



## Report of the IDEA-C Brussels Workshop

### **“Participating to Build a European Identity”**

Brussels, 10 December 2015

**Discussion meeting in the context of the IDEA-C project  
“Europe for Citizens” Programme**



### **Introduction**

The low turnout rate in the last European elections is a warning signal that cannot be ignored: the European construction will be credible and strong if the largest possible participation of the citizens is ensured.

Based on this premises, **Mediter** – which participates at IDEC-C project - in collaboration **Punto Democratico asbl** - an Italian Brussels based cultural association - conveyed experts and representatives of non-governmental organisations to discuss ideas and to envisage tools both to reduce the “democratic deficit” and to encourage the involvement of civic society in the EU decision-making.

Invited speakers were:

- **Giovanni Colombo**, from “PD Bruxelles”, the Brussels branch of the Italian Democratic Party and chair of a thematic group on communicating EU within national politics;



- **Pietro Emili**, Director of “Maison du Pucple d’Europe” (Home of European People), a NGO active in promoting the dialogue between citizens and European institutions;
- **Maria Laura Franciosi**, experienced journalist in European Affairs, former chair of the “Brussels Europe” Press Club;
- **Victor Matteucci**, Chairman of the Mediter Network, acting as a major partner to the IDEA-C Project.

## **Background and consistency with the IDEA-C project**

The “Inter-cultural Dimension for European Active Citizenship (IDEA-C)” project, funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme and lead by the Municipality of Geraci Siculo – Sicily, aims at restoring electoral confidence among EU citizens by addressing the main causes for the low turnout rate in recent European elections. Among these are the limited knowledge of the institutional architecture of the EU, the mistrust towards European bodies and officials, and the lack of sense of belonging to a common European political community.

The project involves experts, students, stakeholders and decision makers, who gather in “local workshops” where they are encouraged to share experiences, best practices and opinions through activities of different kinds (lectures, discussions, use of documentary and interactive technologies). During these events, participants experience the importance of engagement and cooperation and, ultimately, are encouraged to take a more active role in democratic life.

The **Brussels workshop** organised by Mediter and Punto Democratico is consistent with the project’s major goals to give citizens an opportunity to interact on the construction of an “ever closer” and democratic Europe, thereby fostering an active EU citizenship. Another objective is to develop long-lasting cooperation between entities and citizens aimed at improving civic and democratic participation.

## **Panel interventions**

Ms. **Franciosi**, who chaired the panel, introduced the speakers and explained the background and the reasons for the workshop: the professional engagement of most of the attendants within and with the European Institutions based in Brussels enables a discussion around shared values about a “citizens’ Europe”. However, we should always keep in mind that a European identity could only be established through a



bottom-up process: citizens have to feel and describe themselves as “Europeans”, and this requires a long way to go for politicians, intellectuals and officers not only within but also outside the European institutions.

Building a robust European identity requires an effort to explain what European institutions can do for citizens and how they work, and this is the reason for which good communication helps the European project. However, as such, communication is not enough. One of the possible improvements relates to setting authentic European parties, *i.e.* transnational political parties that are able to put European politics and policies high on the agenda and to act consequently.

Mr. **Colombo** was then invited to present the project for which he was responsible in the framework of the “EU DEM School”, a large dissemination initiative targeted at young Italian local officers of the party and at political representatives in Brussels, in order to discuss the relevance of EU policies for national politics and policies.

As a member of the Brussels branch of the Italian Democratic Party, Mr. Colombo chaired a thematic working group on “Communicating Europe”. The group was set up on the observation that correctly explaining how EU works is a prerequisite for both the identity-building process and the effort to increase participation. The working group reflected on the fact that euro-scepticism grows in contexts where and when the “pro-Europe” political parties and organisations undervalue adequate communication efforts within local/national communities.

In order to raise awareness, the “Communicating Europe” working group took on the burden to highlight several features on how relevant are nowadays EU policies for domestic issues. The strategy aimed at making Party officials realize that today European politics is indeed “home politics”.

Mr. **Emili**, Director of the “Maison du Peuple d’Europe” (MPE – House of European People), outlined a complementary approach. MPE promotes civic engagement on several issues, and, in doing so, acts in close collaboration with NGOs and other independent organisations in Brussels.

