

TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF "DEMOCRACY". WHAT IS KEEPING THE PUBLIC FROM ENGAGING AND HOW CAN THIS BE REMEDIED IN TODAY'S E.U.?

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Certain facts that seem to me incontrovertible have direct bearing on the subject matter of this article:

Fact 1: Europe despite its multitude of variable problems is still as safe and as prosperous a haven as one could probably hope for in today's tumultuous and often confusing world. We, European citizens, when we compare our situation with that of most other regions, an activity, perhaps, which it would serve us to engage in a little more than we do, we might be forgiven for a degree of self-satisfied smugness. Especially if we pay heed to the statistical data that is readily available and which show that our level of democracy, our living standards and generally our quality of life far outweigh those of most other regions in the world.

Fact 2: Despite this relatively satisfactory state of affairs there is still widespread discontent with the European Union on the part of the citizens and a noticeable "distancing" particularly of the young from both national and E.U. political affairs even though there are signs both in the most recent European parliamentary elections, in Britain (8 June) and France (11 June) that this trend may be beginning to change.

The question that begs to be asked here is why this apparent incongruity arises.

Possible answers might be found in three distinct directions:

1. In the complacency created by several decades of peace and cooperation among European nations and the many benefits of the EU being taken for granted
2. In the pan-European "sport" of Union bashing which is among the most favoured by political personnel across the Union.
3. In the gradual shift in the meaning of what contemporary Europeans seem to accept as a "satisfactory level of participatory democracy" and their increasing sophistication and, consequently, expectations in that context.

The first point speaks for itself and needs no clarification. As for the second, it is quite easy to understand why national governments and in general political powers go in for Union bashing. The further removed (and so far unwilling to fight back) EU establishment is the perfect scapegoat for

their own mistakes. Pre -Brexit, there was no discussion or understanding of the possible dangers of laying national failures at the door of Europe and/or greatly exaggerating its undeniably bureaucratic nature and its lack of direct democracy while taking no steps to actually remedy the situation.

This is not to say Brussels makes no mistakes itself or that there is little room for improvement even though there have been gradual improvements in both the level of bureaucracy and the matter of the deficit of direct democracy. Brussels, like all "governments" makes mistakes. Albeit with fewer ulterior motives because of all the obvious reasons that we know to be associated with national governments which do not apply to the same degree in the supra national situation.

The faults of the European establishment certainly merit an in depth discussion but this is not a matter for this article. What I am saying here is that facile and irresponsible action in the direction of laying the blame for largely nationally created problems at the doorstep of the EU has indubitably created a dangerous situation. To date the most dramatic outcome of has been the decision of the United Kingdom to part ways with the European Union. At the time of writing negotiations for the terms of this "divorce" have not yet begun and it is not absolutely clear whether they will begin on the 19 June as planned. As these, on the most optimistic scenario, are expected to take at least two years, the precise consequences of this decision both for the U.K. and the E.U. are not clear. But consequences for all concerned there will be and they are likely to be challenging and difficult to manage even after the very difficult uncertainty and instability created by the negotiation period in and of itself has ended.

Let us now come to the last and most important and pertinent of the three points.

As Communication expert I am well aware that the public in general tend to trust the messages of their peers much more than the messages of governments even of their own political affiliation because they see them as further removed or not fully trustworthy, often because being politicians they have hidden agendas.

In any case it is Communication science maxim- based on behavioural psychology - that people in general trust the source of information that is closest to them and that they are influenced more by such things as tone of voice and general delivery including body language and less by the actual content of the messages they receive. This is compounded by the general lack of trust in governments and media, in part because of poorer than desired results on the ground but also the current fears of terrorism, too much immigration for psychological comfort, globalisation and so on and the possibility that people have nowadays to receive information through alternative sources such as the many social media. Through social

media discussions, people tend to reinforce each others' like minded views. Bearing all this in mind it is easy to understand the disaffection of citizens with national governments and, even more so, with the usual suspect or "bogey man" that is the "faceless" EU.

It is unavoidable that the way citizens understand participatory democracy and their expectations in that context have changed a great deal in the last few decades. This is the result of more socially aware and more educated populations with a great deal of information readily available and of course the revolution of the social media. The latter has, at least apparently and in theory, set societies free from top down propaganda. I say "in theory" and "apparently" because there have been by now a great many studies about how the dissemination of information and the creation of political and other opinions on Facebook or Twitter happens. We know from such studies that people generally engage in social media conversations within distinct bubbles. That is in like minded groups where everyone agrees and doubt is kept at bay. This may not be perfect democracy. Nevertheless, it is a fact of contemporary life and we have to take account of it if we want to maintain and develop participatory democracy in our societies.

