

European Conference  
**The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:  
 What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

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**Keynote**

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**European Divergence and the Role of Citizenship Education**

In the optimistic 1990s, the introduction of the Euro was seen to represent the kernel of the European integration process. The single currency was meant to act as the motor for “ever-closer” convergence of European economies, thereby promoting ever-closer integration of public spheres and national policies, leading eventually to a form of political union.

By now, such logic has been proven misleading and inadequate. In the absence of a strong and common political direction, the EU is undergoing a process of structural *divergence*, highlighted by diverging employment, growth, productivity, competition, and fiscal trajectories. Far from producing cohesion, in the absence of common fiscal policies the euro is *reinforcing* such divergence-patterns, undermining in the process the legitimacy and capacity for action of transnational institutions. Monetary policy, the area where most integration in principle is achieved, is just the most blatant example: Failing transmission belts mean that interest rates set for the whole of the Eurozone by the ECB no longer translate into similar financial environments across member states. The recent lowering of interest rates to a record-low of 0.25% has been much decried in Germany for the burden it places on the revenues of pension funds and savers. But SMEs in Spain live on a totally different planet: The average refinancing rate for companies from the South of Europe is closer to 8% if not higher, more than double the borrowing costs for their Northern competitors. In the absence of exchange-rate fluctuations this translates into a tremendous drag on the competitiveness of Southern enterprises, thereby increasing the productivity gap within the Eurozone. Similar considerations could be made about the refinancing rates of public debt. Economical patterns, left to their own are *pushing Europe apart*. And one does not need to be a Marxist to believe in the terrific power of economic trends to influence social, cultural, and political evolution.

Without the possibility of monetary devaluation to keep imbalances in check, and without courageous common fiscal policies, austerity calls for internal devaluation, hitting notably on labour, on social welfare and on investment for growth. A 2013 report by the Red Cross highlights that Europe is the only continent on the planet to be increasing rather than reducing the number of poor people. This should come as a tremendous shock to all of us. Ungoverned, the process of economic divergence risks locking Europe into long-term stagnation, rising inequalities and chronic unemployment. This is not the prophecy of Cassandra, but the bulletins of the ECB and the IMF read honestly. An average of 0.5 to 1% growth in the next years is going, at best, to stabilize the job market at current unacceptable levels, while wealth continues to be polarized and half of Europe’s youth remains out of work in the South, producing a lost and grieving generation on the way. This is not a recovery, but

a joyless and jobless stagnation. Existing and planned EU mechanisms are at best merely *palliative*: just think of the Youth Guarantee – a few billion euros over five years to tackle an unprecedented emergency with youth unemployment. There is no European investment plan in sight, no “Abenomics for Europe”, no serious policy to cut the cost of debt refinancing. It isn’t a rosy picture.

Economic divergence is also producing cultural divergence, with the public debate on Europe speaking increasingly different and often antagonistic tongues in “core” and “peripheral” countries. We see new animosities building up, national stereotypes and distrust returning. With investment in education and research cut back in some member states as part of austerity packages, the skill-set of European youth is becoming increasingly differentiated. Even the principle of labour mobility, and especially mobility of young people is suffering. In theory the great transfer of young people we are witnessing across the EU could be an immensely positive factor for integration. But this mobility is coming to resemble more the migration flows of the past century, and less the circular movement of the vibrant Erasmus generation. It is young people from the South moving to the North, a uni-directional migration that deprives only certain countries of human capital and increasingly appears a coercive effect of power imbalances across the EU.

Making Europe work for its citizens is possible. We *can* go forwards, we *can* emerge from this crisis with a strong polity and a renewed understanding of democracy, of justice, and of equality fit for the twenty-first century. But for this Europe needs a leap, and nothing short of a *radical* leap. The good news is that there is no scarcity of detailed proposals for what should be done. Over the last three years European Alternatives has been running over 70 citizen panels and 13 international forums in 16 countries, engaging thousands of citizens to build a detailed manifesto containing over 80 pages of policy proposals for a democratic and more fair Europe. We have concrete ideas to rein in the financial industry and return banks to their original role of protecting savings and lending to business; we can build common minimum social standards that protect European citizens from falling into poverty, introducing minimum salaries and a minimum income; we have details proposals for industrial conversion and investment plans, for a plan for youth employment, for the better protection of the rights of minorities beginning from migrants and the Roma. We have no shortage of proposals to empower the European Parliament, participatory tools such as the European Citizens Initiative, and hold unaccountable inter-governmental decision mechanisms (all proposals on [www.citizenspact.eu](http://www.citizenspact.eu)).

