

(New) Instruments for a participative democracy

Case study

Learning experience of participative and deliberative democracy:
European Movement, College of Europe & “Ryckvelde”

Prof. Dr. Léonce Bekemans
Jean Monnet Chair, University of Padova (It)
President Ryckvelde Foundation, Bruges, B

Point of departure (Conceptual context): Development of a European public sphere in participatory, deliberative and inclusive democracy¹

Context. The European Union faces numerous challenges in a period where the consequences of economic globalisation are felt: a major one is the largely debated democratic deficit resulting from the great distance between the citizens and the decision-making institutions. On the citizen’s side, one may observe the decreasing trend in civic activities potentially offered by democratic systems. Some experts call these problems symptoms of morbidity or fluidity, linked to the erosion of the sense of belonging to the local, regional, national and European community. European societies are moving towards communities of individuals instead of communities of persons at the expense of the common good. In the midst of a grave systemic financial and economic crisis, mainly due to the negative consequences of financial globalisation, thrust-worthy institutions and confidence-building measures are more than urgent. Therefore, we believe that NGOs across Europe should form part of a regular, structured, and guaranteed dialogue with the EU Institutions. The inclusion of a new Article 8b on participatory democracy in the Treaty of Lisbon is a milestone in the development of participatory democracy and civil dialogue².

Hypothesis. We argue that dialogue while happening with the participative and deliberative democratic system³, may significantly contribute to the improvement of democracy through the greater legitimacy, through real empowerment of citizens in concordance with the subsidiarity principles, through the inclusiveness and the more active participation of citizens in public life and increased sense of belonging to various communities. To break down the negative perception of a disconnection between citizens and the decision-making institutions, focus needs to put on a transfer of the outcomes of the public discourse to a multi-level governance structure, thus an opportunity for an increased political role of the Committee of the Regions.

¹ See Maria Karasinska-Fendler, How Intercultural dialogue can improve European democracy- deliberative democracy approach, in Bekemans, L et al, Intercultural Dialogue and Citizenship. Translating values into Actions. A Common Project for Europeans and their Partners, Venice: Marsilio, 2007.

² Article 8b of the Treaty of Lisbon (OJ 17.12.2007, C 306/1) says: “1. *The institutions shall by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action;* 2. *The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society;* 3. *The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union’s actions are coherent and transparent;* 4. *Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties.”*

³ Within the deliberative democracy concept the deliberation is perceived as an inclusiveness generating process with some specific conditions (i.e. social interaction, respect for different and changing views, and shared commitment of problem resolution, building of a community of interests).

If democratic conversation between citizens and governance is a central idea of democracy, there needs to be a permanent and mutual interaction of the two-ways communication. Therefore a particular role is to be played by various governances to provide channels for such a bottom-up and up to the bottom symmetric interaction. So there is an imperative of connecting this communication and interaction to governments, policymaking and governance at different levels. It is a widely recognised opinion that there are no European demos, nor a genuine European-wide public sphere or a European polis. If the public sphere (today's common space in society is a highly complex network of various parts of public spheres) does not exist how then explain the citizen sense of belonging and commitment to democracy and rights. Criteria are the decision-making capacity, the deliberation process and representativeness. In the EU there is a multitude of discussion fora: local, regional, national international and transnational ones.

We assume that greater participation is a substantive value as an aspect of empowerment. European citizens must therefore be given chances of direct and personal experience of what European citizenship and these values mean in practice; this can be realised through participation in dialogue with the institutions or through horizontal dialogue. In particular, civil and intercultural dialogue contributes to making European citizens a reality through encouraging their direct involvement in the integration process. It may be helpful in developing the feeling of belonging to the Union and to make citizens able to identify with it. Therefore the ability to dialogue should be developed and secondly, the venues and grounds for such dialogue need to be available. In this perspective history teaches us some good practices. The following case study demonstrates that.

