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6th Siena Conference on the Europe of the Future

PSSG 1. HOW CAN WE USE DEMOCRACY AS A LEVER FOR INTEGRATION?

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“No taxation without representation”: few people seem to remember this basic law¹ of liberal democracies. One may even argue that it is also equally true that you cannot have a “state without citizenship”. Yet, Europe has gone a long way along even deeper integrations without ever changing the electoral law through which the European Parliament is elected. More recently, we are talking about increasingly sharing defense, which is again a defining feature of what we call the State without even thinking about whether this means changing the boundaries of the community we feel be citizen of. What kind of positive actions/ reforms can we recommend making further integrations politically feasible?

The recent changes in international politics – the war in Ukraine, the terrorism in Israel and the bombing over civil population in Palestine, the various sources of tension in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, the multitude of «micro wars» around the world – seem to remind us that democracy in Europe, certainly imperfect and incomplete, remains a safe harbor and a valuable point of common ground. Perhaps this is why trust in EU institutions remains relatively higher than the average trust in national democratic institutions. And perhaps this is also why turnout in the European elections, after a twenty-five-year decline, has shown a slight uptick in the last two elections (2019 and 2024).

But the sense of safety in comparing Europe to other scenarios should not distract our attention. Democracy remains in a state of discomfort, as all indicators related to the affective dimension show: trust in political actors, in parties, and even in symbolic institutions that once served as stable reference points is declining nearly everywhere in Europe and across the democratic world. A process of *democratic disconnection* is ongoing. And Europe is not safer than other democratic realities.

As every year, the Pontignano Vision Conference includes a working group focused on the themes of democracy in Europe and in the European Union. The questions we are asking ourselves have remained the same as in recent years: how can we use democracy as a lever to better integrate democratic communities – local and national – into a supranational political system? And then: what new tools can

¹ Interestingly the quote may belong to William Pitt, prime minister of Great Britain for ten years before the American Revolution of 1777. Lord Pitt was, indeed, the first to acknowledge that for a free people to be taxed, they should have seats in Westminster.

we design to strengthen the shared commitment to democratic values while also helping policymakers to achieve more effective and efficient policy-making?

This year, our efforts are focused on some concrete actions aimed at supporting the return of a shared and robust idea of representative democracy, combined with a full awareness of the complexity of political decision-making in a particularly difficult international, social, and economic context. To summarize our approach, we aim to promote the parallel growth of two elements:

1. Responsible decision-making;
2. A conscious supranational citizenship.

It is important to highlight that these objectives and the measures proposed below do not exist in a vacuum. Fostering supranational citizenship through communicational measures and education requires not overstepping the fine line between propaganda and legitimate communication by authorities and institutions. Supporting a particular viewpoint for the sake of providing factual or neutral information may come in conflict with freedom of information. Many of the measures below are also in line with the idea of a stronger European identity that is part of a larger controversy between the merits of nation states and moving beyond them.

The measures suggested are also ideas that may not fit the current administrative framework in member states or the EU at large. Excluding them for the sake of administrative coherence would however go against the mere idea of innovation. Similarly, it must be understood that reaching these objectives will come at a price. The measures below will certainly incur budgetary costs. But they will also have a mental and political price and require the willingness to take controversial measures.

What concrete actions are we considering?

In this brief position paper, we focus on four main areas of action:

I. Education

- Make critical thinking the lynchpin of the educational system

Critical thinking must be the cornerstone of education across the European Union. The member states should commit to strengthening debates, critical and open thinking, and creativity in school curriculums. The days in which learning by heart for exams and tests were the sole accepted way of measuring the success of (school) students must be over.

- Streamlining European school curricula

A transnational European citizenship needs a common identity. In order to build such an identity, we need a shared European story, a European perspective. Such a common European perspective should become the standard in national school curriculums across subjects. Whether it be history, politics, sociology, or law, a European perspective could create a better understanding of how national systems and histories are interdependent and integrated. This European perspective does not intend to override national or regional stories and knowledge, but reflect, juxtapose, and critically debate the controversies, commonalities, parallels and dependencies of events, institutions, and patterns in Europe. This ultimately also strengthens critical thinking skills and the direly needed tolerance for ambiguity in a growingly black-and-white world.

- Offering and recognising youth participation programs and political simulations

Fun and education do not have to be opposites. Knowledge about the mechanics of European politics should be transferred through simulations in schools or organised at a grassroots level to show young people the decision-making processes, but also the art of finding a compromise in a democracy. By giving them the opportunity to design the agenda of these simulations themselves, they also learn to express their political interests and engage with the society they live in. This may also increase the likelihood of young people engaging in traditional political structures in the aftermath.

- Erasmus exchanges for pupils of secondary schools

In the framework of Erasmus+, the EU should grant specific funding allocated for secondary school students' exchange programmes. Not everyone can afford to go abroad (or to welcome someone in their home), yet many young students may harbor that desire. Relatively short 3-month exchange programmes should exist not only between certain member states, but within the EU at large.

- Fast-tracking the “European Degree”

The opportunity to start multilateral joint degrees has to be opened to all Higher Education Institutions that adopt a shared mobility plan. Developing further the Bologna process; recognition should be made more logical and systematic. The acceleration may be reached by creating an online common platform with a shared digital application system to facilitate applications and streamline bureaucratic processes.