A most important matter connected with the future of the EU that needs to be urgently addressed with this backdrop in mind is what content we would need to give to the concept of "democracy" so that it will resonate with citizens. Agreeing on a definition of what we mean/ must mean by the term "democracy" in Europe at this point in time, is a necessary prerequisite of engaging the public in the discussion regarding the future direction of the EU.

Because of this prerequisite, on the one hand, and because citizens, naturally, want to see solutions to the problems on the ground and not to hear promises for solutions at some unspecified time in the future, on the other, the answer to the question "How can we engage the citizens in the future of Europe?" is NOT communication. At least not first off.

Fact 3: Something that communicators often do not realise is that, in order to communicate you need people to communicate to. If, as is often the case, people do not trust you, **you** being the national government, the EU Institutions, the capitalist society, the UNO, the media... they will not listen to you. Also if what you are telling the public is of no interest to them (and it will not interest them unless it has a real impact on their day to day lives and you can show the way in which it will have this impact) you will again have lost their attention. Another way to get people's attention is to somehow capture their imagination by showing them a vision they can identify with. This may even be more difficult than solving problems on the ground because it presupposes putting your money where your mouth is by being visibly committed to the vision yourself and working efficiently and transparently to achieve it.

Eventually, if and when you have society's attention because citizens trust you enough to listen to your message, strategic communication becomes extremely important. Until then, the best communication in the world will yield no results.

So how can one proceed? How does the state at national level and the EU, for best results via local collaborators, begin to engage with people?

The only way that can be done is for all the above to engage **directly** with people on the ground. It is self evident that people aren't interested in information unless they ask for it because they need it or are interested in it for their own reasons. So "sending out stuff" in the form of printed or electronic material, however professionally created, is never the answer. Solving problems, being present where the problems are and actually producing results is the answer.

It is not even actually necessary for citizens to trust the government/State, though admittedly trust of one's authorities would be a nice thing, not least because it makes people happy and creates a feeling of security. What is of the essence is to get people to trust society, their NGOs their grassroots movements, in other words each other.

Fact 4: Societies do not function top down any more or bottom up yet, however much we may think this would be a good thing. Societies, increasingly, in the brave new world of social media and networking function horizontally.

So what do we engage people about? What interests people at European level at the moment How would a state based on participatory democracy function in their view? What would it have to focus on?

Fact 5: Right after the UK referendum several opinion polls at pan European level asked people to name their top expectations of Europe.

Following are the 5 top priorities:

1. External borders
2. Fight against cross border crime
3. Defending ourselves against external enemies.
4. The European aging population
5. Youth unemployment

As regards 1, the decision to create a European and coast guard agency was taken mid September last year and came into effect on October 6. This hopefully will make it possible to abolish internal border controls. We should all know it, use it and ask for it to be developed.

As regards 2, the answer would appear to be EUROPOL which not many people are actually aware carries out 16000 cross border criminal investigations per year and as from spring this year it has been further strengthened.

As regards 3, Mrs Merkel's recent statement in the framework of the recent G7 meeting was clear and resonates with every European. We need our own defence (apart from NATO). This is an important thing to say and it was, at long last, clearly said.

As to 4, we need to be clear and not pander to people's frequently out of all proportion fears of immigration fomented by political forces to serve their own ends, and allow people from the outside to come in a controlled and legal way. We need to move beyond our fears of the boogey man of terrorism which was- in every case we know- home grown and not a result of immigration. Likewise the huge and ubiquitous problem of youth unemployment needs to be looked at carefully and seriously and not be a butt for political bickering between parties. This is one thing that can only be successfully tackled at pan european level. Through joint efforts and not through piecemeal action. With joint and coordinated initiatives.

We all need, our societies, governments and Brussels as well, need to engage in these matters. It is results on the ground that will bring people close enough to communicate with and not talk to or, worse still, AT.

We need to develop ideas about these and other problems that exercise people on the local level and have plans about how to go forward. We need not only to develop plans but to apply, evaluate and amend them until they are adequately suited to the purpose at hand. This what democracy is about. It is no longer simply about voting. That frontier in Europe has long been crossed. It is about engaging people and getting them to participate in the formulation of policy at national and EU level. Democracy is about getting our voice heard and listened to and about getting important things done. This is political democracy and Europe is nothing if not politics. It is an ongoing political project and debate about where we are and where we want to be in the future and which ways of getting there we consider effective but also acceptable.

Only once this level of democracy has been achieved and seen to be achieved does communication really become relevant and effective. At that point, however, it acquires a great significance that has not always been fully comprehended either by national governments in the member states or, indeed, by Brussels itself, despite the lip service that is paid to its the crucial importance for the cementing of true participatory democracy all over the Union.

What then has to be done then to really add communication to the equation?

The obvious thing that has not really hitherto been done is for politicians across the board of the EU to take Europe and the European Union as seriously as it needs and deserves to be taken.

