Civil participation and the European Elections 2019

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore in what ways civil society participates and shapes the European Parliamentary elections and the campaign in 2019. Due to digitalisation civil society actors have new tools and platforms to mobilise and organise citizens, plus European Union institutions show a growing interest to provide space for civil dialogue and strengthen civil society. On the other hand, civil society is under great pressure in some of the member states, especially in countries where the ruling parties have an anti-European and populist orientation. Restrictive laws, scarce funding, criminalisation are part of the challenges that civil society actors are facing EU-wide nowadays, therefore, it is particularly relevant to map the diverse and dynamic landscape of the European civil space and to explore what roles different civil society actors currently play in the European level politics and particularly in relation to the elections.

The general context: changing role of civil society

Democratic deficit is a critique that is associated with all major EU institutions. They are often blamed for making their decision-making procedures inaccessible for ordinary citizens. Though the directly elected European Parliament increased its power, recurring low voting turnouts[1] in the elections and the general disinterest of citizens seriously question the multinational body's legitimacy. In this democratic deficit discourse civil society is described as an actor that can compensate the deficit assuming that it can help to overcome the distance between citizens and European institutions. This idea is manifested at the highest-level EU policies, hence, partnership between European Union institutions and civil society actors became a key term in the governance of the EU. This governance role is assigned mostly to the "organised civil society". One great challenge regarding the European civic space is to define what actors should be considered under this umbrella term. In a narrower sense, civil society is composed of registered organisations often referred to as non-governmental organisations (NGO). In a historical perspective, EU has been created and strengthened a couple of tools to interact with this more formal and professionalised segment of civil society. The European Commission has now a long tradition of organised consultation procedures with interest groups including non-governmental organisations, as well as it relies on non-state actors in advocacy and service delivery.[2]

It has been challenged however more often, whether NGO-s can successfully channel citizens' interests and agendas into policy making. Recently, there has been an increased emphasis on the issues of active citizenship besides the organised civil society and there are voices that urge more direct forms of citizen participation. These trends are to a large extent fuelled by digital technologies. New media tools and social media platforms make it easier for institutions to organise consultation processes directly

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[1] Average turnout in 2014 EP elections was 42,6 %. Especially low turnout of young people: in 2014 only 27,8% of young people between 18 and 24 years of age voted. Source: Parlameter 2018: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2018/parlemeter-2018/report/en-parlemeter-2018.pdf

[2] Beate Kohler-Koch & Christine Quittkat (2009) What is civil society and who represents civil society in the EU?—Results of an online survey among civil society experts, Policy and Society, 28:1, 11-22

with citizens. This puts civil society organisations in a new position and challenge their intermediary roles.

EU and direct citizen participation

Political parties are among the least trusted institutions in contemporary societies. Citizens question whether parties can represent them and have the capabilities to solve the complex problems of our societies. Representative democracy is facing serious deficit issues and it is assumed that the expansion of direct democracy is a possible answer to the problems. Direct democracy is built on the idea that citizens need to be involved in policy making directly.

The European Citizen's Initiative (ECI) is an example of how the EU wants to engage with individual citizens. The ECI, normally presented as the EU's main direct democracy tool was introduced in 2012 by creating a device for petitioning. It allows citizens to collect signatures and call on the Commission to propose legislative action. It is a question to what extent ECI fulfilled its goal. There have been four campaigns so far that reached the required 1 million signatures from 7 countries[3], but he Commission did not propose their desired legislative measures and the ECI is still unknown to the rest of the European citizens.[4]

The more than 30 failed initiatives made the recent reform of ECI necessary. The Parliament, the Council and the Commission reached a deal in December 2018 and a new, supposedly more user friendly ECI will apply from January 2020. The reformed tool will make it easier to set-up and register initiatives, organise the collection of signatures, furthermore, to support and follow-up the initiatives[5].

It is questionable though, how the reformed ECI will solve the tool's main shortcoming, namely its limited impact. Some explain that the absence of a well-developed European level direct democracy tool is leading to the growth of citizens' initiatives at the national and local levels[6].

Enthusiasts advocate different forms of direct democracy; one typical example would be citizens participation in policy and budget-making via citizen assemblies and digital platforms. For sceptics, direct democracy can cause more harm than good. Some go as far as to say that direct democracy is a tool that can best be utilised by populists. It is true, that populist parties have been successfully built on the idea of direct democracy (e.g. in Czech Republic the far-right party is named as Freedom and Direct Democracy Party). Though direct democracy is often framed as an opposite to representative democracy, some experts warn that they should not be treated as exclusionary, rather as complementary categories[7].