II. Soft Power and Cooperation

- “European Decade of Culture”

In this coming decade, we should highlight our common European heritage through cultural means and special funding dedicated to this. This could mean movies related to people and events that incarnate European values or played a significant role in the history of Europe. Museums, galleries, and exhibitions illustrating the various cultures, histories, and systems across the EU would make them more approachable for especially young people. Ultimately, these actions aim to revive enthusiasm for the European project, reinforce the sentiment of belonging among EU citizens, and increase political participation. At a time when many Europeans have lost faith in both national and supranational politics, cultural practices are essential to rebuild interest in public life and depict Europe as more than a distant political project.

- Mobilities for apprentices, workers, and public agents

Erasmus should be promoted among apprentices and young workers: understanding the benefits of being part of such a diverse Union relies on people feeling these opportunities and expanding their knowledge on the world. This must apply particularly to those who are or were not part of the higher education system. We suggest picking up the age-old practice of being a journeyman or woman who roams around for a little while to gather experience through exchange far from home. By granting Erasmus funding to apprentices for school & work experiences abroad, we could democratise the programme and foster craftsmanship across the continent. Along the same lines, we suggest exchange programmes between military and administrative officials of different national, regional, and municipal administrations. This would allow them to realise exchange programmes, foster language skills, and make public agents learn from each other across the Union.

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- Common European Digital Identity

Individuals and businesses should be able to communicate with national administrations across the Union via one European digital identity based on national identification systems (ID cards, tax numbers and alike). This would also incentivise the digitalisation of national administrations to overcome the bureaucratic lowlands of disjunct national systems.

- Avoid overly complex and bureaucratic language when communicating with audiences

The communication of institutions at all levels is often too bureaucratic and hardly accessible. Populists are generally accused of depicting complex matters in an overly simplified manner. While this may be true, the idea of presenting complex and complicated issues in terms and a language accessible to the majority of the audience is essential to shorten the distance between Europeans and their institutions.

- European Student Card

A European Student Card (for pupils, apprentices, and students alike) should grant generalised access to discounts for cultural events, museums and exhibitions as well as railway and public transportation services provided by public or publicly funded institutions. The patchwork of discounts already favouring young individuals within the EU is laudable, but ultimately complicated and counters the spirit of unity. A European Student Card could also shed some light on publicly-funded organisms such as independent theatres, and local artists advocating for human rights, democracy, multiculturalism. In a second step, this could be connected to rehabilitating Interrail to make it more accessible and financially available for young Europeans.

III. Representation

- European constituencies

Social media and online presence can do a lot. But at the core of representation, there should still be the presence of our representatives in the offline world. As to the European Parliament, many voters barely know their MEP, most of them have never met him or her, let alone been in direct touch. On the one hand, this shows the significance of a mentality of public representatives at large to actively search for contact with their constituents. On the other hand, the electoral system at least for European elections should be reformed. For future elections, the European Parliament should have actual constituencies with direct representation (possibly still in a proportional system). By requiring elections through popular vote in constituencies the representativeness of the European mandate could be fostered.

- Annual Youth Seminar

We suggest creating an annual seminar that gathers young students from EU countries with a different theme each year and takes place in a different location. The location may be chosen in consideration of the topic of the seminar (e.g. a seminar on climate change may take place in a city considered particularly 'eco-friendly'). Depending on the topic, students from different degree programmes would be invited to present EU-funded projects that shall be implemented at the European level.

- Using AI to channel input from the population

The amount of deliberative bodies in the EU and its member states is already high and - searching for better representation - we are observing a trend towards even more of them. But deliberative and representative bodies are only worth the effort when they are actually heard. The EU should provide a platform on which deliberative bodies (from national parliaments to city councils and advisory boards, but even ordinary citizens) can share their resolutions and opinions. AI language models could be used to synthesise the data gathered by this sharing platform and thus monitor topics, challenges and solutions adopted in all corners of the continent.

- Youth quotas

Municipal and regional representative councils should be encouraged to adopt youth quotas to ensure that in an aging society young people are not underrepresented. This would reaffirm inclusive participation and ensure that decision-making reflects intergenerational trust and compromises.

IV Use of deliberative democracy tools

In line with other initiatives discussed during the previous Siena conferences, we propose to combine the use of deliberative and participatory democracy as a complementary set of tools to strengthen the capacity of democratic institutions. In particular, the establishment of a two-tiered approach to strengthen democratic participation at the local level with a clear EU dimension is proposed. This would entail, at first, permanent local “Democracy Hubs” – laboratories for civic education, democratic deliberation, and continuous citizen engagement – embedded within the education system. These hubs would empower citizens, especially young people, to participate meaningfully in public life beyond electoral moments.

Second, we propose to build a multi-level ecosystem where local assemblies, supported by the previously mentioned hubs, deliberate on key policy issues and share their findings through centralized digital platforms. This system would enable structured input from the grassroots into EU-level policymaking processes.

- Funding **“Democracy Hubs” in selected sub-national entities of EUMSs**
- Creating a **network of active local hubs** to deliberate in different EU regions on a specific set of priority issues to be included on the agenda of European institutions—especially the European Parliament
- Boosting an **annual critical on all the deliberative practices** (citizens’ juries, mini-publics) implemented within the EUMSs
- Enhancing the institutionalization one **annual deliberative event to select and support the proposals of the European Parliament’s legislative committees**