This means they have to rise above and beyond their, often quite petty, party and domestic politics and develop an idea and following that an actual plan about the direction in which the EU should move in order to become more and more democratic and representative. Europe has to provide answers to people's real problems on the ground and not just an additional level which occasionally complicates things rather than successfully addressing concerns. To do that they have to look into the future with people's needs, wants and aspirations in mind.

Having done that, instead of trashing and bashing Europe they should make a sincere effort not to exploit the benefits the EU brings to people's lives for their own ends while blaming it for all their own mistakes as well as its own. In addition they have to actually begin to do the obvious which is to explain what Europe is, what it is for, and what it has achieved so far and what more it can do to benefit the citizens on the ground. This is a far cry from what politicians are doing today.

Secondly civil society and its many organisations need to become more actively involved. Not only when matters of particular interest to them arise but all the time. Brussels can and should do much more to activate these - often pan european - networks and utilise their ideas and creativity as well as their flexibility and ability to act quickly and non bureaucratically.

In connection with the above there is a space to be filled by the ordinary citizen whose life is influenced very directly by what happens in Europe often much or more than it is influenced by what happens at home. Only they do not know it. We can easily and should in these times of social media engagement, get involved in this debate.

We, as citizens, can air our views get our own lack of information and wrong ideas corrected and get the chance to correct others' misconceptions. This is democracy on the ground and it should not be limited to "home affairs". Europe is - after all - also a home affair. Learn the facts, the true facts about Europe and spread them around. Focus on the real problems and demand that they be solved, suggest ways in which this might be done.

Fact 6: The media are a difficult issue to tackle. They are generally politically motivated in the same way as politicians or if not that, they serve business and other interests. They are -in Europe at least where they function freely- almost completely unchecked. Which is as it should be. This, however, means that it depends on their own professional deontology and/or conscience whether they stick to facts rather than manipulate

them and it is a fact that more and more citizens no longer credit what they hear on TV or read in the papers unless they are part the political-ly/socially captive audience that the media increasingly depend on.

It is probably largely due to this fact that the media in member states do not generally exhibit great interest in Europe, the European project or the need to expand and further develop the traditional concept that we have in the western world of democracy to accommodate the new needs, demands and desires of the present. It is a moot point whether public service media may assume an active role to this end. It is arguably possible that this may be done. A prerequisite of this eventuality would be, of course, that the journalists and editors of those media and interested others would become better educated in matters European and somewhat philosophical and also know a bit more about what happens in other countries in the Union which is far from the case at the moment.

A suggestion about how to achieve this might be to create an Erasmus exchange programme for journalists. Ideally with the European project in mind this might be extended to many more sections of the population. We have mentioned NGOs in which case there is already a level of cooperation, professional bodies could jump on the band wagon, politicians, trade unions, and many kinds of charitable and voluntary organisations. The more people involved the better but it would be very beneficial to pay urgent attention to "reeducating" journalists so they can bring the real Europe to their communities and regions.

Needless to say a key element in the creation of the aware and interested, the engaged and committed European citizen is traditional education. At the moment our schools and quite frequently universities are hardly fulfilling this important role.

Brussels itself has to refocus its approach, too. What we see by and large from that end is a business as usual attitude and some degree of complacency even though post the Brexit referendum this seems to be slowly changing for the better. Europe has to do more to explain facts, and kill lies. Not by trying to "sell" Europe as this never works but by providing support on the ground in member states and working to solve the real problems exercising people all over the Union. In other words by producing visible results that cannot be gainsaid.

Fact 7: Vision and Feeling are important. People need to buy into a vision of Europe that they agree with and feel they are taken into account about what this is and how it is going to be achieved.

Fact 8: Actions speak louder than words and examples speak the loudest. Continuity and commitment are key words. It is time to start the virtuous cycles to replace the vicious ones we have been party to for too long. The EU becomes stronger in every way the more we envisage and try to cre-

ate a real Union, explain what it is and what it is for. The project should not be a strong EU, period. The project should be a strong EU for the benefit of its members and its citizens. Also for the benefit of the world. This latter is only achieved if the EU becomes a moral force. **A Good Union.**

The more we exhibit solidarity with each other as member states and equal partners not in the sense of handing out charity to those perceived as "weaker" members but in the sense of being irreplaceable and inalienable parts of the same whole which has been created for everyone's benefit and development, the more the Union is strengthened in every way and can become this Good Union we need for everyone's benefit.

Unless we have a vision of Europe and see the bigger picture in our mind's eye concerning the future Europe that we need and want, it is unlikely that we shall overcome and we may even not survive the hiccups or teething troubles that are in any case to be expected for such a huge and ultra ambitious project as the integration of Europe and the natural disgruntlement of member states and citizens for varying reasons, not least ignorance and the impatience that results from that.