Formal and informal learning experiences of participative and deliberative democracy: European Movement, College of Europe & “Ryckvelde”

Historical legacy: More than 60 years ago Europe was required to rebuild its future within a framework that went beyond national borders. History was running its pace and Europe was urged to act in order to restore confidence among its citizens. New initiatives were launched and new organisations were created in the aftermath of WWII. They meant to create confidence-building structures: the education of “European” citizens was therefore a challenge to be taken up seriously.

At this particular juncture between continuity and change in European history, our case study illustrates a very interesting (historical) example of bringing the European integration project close to the people, being a practice of participative democracy “avant la lettre”. It represents a remarkable process of sensibilization of the European integration project. Moreover, it teaches us that, even in present times dominated by NT tools for improving participative democracy; interesting lessons can be drawn from initiatives, activities and good practices of learning participative democracy which were initiated quite some time ago. This example also shows some prerequisites needed for developing deliberative democracy.

The ideas and propositions expressed at the Hague conference in 1948 were structured in the “European Movement”. Some of the suggestions have been concretized by the creation of the College of Europe in Bruges (B) 1949, the oldest post-graduate institute offering a specific European formation, and by the launching of “Ryckvelde” in 1956, a European and International information and formation Centre for young people and adults. Reflecting on their history, their vision, mission and functions, we may learn some good practices of participative and deliberative democracy.

1. The European Movement: a bottom-up approach shaped by inspiration and commitment

Context: The International Committee of the Movements for European Unity (ICMEU) was created in 1947 in Paris to organise and promote a publicity campaign in support of European unity. It was the ICMEU that convened and hosted the Congress of Europe in The Hague in May 1948. With Churchill as its Honorary President, the Congress was attended by some 800 participants (statesmen, MPs, businessmen, trade unionists, academics, etc.). Its major objective was laying the building stones for peace, stability and cooperation in Europe. This was made explicit in three ambitions: 1) to demonstrate the existence of a body of public opinion in support of European unity, 2) to discuss the challenges posed by European unity and propose practical solutions to governments and 3) to give new impetus to the international publicity campaign. Building on the success of the Hague Congress, the International Committee assumed responsibility for implementing the resolutions adopted by the participants in the political, economic, social and cultural fields. Accordingly, an Economic and Social Committee, a Legal Committee and a Cultural Committee were set up.

On 25 October 1948 in Brussels, the ICMEU changed its name to the European Movement. Its received public support by major political leaders⁴ The EM aimed to look at the political, economic, technical and cultural problems posed by Europe and also to inform and mobilise public opinion in favour of European integration. Interesting to note in this perspective was the membership of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions and the International Federation of European Houses. The grass roots movement was backed by farsighted political leaders: concrete action was supported by vision.

The European Movement was ideologically very active in the beginning and organised many events on specific themes, preparing the formal process of European integration. In February 1949, the Brussels Political Congress defined individual, family and social rights which might be guaranteed in law by a European Charter of Human Rights. It also reviewed procedures for the appointment of delegates to the European Consultative Assembly and adopted the statute for a European Court. Two months later, the Westminster Economic Conference discussed monetary issues and laid the foundations for a future European Payments Union. Supporters of the pooling of basic industries, the Congress participants also discussed the setting up of a European Economic and Social Committee.

In December 1949, the European Conference on Culture in Lausanne resulted in the establishment of the European Centre for Culture and the College of Europe in Bruges. In July 1950, the Rome Social Welfare Conference drew up a plan for the harmonisation of European social security systems and proposed the creation of a European Commissariat for Labour and Population and a European fund for reconstruction and development. Other international conferences followed, successively considering the integration of Germany into a united Europe, the relations between the Europe being built and the Commonwealth, and the situation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The EM also pursued an intensive publicity campaign, particularly through the European Youth Campaign.

⁴ Former French Prime Minister, Léon Blum, Winston Churchill, the Italian Prime Minister, Alcide De Gasperi, the Belgian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer were elected honorary Presidents.

