

EUROPEAN  
NETWORK  
OF POLITICAL  
FOUNDATIONS



INDEPENDENT ACTORS IN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

# Reconnecting Europe with its Citizens – the Role of Political Foundations

A Policy Paper from  
the European Network of  
Political Foundations  
(ENoP)

July 2015

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## Executive Summary

Taking a proper look at Europe reveals a gap between its citizens and the institutions; the two founding elements of the integration process stand apart from one another. A new *modus vivendi* between citizens and the EU is therefore needed, in order to tackle today's challenges and re-engage Europeans with their project. This is about Europe; it is about us.

This new European vision is crucial, perhaps more so than ever before in its young history. However, at this critical, defining moment, internal divisions seem to be challenging its core existence. Recent developments suggest that the very definition and identity of the EU and its relations with member states and citizens are becoming hot topical issues. If Europe is to play a role in the future, it will have to find a way to inspire, include and re-engage its citizens.

This policy paper was drafted by the ENoP Working Group 'Citizenship' and aims to provide a joint understanding of active European citizenship and some of its challenges, highlighting amongst others the role of political foundations, education and social media.

With its members representing different party families, the structure of ENoP fosters a pluralistic debate. Processes of integration cannot be taken for granted: inclusive debate that engages all citizens is essential. Recognising this complexity, the experience of our WG proved that dialogue can lead to a common understanding and position. In the first chapter, the current paper defines the concept of Active Citizenship. The second part elaborates on how to achieve an enabling environment for active citizenship, while the last two chapters focus on the particular relevance of two specific actors in the field: social media and political foundations. The latter is also illustrated by best practice examples of ENoP member foundations. The conclusion provides several thought-provoking recommendations.



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## Introduction

Elections are a natural barometer of all democratic societies. Every five years the gap between the EU and its citizens becomes wider: when the first direct elections for the European Parliament were held in 1979, the turnout was close to 65%, but since then it has continuously declined, reaching a level of around 42% for the last elections in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Even though Europe is slowly emerging from a lengthy crisis, citizens continue to feel that European and national decision-makers are unable to meet their expectations: decisions taken at national level are disconnected from their needs, and there is a lack of trust in European institutions.

Citizens feel that decisions are taken at a level too distant and disconnected from them, and the EU seems to be unable to solve the everyday problems of its citizens. The rise in votes for Eurosceptic or even anti-European movements and the aforementioned record low turnout stand as stark warnings that call for an immediate response.

The task to devise new strategies for discussing the European project are often delegated to the European institutions. However, civil society – including political foundations – must also come up with concrete measures in order to counteract this trend of perceiving ‘Europe’ and the ‘European Union’ as politically sensitive subjects in EU member countries. In considering the political, economic, but also demographic and societal challenges the EU and its member states are facing, it nonetheless becomes obvious that Europe is needed more than ever.

As a positive force, this need has the power to revive the dream of a more united Europe. So how can this gap best be bridged and how can Europe become more tangible if even acknowledgement of the historic and current need for Europe cannot dispel the fear of a technocratic giant unable to tackle real citizens’ issues? To dispel the fear of losing control as the centre of decision-making moves further away from one’s local reality? Or to counter the fear of losing our grip as the land with which we have always identified ourselves is redefined – or worse – if all definition of identity and belonging is rendered meaningless when confronted with reality rationales?

Examining how to strengthen an *Active EU Citizenship* almost 20 years after the concept first appeared in the EU debate, this paper draws on various aspects of the ambivalent relationship between the EU and its citizens. By providing food-for-thought, awareness should be raised on the divide between EU institutions and citizens in order to foster a discussion both within the European institutions and with external civil society actors.

The list of recommendations drawn up at the end of the paper summarises the ideas and reflections elaborated within the European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP).

