

Introduction

Questo numero di De Europa è dedicato al suo direttore Umberto Morelli, prematuramente scomparso, amico e collega, studioso dell'Europa e appassionato assertore del suo processo di integrazione.

This issue of De Europa is devoted to its director Umberto Morelli, who died suddenly and prematurely. Friend, colleague and passionate scholar of Europe and its integration process his mentorship will be missed by us all.



Media, Democracy and Participation in the EU

Luciano Morganti, Marinella Belluati

Following the results of the European elections in May 2019, the newly elected President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, started her mandate issuing six political guidelines to set the work ahead for the European institutions during her five years mandate between 2019 and 2024¹. These political guidelines, focused on six headline ambitions, were inspired by the European Council's strategic agenda and her discussions with the parliament's political groups. *A new push for European Democracy*, her 6th priority, was mainly meant to give Europeans a stronger role in decision-making process and a more active role in setting political priorities, to offer the European Union and its Member States a joint approach to tackle fake news and disinformation, and to strengthen the Commission partnership with the European Parliament.

The following year, in December 2020, the European Commission launched the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP)² to counter disinformation and the rise of extremism and nurture pluralism in the European public space. Media, politics, and institutions are all involved in contrasting the rise of extremism and reducing the distance between people and politicians, strengthening media freedom, and fighting disinformation. The EDAP tries to connect traditional goals pursued by the institutions over time: citizens' empowerment and participation, transparency, innovation as institutional tools to improve internal cohesion in the European Public Sphere. Together with the EDAP, the European Commission has also launched the European Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (EMAAP)³. The EMAAP recognizes that the media and audiovisual sectors, heavily hit by the coronavirus crisis, are essential for democracy, Europe's cultural diversity and digital autonomy. In line with this comprehensive approach also a more specific initiative for the support of the news media sector was announced, with the scope of bundling existing and future actions and to provide a coordinated answer to the most pressing needs of the news sector (European Commission 2020).

The simultaneous launch of the EDAP and the EMAAP has been largely interpreted as a sign of the fact that media and democracy are now seen as tightly connected and essential to the critical re-launch of the European project that puts the

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf, accessed 14/10/2022

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790&from=EN>, accessed 14/10/2022

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0784&from=EN>, accessed 14/10/2022

citizens and their participation at the center of the debate together with a healthy European media system.

In line with the action started with the Action Plans mentioned above, and in view of protecting media freedom and pluralism in the EU, just a few weeks ago, on 16 September 2022, the European Commission published the European Media Freedom Act⁴, a proposal for a Regulation and Recommendation. The proposed regulation includes, amongst others, safeguards against political interference in editorial decisions and against surveillance, it put emphasis on the independence and stability of funding of public service media and focus on the transparency of media ownership and the allocation of state advertising. The European Freedom Act arrives after, and integrates other EU Commission initiatives that go in the same direction like the Recommendation to protect journalists and rights defenders from abusive litigation, of April 2022, the Recommendation on the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists of September 2021, and the important Digital Services Act⁵ and Digital Markets Act⁶ of December 2020.

Coherent with the objectives to reinvigorate, strengthen and experiment with new forms of citizen's participation, on 10 March 2021, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European Commission, signed the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The CoFoE was in its essence a citizen-led series of debates and discussions that ran from April 2021 till May 2022. The Conference has been presented by the Institutions and the press as a major pan-European democratic exercise that had at its centre citizen-led debates finalized at sharing ideas and proposals on the future of the European Union. European citizens could contribute to the debate in 24 E languages thanks to a Multilingual Digital Platform. Debates were divided into European and National Citizens' Panels. According to the final report of the CoFoE⁷, over 17.000 ideas were put on the table, these were discussed by some 50.000 active participants and the Conference Digital Platform had nearly 5 million unique visitors. Just a few months ago, 49 citizens' proposals were presented on the symbolic date of the 9th of May 2022 to the attention of the European Parliament, Council and Commission. For all the above, the conference will probably be remembered as an unprecedented experience of European transnational deliberative democracy.