Working: The European Movement was led by an Executive Committee and an International Committee that, in turn, was supported by national councils in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, West-Germany and the United Kingdom. To ensure that its views were heard, the International European Movement ran a publicity campaign that was aimed at political, economic, social and cultural leaders. The Movement did not overlook the general public: it held public debates and funded a great many publications, including the monthly journal "Nouvelles de l'Europe". Therefore, despite experiencing ideological, human and material difficulties in the early 1950s the European Movement constituted a tremendous moral and inspiring force that enabled the European idea to move on to the next stage of initial practical achievements.

2. The College of Europe⁵: a unique higher learning institute on European affairs

Not many institutes of higher learning in Europe have had as strong an influence on the development of European integration as the College of Europe. The College's origins date back to the 1948 Hague Congress when Salvador de Madariaga, a Spanish statesman, thinker and writer in exile, proposed the establishment of a College where university graduates from many different countries could study and live together. It was founded in 1949 as the result of the European Conference on Culture in Lausanne by the European Movement. It is a unique institute of postgraduate studies and training in European affairs. It has trained in nearly 60 years of its history more than 7.000 students, is now situated in two campuses (Bruges and Natolin) and has a network of more than 100 visiting professors.

The creation of the College is very illustrative for the inspiring mood of that time, present at the level of the European intelligentsia and political leadership as well as at the local level. Thanks to a number of favourable circumstances, Bruges became a conscious and deliberate choice for the College's site⁶. Happy coincidences which involved a group of Bruges citizens led by the Reverend Father Karel Verleye ("les Amis de Bruges"), the European Union of federalists, local, provincial and national politicians, made the choice for the Bruges' site come through. In sum, the plans by the local Committee and the one by the International Cultural Section merged into one project, i.e. the actual launching of the College of Europe, with a short preparatory academic session in September 1949 with 22 students. It was seen as an initial step towards founding a future European University. Professor Hendrik Brugmans, one of the intellectual leaders of the European Movement at the time, became the first Rector of the College of Europe (1950-1972).

What lessons can we draw?

1) The founders of the College of Europe were sure about their vision. For Salvador de Madariaga, Hendrik Brugmans and Father Karel Verleye: Europe was a historic and spiritual reality which needed to be lived in the respect of common values and enriching diversities. To realize this potential unity, you needed to form Europeans. So the College was created even before the existence of other European institutions.

⁵ <http://www.coleurop.be>

⁶ The president of the International Cultural Section of the European Movement, Don Salvador de Madariaga explicitly said that Bruges had promoted itself as the place for a post-university institute of European studies.

2) In the construction of a common multilevel Europe, this particular vision has proved to be very successful. Its Alumni work in many strategic places of the EU; through their specific competences and skills they have shaped its policy and complex functioning.

Again today Europe is placed at the crossroads of its history. Confronted with many and global challenges, Europe is confronted with the economic, political and institutional challenges and opportunities of multi-level governance in a globalizing context. Once again vision has to inspire difficult and concrete realisations at political and institutional level in order to bring the citizen closer to the European dream.

3) Apart from its successful development another major element of the success story is the interaction between the College and its immediate environment, represented by the Local Committee. The Committee, then also a section of the European Movement, was founded in 1949 as a non-profit association to spread the idea of a unified Europe and to stimulate interest for the working and objectives of the College of Europe in Bruges. Conferences were organised and a European Winter programme was launched. From the mid sixties interest in cooperation declined, mainly due to a more specialised programme, less dedication among Committee members and a more formal relationship. Only in the mid-nineties the Local Committee was revitalised. It is now organising a variety of activities from conferences and concerts to visits in view of strengthening the links of the College with the economic, social and political environment. A final meeting ground between the College and the local environment is the housing and accommodation; in particular the many student residences in the town and the new campus in restored 16th century Jesuit buildings.