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html>

## 1. The EU and its citizens in a nutshell

The relationship between the EU and its citizens has been the subject of debate since the early days of European integration. European integration has very often been perceived as an elitist project<sup>2</sup> too distant from its citizens, though Art. 1 of the Treaty of the European Union states the aim of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. Ever since, this approach has been strengthened in all other Treaty revisions by awarding a stronger role in the decision-making process to the European Parliament and including elements of direct democracy.

The Treaty of Maastricht added a new dimension for nationals of EU member states, making them European citizens with certain subsequent rights, the most obvious of which is the right to take part in the elections for the European Parliament, but also the rights of movement, residence and consular assistance. However, all of this has not yet contributed to the development of a real European spirit among the people of Europe, leaving the rift between the EU and its citizens as still unbridgeable. The debate culminated in the French and Dutch 'No' vote on the Constitutional Treaty and the impasse on the budget in June 2005, leading to a time of profound reflection that ended with the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty.

Against this backdrop, in 2005 the then EU Commissioner Wallström elaborated the so-called 'Plan D'<sup>3</sup> to open up a debate built on a clearer view of citizens' expectations, including an on-line discussion about the future of Europe. The initiatives within the framework of the 'Plan D' campaign improved the debate on EU-related themes, but failed to produce any concrete results. Other Treaty revisions produced an increase in direct democracy tools and enhancing citizens' participation – such as the European Citizens' Initiative – but again their results were modest.

Twenty years after the Maastricht Treaty, the European Year of Citizens 2013<sup>4</sup> was dedicated to the rights that come with EU citizenship. The annual messages were aimed at a general EU audience with a view to better informing them about their status as European citizens, with a broad base of multipliers engaged in order to reach the widest public possible.

Unfortunately, a lack of funding for bottom-up activities did not allow for the full involvement of all relevant national multipliers in the implementation of the European Year, so not all available opportunities were able to be taken advantage of to maximise the relevance of the activities of the European Year of Citizens.<sup>5</sup>

Since July 2012 the Commission has conducted 51 Citizens Dialogues, organised in all 28 member states of the EU. Under the then European Commission President Barroso and together with 21 Commissioners, the first pan-European Citizens' Dialogue was held in the Commission's Visitors Centre in Brussels and the 'Europe for Citizens' programme was established.

The impact of these activities on relations between the EU and its citizens remains questionable. In reality the process of transforming the attitudes of people and politicians is not a one-way street: even though the Commission created projects and activities in order to stimulate debate and dialogue, only a few members of the general public were engaged in the deliberative projects.

There are limits to what a communication strategy can achieve, and though the dialogue led to increased debate, it did not culminate in a reform of the EU institutions. The question to be addressed is therefore how to develop more active citizenship and what role political foundations can play in fostering this.

2 See e.g.: Giandomenico Majone (2009): *Europe as the Would-be World Power*, Cambridge, 22-45.

3 See SEC (2005) 985. (20.07.2005). Action Plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission.

4 See <http://europa.eu/citizens-2013/en/about/>

5 See European Commission: Evaluation of the 2013 European Year of Citizens. Executive Summary, available at:

<http://europa.eu/citizens-2013/sites/default/files/content/document/EYC%20evaluation%20executive%20summary%20FINAL%20EN.pdf>



## 2. Towards an active citizenship

The term 'Active Citizenship' was first used in a European context when developing the proposals for the European Commission's Lisbon 2010 Strategy towards establishing a competitive 'knowledge society' and 'greater social cohesion'.

In this context, Active Citizenship was described as a way of empowering citizens by having their voices heard within their communities, acquiring a sense of belonging and a stake in the society in which they live, appreciating the value of democracy and equality and understanding different cultures and different opinions. Since then, Active Citizenship has been defined in a number of different – but in the majority of cases complementary – ways. This definition usually entails two elements. First there is a focus on participation in civil society, community and/or political life. Here, Active Citizenship is a form of literacy: it implies being aware of what is happening around us, acquiring knowledge and understanding so as to make informed judgments and having the skills and courage to respond in the appropriate way, individually or collectively.