The ambition of the EU institutions to reach out and engage citizens in direct forms is part of the preparation for the European elections. Initiatives especially introduced by the European Parliament aim to encourage participation in the elections with non-partisan communication actions. **YouVoteEU**[8] is a participatory platform that connects citizens with civil society organisations, candidates and political parties. **What Europe does for me?**[9] is a multilingual website with short notes on how EU

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[3] http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/initiatives/successful
[4] https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/a-european-citizens-initiative-2-0-to-tackle-the-democratic-deficit
[5] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-6792_en.htm
[6] https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/11/15/getting-europe-s-direct-democracy-right-pub-77750
[7] https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/11/15/getting-europe-s-direct-democracy-right-pub-77750
[8] https://ecas.org/projects/you-vote-eu
[9] https://what-europe-does-for-me.eu/

impacted citizens life in different policy areas and in their localities. **This Time I'm Voting[10]** launched by the European Parliament is a grassroots campaign to get more people involved in the elections.

New forms of informal civil activism

Digital technology does not only shape the communication between institutions and individuals. Social media platforms make it easier to organise and mobilise different groups of citizens, which give an impetus to the less-institutionalised and NGO-ised informal civil society networks. With the proliferation of new technologies, the spread of grassroots activities, trans-border communities, the number and relevance of the 'informally organised' actors are growing. Yet they constitute a type of civil society which is often neglected in the public discourse and does not have a space in governance.

Initiatives building on digital tools and this new type of activism is relevant in the context of the elections too. Several projects have been launched recently which aspire dialogue and participation of European citizens. **Citizens' Agora**[11] organised by the Union of European Federalists is one example of projects that reflect on the problem of citizens' weakening control. The Agora seeks to make citizens opinions and proposals visible by bringing politicians and civil society representatives to a common platform. Similarly, **WeEuropeans**[12] aims to foster citizens' consultations and make citizens opinions and proposals visible by collecting proposals on European issues directly from citizens. The **European Balcony Project**[13] called citizens around Europe to gather at a single moment on 10th November 2018 in theatres, balconies and public spaces to debate the future of Europe and citizens' claims. **Pulse of Europe**[14] organizes monthly Sunday rallies in registered cities across Europe. The main goal is to send positive massages through the events and to mobilise citizens against nationalistic and protectionist tendencies in Europe. **Allience4Europe**[15] is a network of Europeans particularly established for the elections. Their goal is to mobilise 3 million voters who otherwise would not vote in May 2019.

Common in these projects that they are non-partisan, require rather short-term commitment by participants and use digital media tools to mobilize citizens.

These inclusive Pan-European campaigns can also be looked through the lenses of the concept of the **European Public Sphere**.

It is much debated among scholars whether the EU can act as a communicative space, whether it has a public sphere. Public sphere is a theoretical concept and defined as a medium for political justification, political initiative, a space where citizens can be empowered and influence decision-makers. Practically, public sphere is the space where civil society is linked to decision-making. The model of public sphere presupposes a homogenous political community, and it questions whether such a sphere can evolve in the European Union where there is no collective identity, shared language and one single European discourse. Some experts hold that there is no one unified European public sphere, instead there are segmented parallel publics which emerge around policy networks. Even more recently the idea of the public sphere is related to the European media. The EU and its institutions on the one hand are gaining increasing visibility in different media outlets. On the other hand, mass media in the member states supply the public with information on EU matters. What we can witness is more the Europeanisation of public spheres instead of a single pan-European public sphere[16]. The Pan-

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[10] https://www.thistimeimvoting.eu/

[11] https://www.federalists.eu/we-are-europe/we-are-europe-citizens-agora/

[12] https://weeuropeans.eu

[13] https://europeanbalconyproject.eu

[14] https://pulseofeurope.eu

[15] https://www.alliance4europe.eu/

[16] https://www.martenscentre.eu/blog/making-european-public-sphere-state-union-2017

European media like Politico, Euronews and Euractiv are important actors in shaping the public European discourse, and the above mentioned Pan-European campaigns initiated by the Commission and civil society actors provide new platforms that can strengthen the European democracy.