In sum, the unique College formula has become a visible part of daily life in the city. The ties which have linked the College of Europe and the City of Bruges since 1949 are such that they have given rise throughout Europe to the expression 'l'esprit de Bruges' and the 'esprit du Collège'. The city provides a learning basis for the European citizens of tomorrow and offers the space to develop plural identities for the future of Europe, a meeting place between theory and practice.

3. Ryckvelde⁷: a locally based and citizens' oriented European and international formation and information Centre

Ryckvelde is an independent non-profit organisation, supported by the department of Education of the Flemish Government in Belgium and the Province of West-Flanders. Since 1956 Ryckvelde has developed a broad experience of formation of young people and information about the European integration with the aim to bring Europe closer to its citizens. It favours the European integration and an active European citizenship based on some fundamental values, in particular respect for each person within its social context. It is an organisation which adopts a bottom-up approach with a clear vision to transmit the forgotten factors of the European integration to European citizens, young people and adults. Since 2005 the organisation consists of two sub-organisations: 1) one focussing on formal education (primary and secondary education) and 2) one focussing on information and formation for adults.

⁷ <http://www.ryckvelde.be>

With its vision, mission and grass roots perspective Ryckvelde has more than 50 year of experience of training and information activities which have stimulated participative democracy. They concern following general activities:

- *Training*: Ryckvelde offers a variety of training sessions to schools of secondary and higher education. They are adapted to the students' needs, their age and educational level. Different methods are used: interactive presentations, simulation exercises and educational games. Adult groups are offered a variety of tailor made European training sessions. It also publishes didactical sets for teachers and adult groups: training sets for various target groups, didactical internet material and educational games.
- *International school projects*: helping schools to set up international projects and/or advising them with the content (didactical aspects) or organizational (practical/grant) aspects of their projects. Every year the Ryckvelde Centre organizes an international meeting session for teachers. They meet colleagues from all over Europe and get acquainted with the European educational space.
- *EU Campaigns*: In the week of May 9, every year a European campaign is launched with quizzes, debates and concrete actions that draw people's attention to the European integration process and make them think about the future of the European project. A State of the European Union is organized in collaboration with the Flemish Parliament and the Flemish-European Liaison Office: a critical Europe watcher sets out his/her vision on what the European Union should do in the coming year. In the same event prizes are awarded to The Junior State of the European Union, The State of Creanovative and a Senior State of the European Union.
- *Actions and debates*: organization of public debates on current European themes, as well as simulation sessions of the European Council with a view to raise awareness with the European democratic decision making process
- The yearly *Karel Verleye Prize* in memory of its founding father: a prize is awarded to students who have written a thesis on the forgotten factors of the European integration, being education, culture, ethics, citizenship, etc.
- *Joint European projects*: increasing involvement in European projects with a view to stimulate youngsters to actively reflect on the future of Europe, its vision and European citizens' needs. Ryckvelde cooperates with the European SPES Forum in the project "Imagine Europe", financed as a youth democracy project within the Youth in Action Programme of the European Union (DGEAC).

In the following we express a number of reflections on participative democracy based on a 50 years learning experience in formation and information on European issues. Participative democracy refers to an exchange of a diversity of views, the modes and organization of civil dialogue⁸ (i.e. the principle of participation aims at facilitating more inclusion of those issues and people that are usually underrepresented but are of major concern for European citizens) and the citizens' initiative. In practice, this means the right of petition, binding referendum at peoples' initiative, at the initiative of a Head of State, government or prescribed by the Constitution, removal procedures and forms of "on line democracy", creating a European public sphere/space. We identify advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses and present an experience-based assessment.

Advantages/ Strengths of participative democracy

⁸ Elodie Fazi and Jeremy Smith, "Civil Dialogue – Making it work better", Civil Society Contact Group, 2006, 100 p.

1. Content focused and citizens oriented: In contradiction to representative democracy where citizens vote for individual politicians (because they are thrust-worthy) or where citizens choose for a political party (because of the programmes' attractiveness), participative democracy focuses more on content themes. Representative democracy seems to be in crisis and the public has the impression/perceives that politicians are too busy with their own agenda and less occupied with the real problems. In a participative democracy with referenda the citizen feels that his vote has a direct impact on the reality. This increases his interest in the public cause, the common good and strengthens the citizen's involvement and participation in democratic life.