But such policies require structural Europe-wide legitimate and democratic governance mechanisms, touching on labour market, wealth redistribution, education systems, welfare systems, and industrial policy. This, in turn requires political will on the part of elites and citizens for substantial integration. The process of divergence makes that will increasingly fragile. And so, where is the political agency for the necessary leap going to come from? And most importantly, beyond legislative or institutional change, how do we pull Europe back together from the standpoint of citizenship and self-understanding of European citizens? Citizenship education, together with the empowerment of grassroots movements and initiatives to “act European”, still has much to offer.

### **Citizenship education and citizen movements**

Real European democracy is in fact, not just about institutions or laws, but also and particularly about learning and enacting practices of European democracy. As Etienne Balibar is fond of saying, recuperating a concept dear to Antonio Gramsci, “what history shows is that a *demos* does not pre-exist its own political mobilization; on the contrary, it is the ensemble of democratic movements within a social and political context that create or

generate the *demos*, especially if they also include a resistance to multiple forms of de-democratization or expropriation of the people's right to politics, which is precisely the case today. Therefore what we need to recreate in Europe is a proliferation of democratic movements."

What this means is that a sense of shared European citizenship is not something to be built externally from "above" or as an empty conceptual space, nor something that will naturally spring up through cold institutional reform, but rather something that arises through its very *enactment* through citizenship practices on the ground. Rather than a single European "demos" we could be speaking in the plural of the formation of multiple European *demoi*. That is to say, different transnational movements and initiatives become conscious of a common sense of destiny in a shared European political community through their own mobilization around transnational claims or life-experiences.

The Erasmus programme is certainly the most cited example of such a practice and not unsurprising talk of the "Erasmus generation" is omnipresent. But over the last two years a much wider process of "Europeanization" of initiatives and protest has taken place, often amounting to a real "enactment of European citizenship through dissent", as often argued by Engin Isin.

We may cite the example of important European Citizens Initiatives (ECI) that have mobilised huge numbers around shared demands: the ECI demanding a universal right to clear water and avoiding the privatization of water services collected 1.8million supporters, mobilising citizens groups, activists, NGOs across the Union. Or, on an even more grassroots level, recent important protests to avoid the destruction of Rosia Montana, a mountain in Romania, and its nearby villages by blocking the plans of a Canadian gold mining corporation. A quintessentially local or at best national concern, activists have built an incredible European network, linking with other protests around environmental and land issues in Greece, Germany, Sweden, Italy and beyond, and staging protests and initiatives in a very large number of European countries. There is now even an attempt to turn this budding European network into an ECI to demand EU legislation banning the use of cyanide in mining projects. On a more conflictual level still, the evolution of the "Blockupy" movement – famous for staging protests in front of the ECB tower in Frankfurt – represents a remarkable example of turning national stereotypes on their head. A German-led process, the initial keywords of the movement accepted the fragmentation of the European space between north and south as a starting point, demanding replacement of austerity with "solidarity" between countries. After a yearlong process of discussion and meetings with citizens and protest groups from throughout Europe, the discussion has surprisingly changed. The focus is no longer placed on "northern countries" having to help "southern countries", but rather on the unacceptable levels of inequality and poverty that besiege *all* European countries (German "mini-jobs" are now often mentioned, for example). The call is now a common demand for policies that promote equality and social justice anywhere in Europe. This is much more than a simple linguistic shift: It represents the transformation of a more traditional "internationalist" logic of separate national spaces into a transnational logic of taking responsibility for change in a common European polity.

Citizenship education needs to be at the heart of these processes, fostering "learning by doing" and empowering citizens groups to activate all channels of democratic participation to construct a real space for civic engagement at transnational level. Promoting European citizenship education means, politically, fighting the feeling of disenfranchisement that nationalist movements thrive upon and enabling citizens to express their demands as European citizens who have a right to be listened to. To achieve this – particularly in the context of an often difficult European democratic set-up – promoting networking and cross-

pollination between similar groups with similar concerns across countries, while empowering these groups with a tool-kit of participation techniques that includes the ECI, the European Parliament Committee on Petitions, as well as more grassroots models and practices, is of paramount importance.

Ultimately, a positive programme for real democracy in Europe rests on our collective capacity to redesign transnational institutions of democracy that can effectively act on our common concerns, projects and problems. A common sense of democratic purpose needs to be fostered between the different emergent *demoi*, orientating punctual and issue-specific transnational action around a common demand for the transformation of the European Union into a space where citizens may find response to their requests for change. This is the role of politics. But without an aware, alert, and empowered European citizenry, politics too often risks turning into little more than demagoguery.