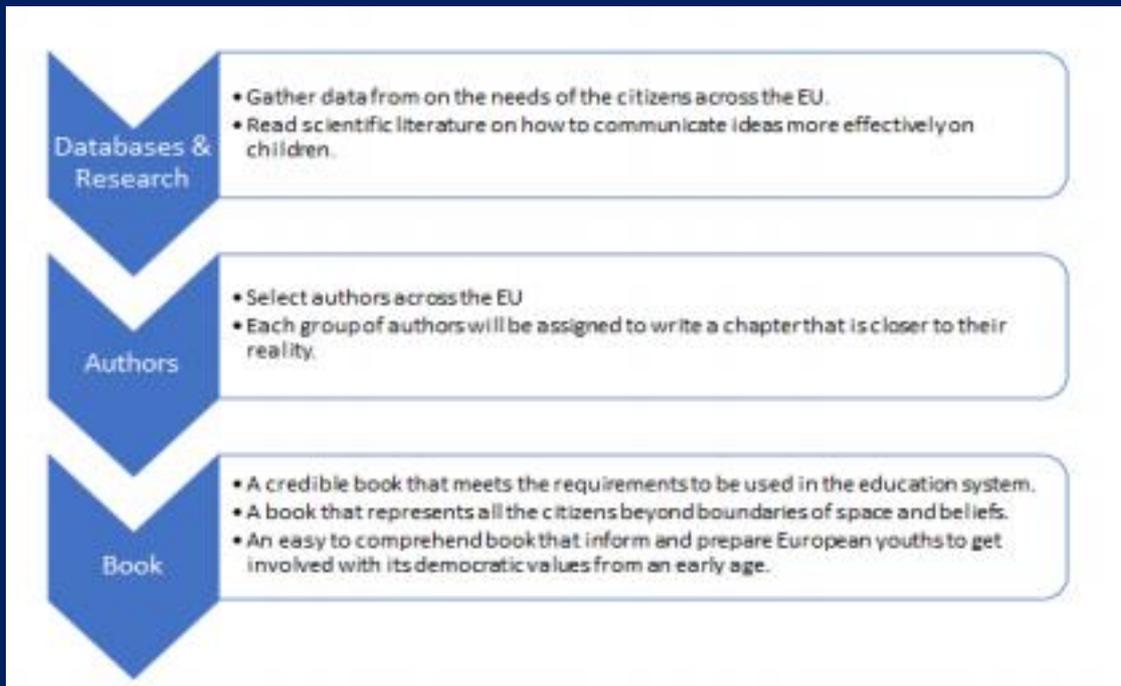
## Mission

The mission of the book is to reach standards that can place it within the primary education system of the Member States. By having shared information and values across all the

countries, a more unified consciousness will be achieved.

## Vision

Our vision is that in the future, more series of books with the same mission will be generated and spread across the EU in order to make citizens more aware and homogenize periphery with the centre.



## Identifying the Solution

There were two factors that helped us to identify this solution. First, the diversity of nationalities within our group enabled us to notice how different our conceptions of the EU and its democratic system is. These core differences are embedded in us through our participation in the educational system and our social interactions in our countries. We also realised how different the distance to the Union is perceived depending on where you live in Sweden. The second factor is that one member of our team works at a Swedish elementary school, where he has noticed that the awareness of the EU and the notion of belonging to the European Community is almost absent. By combining the first and the second factor, we concluded that there is a significant difference in how EU values and democracy are taught across Europe. Increasing the awareness throughout the Union could create a greater alignment within the EU.

## Relevance

We believe that increased awareness and understanding of the EU is key in order to create a greater sense of belonging among its citizens. This will in turn increases the interest to participate in the European democracy.

## Innovativeness

While there is nothing innovative in a book per se, a couple of words in the right order can produce the greatest innovation in history. The innovativeness is in the book's context, which aims to tackle the lack of awareness in the EU by emphasizing the impact of active participation in its institutions. By writing an easy-to-read, modern book based on data gathered on the needs of people, you enable the formation of the next generation of citizens that identify as Europeans.