The experience with Ryckvelde is that the interest of young people and the broad public can be stimulated by talking about very concrete and clear issues concerning the European Union. When people are informed about the impact of European decisions on their direct life, than they often recognize the relevance and importance of the issues at stake. Once the interest is aroused, the preparedness grows to tackle and deepen more complex themes. Examples of training sessions and didactic materials illustrate a continuous link between people's daily life and the European context. Therefore methods, pedagogical tools, concrete targets as well as privileged testimonies are crucial. Some examples demonstrate this commitment.

- Didactic tool kit: 'Zeg eens EU...' The initial target group are course-members from the Centres of Basic Education and students from technical education. This pedagogical tool is also meant for socio-cultural organisations, associations, etc. Objective is that the teachers, trainers or moderators choose the themes which are most appropriate and best connected to specific interests of specific target groups.

- Training sessions for adults (social-cultural organisations). Examples are: - "*The EU in our daily life*": focus is on European realisations we are confronted with every day (e.g. : phoning, flying, technical standards for house hold tools, etc.); - "*The EU and Kyoto*": it deals with the global warming up and its consequences (e.g. Europe's role in the Kyoto protocol, the measures taken and the consequences on daily life); - "*The EU globalised*": it deals with concrete issues such as cheap textile from China, the financing crisis, social dumping or companies moving to developing countries; it also deals with the concept and (positive and negative) consequences of the process of globalisation (e.g. what is EU's role and its responsibility in the globalising world?)

- Concrete cooperation with the Regional centres: collaboration with "Europe Directs" of different provinces resulted in various projects for the 5th and 6th classes of primary education (e.g. 'Sterrenkijker' / Province of West-Flanders, 'Jelle en Jana' / Province East-Flanders or "Euroscoop" / Province Limburg). The linking with the specific province or territory makes Europe very recognisable and visible.

- Web quest ('SpEUrnEUs'): an internet search for children of the 5th and 6th grade of primary education in cooperation with the network of Europe Directs. Primary focus is on the link between the own region and the European dimension (e.g. West Flanders deals with the issue of war and peace; in East-Flanders they visit a firm that produces wooden toys and must respect the EU safety regulations, etc).

- Collaboration with the information offices of the European Parliament: information brochure for children: "The 24 hours of Europe".

- "Imagine Europe"⁹: The overall aim of this European youth project is to give a voice to youngsters in redefining the mission and identity of Europe. In fact, "Imagine Europe" wants to stimulate young people to think about how we can create a European Union with more soul

⁹ <http://www.imagine-europe.eu/>

and more attention to the needs of its citizens. The activities of the project “Imagine Europe” consist of two parts: local programmes in several European countries with partner institutions and a European Youth conference¹⁰. The result of this all should be the creation of a network of young people all over Europe who are multipliers and stimulate other youngsters in Europe to participate in democracy projects or in the political decision making process. The “Imagine Europe” website is meant to stimulate this European youth network.

2. Agenda setting: Forms of participative democracy at European level may put European issues high on the political agenda in a Member State. In countries such as France, the Netherlands and Ireland where referenda were organized either on the “Treaty for establishing a European Constitution” or “the Reform Treaty”, the attention for the European case has increased. European issues are (hotly) debated with positive and negative reactions. It certainly opens up a space for opportunities as to information, communication, the role of the media and transmitting honest assessments. More than in the case for European Parliamentary elections participative democracy focuses on specific European issues. In the present format of European Parliamentary elections whereby national (regional) list of candidates are presented, the elections are perceived as popularity polls of national (regional) parties beyond the scope of the real issues.

