

Media, Democracy and Participation in the EU

Guest Editors

Marinella Belluati, University of Turin

Luciano Morganti, IMEC-SMIT-VUB (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

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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 adhesion 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](#), 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.

Essays



News media in European democracies and beyond: stable structural conditions but notorious deficits

Tales Tomaz, Josef Trappel

1. The problem (Introduction)

Not only in times of political or economic crisis, but also during times of prosperity and welfare, news media provide information, give voice to people and attempt, at least, to hold the powerful to account. To what extent and in what quality news media fulfil these fundamental tasks in contemporary democracies of all kinds have been part of the scholarly debate since decades. When scrolling through the theoretical literature, there seems to be (or has been) a general agreement that news media are supportive to democracy and their performance helps to advance and improve democratic values and decision-making processes. However, claims of failing “mainstream media” challenge this assumption, coming in different flavours that range from serious academic critique to aggressive right-wing accusations of bias. This means that there is demand to not only observe, but also monitor the news media’s performance towards the achievement of democratic values. Academic and non-academic (NGO) institutions have undertaken this task with high aspirations: to contribute to the improvement of democracy by monitoring the public discourse organised and delivered by (leading) news media. Within this tradition, social science scholars have developed the project “Media for Democracy Monitor” in the first decade of the 2000s and applied it empirically in three waves thereafter. In the following we explain the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this instrument, as well as the most relevant results for EU democracies, which show that news media still fulfil relevant democratic roles.

2. The approach (theory and background)

According to Bertrand (2003), Galtung (1999), and Nordenstreng and Griffin (1999), normative expectations about the media require regular monitoring. The concept of the MDM closely follows Galtung’s definition of media monitoring:

Monitoring is much more than trend watching: To monitor is to understand in order to act in an informed, well-reasoned way. Monitoring is beyond mirroring what happens in the fourth pillar of society (in addition to State, capital and civil society). To monitor the media is to make them transparent, a basic condition for democracy to function. (Galtung 1999: 23)

As Nordenstreng (2001) suggests, media have influence, media enjoy freedom, media should be responsible and accountable. Accountability in this context refers not only to the output of the media, but also “to the willingness of the media to answer for what they do by their acts of publication, including what they do to society at large, and refers as well to the feasibility of securing accountability where there is unwillingness” (McQuail 2009: 132).

Most monitoring initiatives focus on the media content. However, this broader concept of accountability implies the need to pay special attention at the changing structures of the media, which set the framework for the content and media use (Nordenstreng 1999: 11; Pickard 2020: 9–10).

2.1 Normative expectations in news media

Media structure is monitored in the MDM considering the normative roles that historically have been ascribed to journalism and news media with regard to democracy, especially in the Western context. As Christians *et al.* (2009: 135) summarise, the media must make some “commitments to their own audiences and to many others with whom they have dealings” in order to successfully operate, giving rise to expectations of public service.

The report of the US Hutchins Commission, published in 1947, is considered a milestone in the history of these normative approaches by consolidating the vision that mass communication should contribute to the education of people in public affairs. The report argued for creating better conditions for the operation of a “free and responsible press”, seen as a requirement for “the preservation of democracy and perhaps civilization” (The Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947: 106).

This tradition of assigning a role to the media in democracy has generated diverse accounts on which specific responsibilities these companies or their professionals should bear, ranging from classicals such as *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert *et al.* 1956) to more dynamic models such as Denis McQuail’s (2009) roles, which provide an elegant synthesis of normative requirements to journalism. The MDM follows mostly McQuail’s account. According to him, news media are expected to play four different roles: monitorial, facilitative, radical and collaborative. The monitorial role refers to “all aspects of the collection, processing, and dissemination of information of all kinds about current and recent events, plus warnings about future developments”, which provide the basic points of reference to the people (McQuail 2009: 125). In the facilitative role, journalism should promote debate, participation, and the inclusion of marginalised groups, helping to develop “a shared moral framework for community and society, rather than just looking after individual rights and interests” (McQuail 2009: 126). The radical role “focuses on exposing abuses of power and aims to raise popular consciousness of wrongdoing, inequality, and the potential for change”, *i.e.* the media should point out wrongdoings by powerholders and remember that social order could be different (McQuail 2009: 126). The collaborative role refers to the collaboration between the media and the state, for example, during times of crisis – such as the Covid-19 pandemic (McQuail 2009: 127).