Active Citizenship embodies the conviction that every individual can make a difference to the community in which he or she lives – be it local, national or global.

Three distinct forms of participation can be distinguished: Representative Democracy, Protest and Social Change, and Community Participation.

Secondly, Active Citizenship is characterised by mutual respect, non-violence and respect for human rights and democracy. This is not so much an ethical framework of norms and values as a necessary basis for making dialogue possible.

Tolerance, respect and responsibility are part and parcel of the institutional design of modern democracies, which bring together three elements: the private autonomy of citizens, each of whom pursues a life of his or her own; democratic citizenship, which is the inclusion of free and equal citizens in the political community; and independence of a public sphere that operates as an intermediary between state and society.

### 3. Creating an environment for active citizenship

Given the highly complex environment, it is difficult to identify single projects or interventions and their contribution to Active Citizenship. Four elements are usually highlighted:

Firstly, relations between development and Active Citizenship. It has been shown that Active Citizenship correlates negatively with the Corruption Perceptions index, but positively with the GDP per capita and the Human Development index. This suggests that people are more motivated to contribute to political dialogue if they have more faith in their leaders, but also that without Active Citizenship, corruption and the phenomenon of an informal economy will continue to operate to the detriment of every individual citizen and the state as a whole. This situation can lead to a vicious circle and implies that work is needed on both fronts.

Secondly, the role of education is often highlighted as Active Citizenship can be considered as a form of social capital. Moreover, by definition Active Citizenship requires cognitive elements such as knowledge, skills and affective elements such as attitudes, values and intended behaviour. The level of education a person has received also correlates with Active Citizenship, but this relationship is non-linear, with a particularly strong link to tertiary education. Thirdly, the role of formalised structures in the production of social capital considers Active Citizenship in relation to *structural social capital*, relatively objective and externally observable social structures such as networks, associations, and institutions, and the rules and procedures that they embody. These three elements are mutually reinforcing but can exist independently of each other.

The fourth and often most contested element is the level of coercion that is considered acceptable. Adults generally accept that

active citizenship is a right and not a duty, and thus that there should be a total absence of coercion. Apart from perhaps the obligation to vote, Active Citizenship should only exist as an open invitation to participate in public life. The case is less straightforward when dealing with children and youth, however. Here, firstly the teacher must represent the world as it is, not how he or she wants it to be. While introducing the learner to an older world, the curriculum must nonetheless respect the individuality of each child as a new and unique life, with a claim on the world and an inalienable and indivisible right to participate therein. One simply cannot talk about citizenship rights and deny the right to be informed. Secondly, it is understood that external motivation can and sometimes should be introduced to encourage a child to participate in formational activities. Only in doing so can the child develop into an adult capable of making informed decisions about if and how to participate to public life.

Active Citizenship can therefore be understood in its broadest sense as 'participation' and is not restricted to the political dimension. It ranges from cultural and political to environmental activities, on local, regional, national, European and international levels. It includes new and less conventional forms of Active Citizenship, such as one-off political issues and responsible consumption, as well as the more traditional forms of voting and membership of political parties and NGOs. The limits of active citizenship are set by those activities and attitudes that destroy the public space in which dialogue takes place. People's activities should support the community and not contravene the principles of human rights and the rule of law. Participation in extremist groups that promote intolerance and violence should therefore not be included in this definition of Active Citizenship.

#### Getting Citizens Involved: Inspiring local council representatives

by CEVRO (Czech Republic)

CEVRO – The Liberal Conservative Academy organised a series of seminars on citizen involvement in the policy-making process designated for local council representatives. The aim of this project was to familiarise politicians with the idea of interactive policy-making processes and provide them with examples of good practice, where active citizens become partners for government.

There is an opportunity for citizen participation in almost every part of the policy-making process. However, each phase and issue requires different kinds of action. Various methods and techniques for involving citizens were presented to the seminar participants, who learned how to better listen to public needs and desires and deal with different kinds of protests. Moreover, they heard how to prevent defiance and successfully reach a consensus.