Disadvantages/ Weaknesses of participative democracy

1. It remains a difficult task and challenge to explain complex technical issues to the citizen. Moreover, concretising Europe has its limits. The heterogeneity of the public often makes content discussion and debate difficult. More than before the general public has become interested in issue-related participation and less in general debate. In sum, it will remain difficult to inspire or motivate the totality of the population with a general discourse. This has an impact on the methodology and pedagogy of participative democracy, the choice of themes and the organisation of formation and information. In representative elections it is often not easy to make the majority of the population to participate; this is often related to the democratic deficit, the indifference of citizen to the public cause and the waning trust in politics.

2. As has been clear in the referenda in France, the Netherlands and Ireland, people have been voting against or in favour for the most diverging and contradictory reasons. It is often easier to build a coalition against a proposition in the public opinion than a coalition pro. Moreover, participative democracy tools if not well designed and coherently explained to citizens, can be misused. Populists and populist parties can often very easy adapt their policies to changing circumstances of proposed themes in the participative democracy. This often makes it difficult to draw general policy conclusions from the outcomes of referenda.

Assessment:

¹⁰ During Spring 2008 various local “Imagine Europe” initiatives took place in different European countries with following partner institutions: Dondeyne-huis, H. Spirit College, International Office K.U.Leuven, B; Institute of Political Sciences and Student Association Political Sciences (Opole University, Pl); Foundation European Studies Lodz and Young Europeans (Poland); Centro de Estudios Europeos (Universidad Navarra), Pamplona and Student Residence Colegio Mayor Belagua in San Sebastián (Spain) and with the University of Bogazici and Euro-Mediterranean Youth Association, Istanbul (Turkey). A final European Youth Conference is organized in Brussels (12-15 November 2008) for about 60 students coming from the various partner institutions.

From the above short analysis following lessons can be drawn for the practice of participative democracy¹¹:

1. Participative democracy covers commonly accepted features such as a) involvement of non-state actors, mainly individual citizens and civil society organisations; b) extension of the concept of citizenship beyond the conventional political sphere; c) focus on policy-makers' permanent accountability between elections; d) recognition of citizens' right to participate in public life through alternative channels, e) possibility for citizens to take direct responsibility in public life; f) possibility for women or citizens belonging to minority groups to make their voice heard in the public debate; g) emphasis of the role of civil society organisations as important forces of integration and empowerment.
2. Prerequisites are needed for a well functioning participative democracy: an applied vision and generous commitment shaped by different actors and partnerships at various policy levels, a sufficiently pro-active and autonomous civil society, territorial embeddedness, trust-building instruments and innovative methods, supportive financing structure, etc.
3. The building of European public spheres assumes a move from participative to deliberative democracy tools: originally driven by the need to tackle the shortcomings of representative democracy, civil dialogue appears as a mean to bring back in the policy decision the citizens whose voice is not always sufficiently heard.
4. The importance of testimonies of best practices in formal and informal learning of participative democracy: a deliberative context is needed if participative democracy is not reduced to a katalysator of public moods and used for own political purposes.
5. The following points arise as key challenges for the development of (new) instruments for participative democracy: a) providing an enabling structure leading to concrete outcomes; b) the need for better horizontal coordination and equal access; c) strengthening trust and mutual understanding between NGOs and EU institutions and d) the need for an inclusive approach.
6. European cooperation in the field of education means direct investment in Europe's future: a) Important in this perspective is the recently launched Comenius Regio Partnerships, i.e. an action under the Lifelong Learning Programme. It will create new opportunities for cooperation in school education between local and regional authorities, schools and other learning organisations across Europe; b) the establishment of a European (regional) programme similar to the Democracy Fund at the United Nations ('UNDEF'). Its primary purpose is to strengthen the voice of civil society and ensure the participation of all groups in democratic practices. It funds projects that enhance democratic dialogue and support for constitutional processes, civil society empowerment, etc.

¹¹ See also Berger Nicolas, Participatory Democracy: organised civil society and the "new" dialogue, Paper given at the Federal Trust and UACES conference "Towards a European Constitution", London 1-2 July 2004.