While the European Union has become increasingly crucial for the life and the work of its 450M citizens, the European integration process itself has historically been characterized by cyclical crises. The last years - and the very last months - are a clear example of this revolving of cyclical crises.

The EU has had to face a long-lasting economic crisis and a migration crisis that played an important role most probably in the important rise of populist and euro-sceptic parties all over Europe. As a matter of fact, their rise accompanied and thrived

⁴<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/european-media-freedom-act-proposal-regulation-and-recommendation>, accessed 14/10/2022

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0825&from=en>, accessed 14/10/2022

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0842&from=en>, accessed 14/10/2022

⁷ Conference on the Future of Europe - Report on the final outcome, May 2022, European Union.

on European economic and humanitarian crises. Since the last two legislatures, this “disruptive force within” has been loudly present in the European Parliament.

Since 2017, the year of the *Public consultation on fake news and online disinformation*, the European institutions and especially the European Commission have understood the tragic consequences that the spread of both disinformation and misinformation can have on our democracies, on the risk to polarize debates, but also on the health and security of its citizens. It is since long that the European Commission recognized that large-scale disinformation campaigns are a real challenge for the European Union integration process, a challenge that requires a coordinated and sound response from Member States and EU institutions but also from online platforms, news media and, last but not least, the citizens themselves and those using social media and news outlets. The European Commission presented a European Approach to tackling online disinformation in April 2018 soon followed by an Action Plan against Disinformation⁸. Since then, the Code of Practice on Disinformation has been reviewed and discussed in view of reinforcing it to make it able to withstand the amplitude of the disinformation phenomenon. As we write, the Strengthened Code of Practice of June 2022⁹ has been signed by some 34 actors including the platforms, tech companies, and civil society.

Looking back, economic, political, and social tensions have previously opened new opportunities for widening and deepening the EU's integration. NexGenerationEU, the recovery plan for Europe following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, a health crisis such as Europe and the world did not know since centuries, has been an unprecedented collective effort that together with the EU's long-term budget is the largest-ever stimulus package financed in the EU. This to say that many times, and successfully, the EU has been able to transform a challenge into an opportunity while strengthening its adherence to common European values and principles.

The institutional and historical context – only briefly sketched above –, is the wider framework on the backdrop of which the contributions presented in this *De Europa* Special Edition should be read and contextualized. By acknowledging the importance of citizens' participation and the role of media in making the EU integration process more democratic and participative, the aim of this *De Europa* Special Edition on *Media, Democracy and Participation in the EU* is to start a critical reflection on the essential relations between Media, Democracy and Participation in the particular context of the EU multi-level governance and multi-actors structure. In this complex setting, in which participative practices, actions for the support of media and journalists in the EU and EU related information and communication strategies have to find a precise role and place, it is vital to understand and discuss at different levels and from different perspectives. It is particularly important to present critical views on what the EU tries to achieve and how it is moving in that direction that could help understand possible setbacks and identify possible corrective measures.

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018_en.pdf, accessed 14/10/2022

⁹ [2022_Strengthened_Code_of_Practice_Disinformation_TeAETn7bUPXR57PU2FsTqU8rMA_87585.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/2022_Strengthened_Code_of_Practice_Disinformation_TeAETn7bUPXR57PU2FsTqU8rMA_87585.pdf), accessed 14/10/2022

Sadly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine a few months ago, well after the idea for this special issue was discussed, the topics therein defined, and the call for papers distributed, has been for us a tragic example of how the themes we discuss in this Special Edition, participation, media, disinformation, the health of European media, are inter-connected and need more than ever attention and serious consideration.

A few words about the contributions in this number of *De Europa*

This number of *De Europa* presents seven contributions that reflect and discuss, at different levels and from different angles, theoretical and empirical aspects of media, democracy and participation and their interrelationships in the EU. We believe that the different scope of the articles, but also and especially their diversity and complementarity, will be useful to continue a long-dated discussion.