Mr. Emili pointed out that MPE’s initiatives are aimed at promoting “participatory democracy”, whereas EU functioning is mostly based on “representative democracy”. More precisely, EU in principle supports also participative democracy, but this channel is conceived “in addition” to the main processes of representative democracy.



Open consultations on legislative proposals promoted by the European Commission are an instrument for a more direct engagement of citizens in the European policy-making process. As such, consultations have always represented an element of participatory democracy. The Lisbon Treaty has boosted “in theory” this pillar through the establishment of the “European Citizens Initiative”, by which citizens can try to influence decision-making processes from the very beginning.

Yet, this procedure seems not to be enough, since the European Commission retains the prerogative to formally approve or reject citizens’ proposals. MPE witnessed malfunctioning of ECI in a number of cases, including on its own proposal about ongoing negotiations on TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), which was rejected by the Commission. Surprisingly, some of the arguments in support of that proposal were included in an official Commission’s document on Trade Policy, which shows that some sort of influence on policy-making was equally achieved, albeit with little transparency on the process. MPE has been working since then through more traditional lobbying activities; these are based on several “mailing” campaigns (ordinary, e-mail and Twitter) to all MEPs or MPs that will have a say in the final adoption of TTIP, which (in particular in Belgium) include many members of regional and national parliaments.

MPE is also engaged in initiatives devoted to “aggregate and represent” citizens’ points of view on EU-relevant dossiers, for example by organising citizens’ meetings in which EP debates and votes are simulated in order to check the degree of MEPs’ representativeness of people’s feeling.

Mr. **Matteucci** explained how the Mediter Network was founded and how it is currently involved in the realisation of the IDEA-C project.

He then discussed how low turnout rates and mistrust towards politicians could be traced also at the national level; a general trend seems to be common everywhere when it comes to people’s attitude towards institutions and politics. According to this viewpoint, we experience a progressive reduction of the role and influence of intermediate bodies: political parties, trade unions, stakeholders organisations seem to be outpaced and incapable both to shape consensus and to represent interests and needs.

The disappearance of intermediate bodies goes along, and is possibly caused by, a (dangerous) “simplification” of the political discourse; in this context, an increasing sense of mistrust is hardly surprising, since larger and larger portions of citizens feel that they are no longer represented. Mr. Matteucci is convinced that an effective



response to the problem of low participation and “sense of distance” towards EU should be based on re-establishing the correct aggregating role of such intermediate bodies.

## Questions and comments from the audience

A general discussion followed the interventions of the main speakers.

Mr. **Francesco Cerasani**, political secretary of “PD Bruxelles”, stressed the importance of securing representativeness to any political instance in Europe, including the so-called EU-sceptical parties and movements. As far as the Democratic Party is concerned, its Brussels branch is strongly engaged in a political strategy based both on “communicating Europe” (i.e., disseminating among stakeholders, citizens and political parties’ officers information on how EU works and what EU can really do) and “representing people”. This means that the Democratic Party, and hopefully any political party, is an instrument available to people, which want to “speak to Europe”.

Mr. **Alessandro Giordani**, an EU Commission officer working on institutional communication, outlined the difficulties experienced when EU and Member States speak to each other. We cannot pretend that “common people” understand EU policies and processes and support the European project when we note that even professionals hardly establish good communication.

Mr. **Paolo Clarotti**, a former Commission officer, though admitting current difficulties, stressed the much bigger problems experienced in the past, when the basic freedoms that we enjoy today (like free movement and establishment) were yet to be achieved.

## Conclusions

The speeches and the discussion showed that there is a consensus on the need for better communication in order to increase people’s participation and curb the phenomenon of “distance” towards EU politics and processes.

Focusing on concrete initiatives, such as the MPE’s engagement with participatory democracy and the Italian Democratic Party’s attempt to define European politics as “domestic” (and vice versa), can help to reduce the gap with the EU.

Work has still to be done in order to make “intermediate bodies” capable to implement this strategy. Associations, NGOs and political parties should be encouraged and supported in this respect.