Interactive seminars were held in 11 county towns of the Czech Republic in spring of 2013. The seminars were given by lecturers experienced in citizen participation, with good practice in moderating the dialogue between local governments and the public.

## 4. The Role of social media

Social Media can be a supportive tool for increasing political engagement among EU citizens. Nevertheless, using social media as a simple extension of the traditional election campaign (i.e. advertising) cannot be expected to reinforce people's interest in EU politics. Yet this is exactly what the ambition should be in order to reach the 300 million active social media users, who accounted for 40% of the population of Europe at the start of 2015.

Statistics show that elections are one of the most popular topics discussed in social networks, indicating both a public interest in political participation and the importance of social media as a communication tool for political parties. Consequently, in addition to and aligned with traditional media and advertising, election campaigns are increasingly dependent on the successful use of social media. Well-known recent examples of this are major election campaigns such as those in the United States, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, Romania and the European Parliament, all of which highlighted the importance of social media for future elections.

Social Media should not simply be utilised as a broadcast channel, but rather as an interactive means of real communication with citizens. In this way online political dialogue can be promoted, highlighting people's concerns and putting into practice the idea of transforming the EU from a top-down to a bottom-up project. By providing effective new channels for dialogue, social media has the ability to foster online public discussions about the future of Europe and can play a crucial role in enhancing political mobilisation and participation as well as encouraging a stronger sense of citizenship and participation.

Key to this strategy will be the development of online monitoring tools to analyse the social media political mood at an early stage and identify areas that the political campaign should focus on in order to resolve any potential misunderstandings about the European Union, political participation or Active Citizenship. A sophisticated political strategy based on the above-mentioned values can close the feedback loop as well as help political leaders adjust the political agenda and make it more appealing for citizens.

### Elections Observatory

by KKID (Greece)

Since October 2012, the Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy (KKID) has been implementing a research programme on citizenship via an online election observatory. Electionsnet.org is a web platform aiming to provide information, raise public awareness on electoral issues and democracy and reinforce citizenship. The main objective of the programme is to highlight citizens' concerns and reflections through public discussions. It also aims to present common European challenges and provide a well-rounded approach to their resolution, through useful information and analysis on political tendencies, polls, interviews, results, online voting and relevant news updates.

Greek and international academics and analysts, together with the Institute's research team, are performing in-depth analysis of several European elections, such as past campaigns in Cyprus, Italy, Bulgaria, Germany, Austria, the UK and the European Parliament. These reports include a detailed presentation of the political system and parties of each country, the candidates and key issues on the political agenda, the main political challenges and their potential impact on the future of Europe.

At the core of this initiative, which started in 2012, was the fact that it is more effective to launch a public debate on EU elections well before the beginning of any political or advertising campaign. In this way public interest would increase gradually, thereby creating a basis of powerful multipliers in favour of participation and voting in the 2014 EU elections.

[electionsnet.org](http://electionsnet.org) is still evolving and aspires to become a source of credible information not only for journalists and analysts, but also a reference point for those who are closely following international politics and for all those who wish to be active citizens. Since youth participation is an essential issue, in the framework of the programme strong links with university student groups were created, particularly through the use of social media.

For more information: [www.electionsnet.org](http://www.electionsnet.org)

## 5. The Role of political foundations

Political foundations operate on the level in between government and citizens, where they are most effective. As such, they are part of the institutional build-up of the public sphere, enabling face-to-face interaction and reciprocity between speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions.

As such, a responsive civil society finds itself flanked by the anonymous masses and political decision-makers, assigning it an important role in legitimising policy through a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes.

In order to facilitate this process of deliberation, political foundations fulfil three functions: (a) they mobilise and pool relevant issues and (b) process such contributions discursively by means of proper arguments for and against. Taken together, these first two functions compose the educational tasks of political foundations but (c) political foundations are also expected to generate rationally motivated *yes* and *no* attitudes that are to inform political decision-makers.