The scholarly efforts to underscore the public service mission of the media, especially in journalism, have been followed by several institutions and researchers, especially in the US. Some recent trends highlight investigative journalism as a public good (Hamilton 2016) and non-commercial professional news as the remedy against contemporary mis- and disinformation (Pickard 2020). In common, normative accounts acknowledge that news media bear some duty for safeguarding and harnessing democratic processes, and that a well-functioning media system is an essential component of a thriving liberal democracy.

However, this connection between media and democracy, which assigns to them public roles, is contested. Critics argue that it is Western-centric (Zelizer 2013), draws on specific market conditions of the American journalism from the end of the 19th century (Nerone 2013), and overstates the importance of the political sphere at the expense of the domain of everyday life (Hanitzsch, Vos 2018).

This criticism is legitimate and, to a certain extent, relativises the question on the fulfilment of normative expectations by the news media. At the same time, it does not invalidate the question. Even if these roles are generated in a specific sociocultural environment, even if they rather serve the sustainability of a business model, they continue to be widely used by news organisations and professionals as justification for their service and for the freedoms they are granted with (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2007; Trappel 2011).

Therefore, investigating the normative roles of news media, especially with regard to their contribution to democracy, continues to be a relevant effort. Actually, this is even more necessary as commercial journalism undergoes severe economic crises, and media owners, scholars and activists increasingly request policy intervention to provide public support to the professional production of news.

2.2. Models of democracy and media roles

If the contribution of the media to democracy is to be analysed, it must be clear which concept of democracy this analysis relies upon. The theoretical framework of the MDM considers that there are two major traditions of democracy: the liberal and the republican (Cunningham 2002; Glasser 2009; Held 2006).

Liberal theories of democracy come from the Anglo-American world. This tradition sees democracy as “a system of rule embracing elected ‘officers’ who undertake to ‘represent’ the interests and/or views of citizens within the framework of ‘the rule of the law’” (Held 2006: 4). For this reason, it is often called “representative democracy”, and representation stands for a mechanism to aggregate and express the individual preferences. Schumpeter (1976) illustrates a more radical development of the liberal concept of democracy by arguing that democracy means government *for* the people, but not necessarily *by* the people. In this sense, informed and competent elites elected by the people should take the governance decisions, whereas the role of population is to hold these elites accountable in elections. For this reason, scholars usually characterise liberal models of democracy as “elitist” (Baker 2004).

On the other hand, the republican tradition depicts democracy as “a system of decision-making about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved” (Held 2006: 4). As such, public decisions are not expected to be made exclusively – or independently – by elected officials, but should be an open process of dialogue, debate, and activism, in which as many citizens as possible could and should take part. Such models of democracy expect that speakers with the better arguments will succeed over the others. There are plenty of alternative models of republican democracies. Glasser (2009) suggests characterising three of them: pluralist, civic, and direct. The pluralist one underscores competition among different groups in societies. The civic model argues for democracy as a space of cultivation of different voices and perspectives. Finally, direct democracy rejects any delegation of decision-making resources and expects each citizen to take their part in society. There are many other accounts of republican democracies, such as participatory, deliberative, developmental, and agonistic (Cunningham 2002; Strömbäck 2005; Mouffe 1999). In any of these accounts, expectations on citizens are higher than in liberal models of democracy. That is why Dahlgren (2007: 59) argues that the most characteristic element of republicanism is “its insistence on the active participation of citizens in democratic self-governance. [...] Republicanism asserts that democracy requires civic virtues from its citizens”.

Both democratic traditions bring their own requirements to the media. In liberal democracies, the role of journalism is to identify and make public the wrongdoings of elected representatives. This way, it contributes to public awareness and raises the chances that elections “reward effective elite response to popular needs” (Baker 2006: 114). Political reporting should be restrained to crucial problems, as people have limited attention and knowledge to follow the daily routine of power holders. This places a considerable burden on journalists: “Journalists cannot talk about every potential problem because their audience would ignore them; it is the job of reporters – in cooperation with political and interest groups – to decide what requires attention and bring it to the public” (Zaller 2003: 121).