The scholar debate has for decades converged on the fact that the role of media in contemporary democracies is to improve the quality of democracy by providing information, giving people a voice, and to hold the powerful accountable. However, claims of failing “mainstream media” challenge this assumption, coming in different flavors that range from serious academic critique to aggressive right-wing accusations of bias.

A first set of articles in this Special Edition revolves broadly around news media and their (inter)relation with democracy and democratic processes.

Following the McQuail’s (2009) model, the “Media for Democracy Monitor” project (MDM), presented by Josef Trappel and Tales Tomaz in the article *News media in European democracies and beyond: stable structural conditions but notorious deficits*, provides a synthesis of normative requirements in the Western context of journalism and news media. The starting point is that in a democracy, the media must make commitments to their audience and perform a public service role. The dilemma regarding the role of the media is whether they should follow the principles of representative democracy, in which institutions act on behalf of citizens, or deliberative democracy, which, instead, actively involves them in the processes. By combining different models, the Media for Democracy Monitor approach proposes an interpretative key that, according to the authors, is best fitted to understand the complexity of advanced democracies. Combining the elements of democratic institutional and participatory perspectives, MDM examines different European media systems to understand whether there are common roots and shared grounds for building a functional and more solid European public space. In their perspective, media systems must fulfill a triple mandate: defend freedom of information, control its quality, and defend pluralism. The issues related to pluralism and freedom of expression and the economic imbalances related to ownership concentration of European media systems, opens the debate about the need to strengthen media governance through public policies.

Towards the end of 2020, the European Commission issued two interconnected Action plans, the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and the European Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (EMAAP). They mainly focus on enabling citizens to par-

ticipate in the electoral process, making informed decisions and safeguarding the role of free media as a prerequisite for a pluralistic public sphere and democratic debate. The media sector is clearly seen as a crucial element in stimulating a coherent and participatory debate in the European Union and the countries therein and to ensuring sustainable and open democratic processes. The article of Luciano Morganti, Cătălina Dumbrăveanu and Giordano Zambelli, titled *EU participatory democracy and EU news media - between complementary policies and sectoral needs. A reality check* aims to start a broad reflection, at a theoretical and empirical level, on the role of the European news media in the context of the participatory practices of the EU and to explore the interplay between the European policies and actions of the media, and the specific sectoral needs. Through the analysis of Policy documents and with a survey conducted to the beneficiaries of the project Stars4Media - a programme co-funded by EU to support the exchange and innovation in the European media sector - their contribution aims at critically assess the EU approach that links the strengthening of the European media sector to the quality of the participatory democratic process. More in detail, their contribution starts with theoretical considerations on the role of the news media sector in European participatory democracy. Then, the interconnection between the European news media sector and participatory democracy, as presented in EU actions and policies, is outlined. Lastly, based on the empirical study of companies engaged in innovative cross-border collaborations, some of the needs of the European news media sector and their perception of the EU approach to support the European news media for strengthening EU democracy, are presented.

A crucial point to defend freedom of information and to contrast illiberal tendencies is countering disinformation. This is the focus of Marinella Belluati and Alice Fubini article's *Reacting to disinformation. The multilevel EU fact-checking approach*. In recent years, the spread of Fake News and Disinformation has become an increasingly worrying phenomenon in many countries around the world, particularly regarding the impact this can have on citizenship and democratic systems. In these regards, the European institutions, being aware of the need to adopt targeted strategies, have taken a multi-level regulatory approach to fight disinformation. Since the preliminary reflections of the High-Level European Group (HLEG) for combating disinformation, the European Commission has created its own policy lines and defined a specific Code of Practices. The European policy on disinformation has placed at the center both producers and the multipliers of fake content which, therefore, need to be involved in countering actions. Another important aspect was the engagement of civil society, which can be an effective actor to counter disinformation if forms of participation are broadened and educational tools and skills are provided to recognize and manage fake news. In this framework, policy action must involve digital environments, platforms, and social networks for their crucial role in everyday practices of consumption and dissemination of content. This contribution examines this European strategy analyzing the fact checkers community of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). One of its assets is precisely the understanding that disinformation does not only concern the media system in general, but a systemic com-

plexity composed of collective actors with different goals. Public and private, profit and non-profit, small, and large fact-checking projects. In this sharing platform, different actors are enabled to interact by exchanging practices and sharing objectives. Even though this strategy is overall a new one, the recent covid crises and the war in Ukraine have revealed its potential and pointed out the crucial relation between information and democracy.