## Feasibility

Practically writing and publishing a book is not difficult. Since the issue we are tackling is at every level, from national to local, the advantage of the book is that it can reach everyone in the Union due to the lack of technological barriers. This makes the solution fully inclusive and easy to implement. In addition, one could consider developing more interactive and technological versions of the book for citizens with such preference or disabilities impacting their ability to read, such as: audio books or electronic books.

## Solution 2: The Citizens' Lobby

We propose the creation of a website customised to cross-platform interaction with a mobile application, through which all EU citizens over the age of eighteen can participate in what we have decided to call the "**Citizens' Lobby**". The idea is grounded in a frustration of the strong influence lobbyism has on the decision making in the EU and is an attempt to amplify the voices of the citizens to increase their participation, which would ultimately strengthen the European democracy. Our team would argue that the current website for petitions is lacking in two regards – its user-friendliness and its distance to the decision-making process. Citizens over the age of 18 would be able to create a private account (connected to their social security number and form of identity confirmation to prevent fake accounts) where they can post ideas that they would like the European Parliament to bring up for discussion. The ideas will be monitored by moderators to screen if they are eligible according to formal requirements. Once approved, these ideas would then be open for other citizens to sign on to, which would work as a petition that is automatically sent to the Parliament after they have reached the number of signatures needed. Municipalities should provide public computers and technological support for citizens who require access and assistance (such as the elderly and people who are inexperienced with technology). The system would have a cutting-edge search engine and allow users to stream the plenaries in good quality. Making it cross-platform would allow people to use the media they prefer. It would also entail a more direct influence on the European democracy, as the petitions that gather enough support would form the agenda of a special monthly plenary at the European Parliament, rather than going through the Petitions Committee. The aim here is to engage EU citizens to take a more active part in our democracy by removing existing barriers between citizens and the Parliament.

The Citizens' Lobby will be a pilot project that has the potential to replace the current Petitions system in the long run. Indeed, we believe that with this new instrument it is easier to create, find, and share ideas and therefore we agree that it is more efficient than the one in place. However, this change would need an inevitable transition period for the education of the

moderators and the creation of an effective procedure respectful of the EU regulations. During this period, these two systems would coexist by empowering the citizens even more, by giving them the possibility to be part of the Union's decision-making process throughout different tools.

## Identifying the Solution

The diversity of nationalities in our team means that we have grown up with different views and relationships to the EU. In our early discussions on what issues the European democracy faces, a discussion was brought up regarding the vote in the European Parliament for whether vegetarian food should be able to be referred to by its shape – burgers, sausages et cetera. This sparked a debate between us, where those who have grown up with a stronger EU-identity understood the reasoning behind bringing it up in the parliament while the more critical side saw it as a good argument for why the European democracy is broken, due to the strong influence of lobbying groups. This led us to the realisation that, regardless of what side you are on, the legitimacy of the EU democracy is harmed if parts of its population do not have faith in the system. This, in turn, led us to a discussion on how this perception could be changed, how we could strengthen the legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of its sceptics – which led us to the creation of the Citizens' Lobby.

## Relevance

Legitimacy is a crucial part of a democratic system, and we believe that it is possible to strengthen the belief in the European democracy by increasing the involvement of its citizens. Further, this would decrease the distance between the people and the decision-making process, which could enhance their sense of belonging to the Union and its values, principles, and ideas. All in all, we claim that making the citizens feel like a fundamental cog in the EU machine would enhance the efficiency of the entire system.

## Innovativeness

The innovativeness of this solution is the tech behind the system, which would replace the current website that we find to be complicated and time-consuming to use, making it an inefficient tool. We believe that the possibility to express our preferences through an application is a fast and intuitive instrument that produces immediate outcomes.

## Feasibility

The feasibility of this solution lies in that it enables a higher participation of the EU citizens by implementing a system that already exists. The goal is to adapt to the changing world, integrating with an app which is available to smartphones, making the engagement in petitions as simple as scrolling through social media. This solution would involve three steps:



Creating the app and  
website



Educating the  
moderators



Establishing a monthly  
citizens' plenary

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