New political movements

Beside technology as an enabling factor, another important drive explaining the emergence of new networks' is citizens' disappointment with traditional institutions and party politics. As mirrored in voting turnouts, there is a growing alienation from political dialogue at all level of politics. Therefore, initiatives emerge that are experimenting with new ways of mobilisation. As a result, not just non-partisan, but new semi political-civil actors appear that are trying to find solution to the challenges of traditional party politics and citizens' apolitical attitudes. Currently we are witnessing the emergence of new transnational parties e.g. **VOLT** Europe and **Diem25** from the bottom-up at the European level. Though they position themselves differently on the political spectrum, both are identifying themselves as pan-and pro-European. VOLT is funded by students and young professionals who had not yet been politically active before. The party has about 20000 members, in more than 30 countries and aims to participate in European, local and national elections through its subsidiary organisations in the member states. VOLT communicated that they are committed to the European integration but also that a deep reform of institutions is necessary. DiEM25's leading figure is the former Greek finance minister Yannis Varoufakis. They claim that the current way the EU operates is unsustainable and will lead to collapse, because it puts the interests of corporations and the financial oligarchy above democracy, social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

Not all new political movements are pro-European. **Generation Identity** is a far-right movement started in France and spread across Europe which claims to represent "indigenous Europeans" and promote white supremacy.

Based on the latest Eurobarometer poll, the majority of European citizens perceive the new political movements positively. New movements "against the old establishment" are perceived by at least 40 % of the respondents as being capable of finding new solutions better than the traditional parties[17].

The shrinking civil space: populism and attempts for new media platforms

There is a general agreement among practitioners and researchers that the civic space has been shrinking around the globe as well as in Europe. This can be manifested in restrictive legislations that diminish the basic rights (freedom of assembly and expression) or limit the functions of NGOs. Often in the name of "traditional values" populist and anti-democratic political forces see the collective efforts by civil society with suspicion and try to destroy civil society organisations' public image and credibility by criminalising them. The Hungarian case is an example where we find both legal restrictions and a negative propaganda against civil society. Orbán's government is continuously attacking civil society and escalated its attacks with a legislative package in 2017 with the aim, among others, of combating money laundering. The introduced legislation obliges CSOs to declare themselves as 'organisations in receipt of foreign funding' for donations received from abroad above a certain threshold. Civil society actors face challenges in terms of financial sustainability, legal restrictions and harmful messages that ruin their legitimacy.

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[17] Parlameter 2018: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge

Media is as polarised as many member states' political systems. Beside the raise of media platforms echoing Eurosceptic and populist voices, fake news and scandal-oriented journalism are spreading across Europe. Credible, reliable, fact-based journalism would be essential for a healthy civil society both in member states and at the European level. Taking an action into this direction, there are emerging professional networks of journalists who are seeking to create platforms often on a voluntary basis. **N-Ost**[18] is a cross-border network whose aim is to create a new platform for foreign reporting by professional journalists and media activists. **TOL**[19] (Transition Online) has a similar mission with a regional focus on post-communist and former Soviet Union countries.

Summary

Civil society is witnessing turbulent times both at the national and European levels. Digitalisation enables mobilisation and new forms of direct participation. EU institutions have new tools to reach out to citizens, and citizens can also organise themselves in new ways in which short-term activism, grassroots type of organising and transnational network building are more prevalent. New initiatives are appearing which try to influence the outcomes of the elections and European politics in general by engaging citizens and foster public discourse on European values, futures and policies. Beside citizens' activism, new political movements emerge which identify themselves as alternative to the mainstream party politics and use citizen-driven community-organising tools. The new movements are diverse, we find pro-European and anti-European, protectionist movements among them.

Though technology-driven innovations give new opportunities for the renewal of civil space, citizens and organised civil society organisations experience difficulties in channelling their voices into decision-making at all levels. The tendency of citizens' growing interest for less-institutionalised, more ad-hoc forms of activism goes parallel with the shrinking of civil space. Governments tend to limit civil society's manoeuvring and in a growing number of member states populist ruling parties pose legal restrictions against civil society organisations. Restrictive policies are often complemented by negative propaganda and the criminalisation of civil society actors. As a response, there is a growing number of civil society-driven projects that mobilise citizens with pro-European messages and tend to create an alternative space for the dialogue on the European values. In the coming weeks of the campaign, it will be interesting to look at these diverse actors that constitute the current European civil ecosystem.

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[18] https://n-ost.org/
[19] https://www.tol.org/client/