United we stand: narratives of Latvian leading politicians on unity and values of the European Union during Covid crisis (2020-2021), the article written by Mārtiņš Pričins and Anastasija Tetarenko, focuses on a more specific topic, the relationship between Euroscepticism in Latvia and the Covid crisis and the potential that the reference to European values and principles could have for increasing trust in the European project. According to the authors, disinformation in Latvia represents a crucial problem together with the effectiveness of the democratic system and the legitimacy of elected entities. This goes along with an unstable political future, which depends on party qualities such as the type of political actors. During the pandemic, to cover up the lack of capacity of the political system and to counter disinformation flow from Russia, political communication became more pro-European, increasing public appreciation towards European institutional action. During the COVID emergency, the role of the media in providing political information has increased significantly and highlighted challenges in the political communication process. Analyzing political discourses on Facebook, the research shows that, on the one hand, without common guidelines Latvian politicians promote European values, on the other hand, they are not able to link EU issues with the Latvian context. This lack of coherence produces a sort of disorientation for public opinion but opens opportunities for European media strategies.

A second set of articles focuses instead on the analysis of participatory processes, institutional practices, and platforms.

The contribution of Andrea Volterrani and Maria Cristina Antonucci, *Le piattaforme per la partecipazione digitale dei cittadini. Una analisi basata sul modello di UE e Italia*, aims at comparing, evaluating, and critically analyzing the European and Italian experiences of digital platforms for citizens participation. These European and Italian platforms for digital participation are different in many respects according to the two authors. The formers appear to be projected to build the future European participatory model, the latter appear to be more “concrete” and revolve around very tangible objectives in terms of public policies resources and implementation. It is by synthesizing these different models that, according to the authors, it is possible to further develop, also in less “conventional” ways, robust future digital platforms for citizens’ participation.

In line with the previous contribution, also the article of Rossana Sampugnaro focuses on EU-specific forms of citizens’ participation: her contribution analyses the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) and its evolution. *Dieci anni ma non li dimostra. Lo spazio dell’iniziativa dei cittadini europei e la sua evoluzione nel quadro delle politiche di rafforzamento della partecipazione* proposes a diachronic investigation of the set of

proposals submitted in the first 10 years of its implementation in view of understanding its nature and evolution into its current implementation phase. According to the author, the ECI enables EU citizens to directly interact with the European Commission, and, through the European Commission, EU citizens can relate to the European Parliament. However, the complexity of the mechanism for initiating individual proposals has limited its use, even in the presence of constant improvements in the regulatory framework and an intense dedicated communication activity that has developed especially in recent years. The set of policies promoted by European citizens shows an overwhelming preponderance of post-materialist instances, oriented to defend the environment, civil and social rights but also national peculiarities. There emerges a multi-speed Europe in terms of participation with differences between regions within the EU itself in which the ECI results an important venue to broaden the opportunities for organised civil society to build an agenda of problems and priorities for the European Parliament and the European Commission on issues that do not normally find a place in political party agendas.

Finally, the contribution of Lucia D'Ambrosi and Mariaeugenia Parito titled *Involvement of Young Citizens in Transnational Communications flows: Together for Europe* presents the readers with an analysis of innovative communication flows and practices that involve young people. In particular, their contribution presents a qualitative study of together.eu, a pan-European community promoted by the European Parliament after the 2019 European parliament elections. The authors show how young people could play an important role as ambassadors or, as they call them, micro-influencers. Interestingly, according to the research, European institutions might play an important role as facilitators or in removing participatory barriers and to involve not only the more educated and engaged amongst the youngsters but a wider representation.

Questions are obviously important, open and in progress. As editors and authors, we hope to inspire, with the texts that follow, an interesting and useful debate amongst scholars and beyond.