In its plurality, ENoP allows for the sharing of opinions and frameworks of political analysis from and among political foundations. This enables third parties to feel welcome to express their views equally and freely, in particular when dealing with marginalised communities.

The complementary forces of institutional frameworks on the one hand and the plurality of discourse on the other mirror the social paradox that underscores society in terms of harmony and conflict at the same time. Moreover, it has been shown that group deliberation results in more consensual change rather than a polarising of opinions. Participants consequently demonstrate improved levels of information and broader perspectives on a clearer and more specific spectrum of issues.

Throughout the process, impersonal arguments tend to take priority over the influence of interpersonal relations and demonstrate an increasing trust, expressed in the procedural legitimacy of fair argument.

Political foundations as such serve as a vehicle for inclusive social dialogue. A comprehensive penetration of the institutional and public spheres by political foundations can be an important force in counteracting sectarianism and facilitating community-building.

## 6. Conclusion

The months and years to come will be decisive for the future of the European Union, with many voices offering different opinions on which direction European integration should take. In order to effectively engage with Eurosceptic and anti-European movements, structural debates and clear messages are needed to keep European citizens on board the European project.

In an environment that is challenging traditional structures and answers, political foundations contribute to the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions. They ensure that *relevant* issues, *required* information, and *appropriate* contributions are mobilised, thus balancing political, economic, and media power through the facilitation of social power. Moreover, they reintroduce discourse in an environment that is increasingly personal and commoditised. By their very nature, political foundations politicise the way the world appears to citizens by bringing in public discourse and relating this to a framework of political tools of analysis.

Rather than a truth-seeking potential or a normative model, the diversity of political foundations can be appreciated only in terms of the network which, on the one hand, facilitates the flow of information and opinion, and on the other connects people and contributes as such to the community formation necessary for establishing a real European spirit.

## Recommendations

(1) Feelings of scepticism and discontent still persist towards the process of European integration, which pose new risks for democracy and the European social model as a whole. It is therefore more necessary than ever to strengthen international alliances and networks, as well as to build together our shared democratic political projects on a continental scale.

As such, the following measures should be taken into account:

- 1.** Political foundations can be a powerful instrument for building and strengthening alliances, democracy support and development cooperation.
- 2.** The work of political foundations must be facilitated and adequately supported in order to ensure diversity, plurality and the representation of a whole spectrum of political opinions and viewpoints.
- 3.** In order for citizens to engage with policy development, effective mechanisms need to be put in place to provide diversified and objective information and education for citizens. This is a major task for all political foundations.
- 4.** The use of direct democracy tools needs to be facilitated by a less technocratic but more citizen-oriented approach, in order to foster pan-European debates on issues that are relevant for European citizens.
- 5.** The Citizen's Dialogue should be continued and should develop into a permanent exchange forum where citizens can discuss important institutional and political developments with political leaders before the decision-making process starts.
- 6.** Innovative on-line communication tools should be integrated into policy-shaping and used by politicians in order to reach out to broader groups of citizens, in particular the youth.
- 7.** The ultimate goal of European integration should be to foster a sense of community and ownership of the EU among its citizens.

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*The European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP) is the representative platform of currently 64 political foundations from 25 countries. ENoP unites member foundations from six party families (ALDE, EPP, S&D, ECR, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL). Political Foundations have been active players in the field of democracy support for several decades. On the one hand, they contribute to effective development and democratisation policies by implementing projects on the ground; on the other hand, they develop policy ideas and contribute to agenda-setting in the national and EU context. Since its establishment in 2006, accompanied by an inaugural speech by President Barroso, ENoP has become a trusted partner of EU institutions and an important actor in the field of democracy support. The network currently enjoys the financial support of the EC in the framework of the co-funded project 'Building a bridge towards socio-political stakeholders for an effective EU development assistance – enhanced dialogue with and within the European Network of Political Foundations'.*

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*Co-funded by the European Union*

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