In republican democracies, news media face different expectations, well-illustrated by Baker:

[In complex democracies, the] media should support varying types of discourses – bargaining discourses of the liberal pluralist, discourses aimed at the common good emphasised by republicans, and smaller self-definitional as well as minority cultural discourses especially important to the fairness of the democratic participation of smaller or otherwise marginal groups. (Baker 2006: 119)

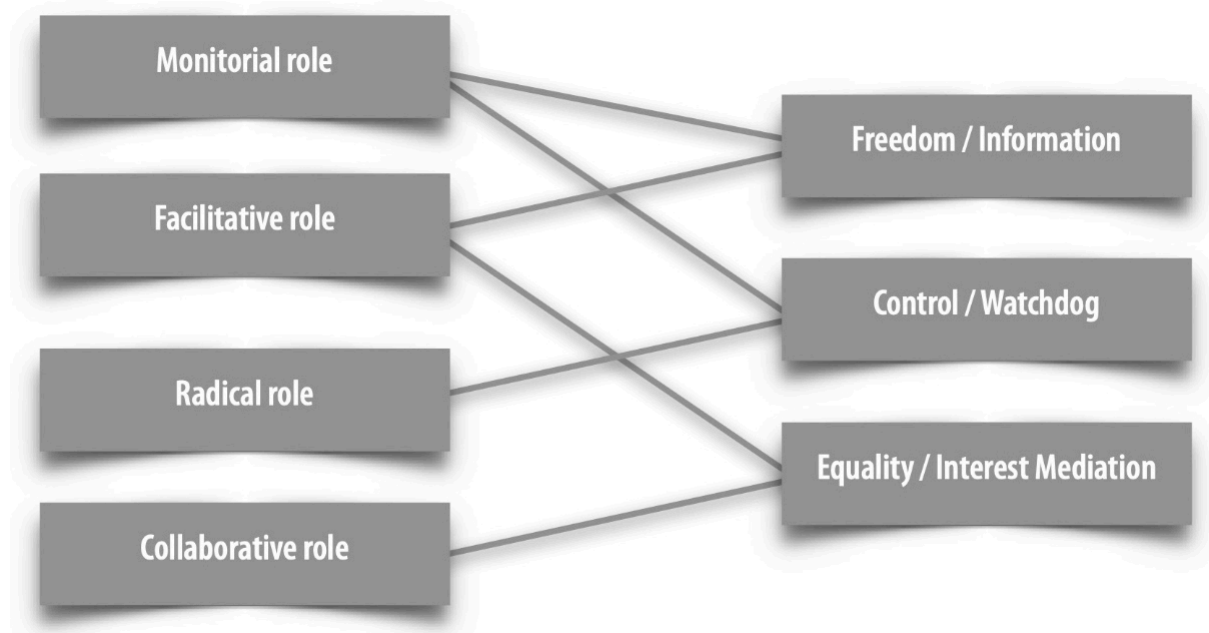
Journalism has the obligation not only to inform about crucial issues, “but also to act as a forum for the debate” (Trappel *et al.* 2011: 18). By giving voice to disadvantaged citizens and groups, the media are expected to inspire them to participate in the public discourse, mediating the different, sometimes contradictory, interests in contemporary societies.

The question, then, is how to deal with these different traditions of democracy and the different normative roles of news media derived from them. In the MDM, it is

understood that all these models and roles reflect mostly legitimate, even if sometimes contradictory, expectations in contemporary democracies. As suggested by Bühlmann and colleagues (2012), combining these different models might provide resources to grasp the subtle variations in advanced democracies. Diamond and Morlino (2004) similarly argue that liberal and republican elements of democracies actually complement one another. The liberal element protects the rights of individuals and groups under the law, and the republican element provides a contextualised understanding of the public interest, to which public officials should serve (Diamond, Morlino 2004). Furthermore, both traditions draw upon the same three basic constituents – *freedom, equality, and accountability* –, and mature democracies should make progress in the direction of these values (Diamond, Morlino 2004: 7). In summary, democracies are understood as political systems with solid institutional support for the progress of three main goals: freedom, equality, and accountability (which in the MDM we decided to simply call “control”).

The normative roles discussed above can be related to this triple dimension of contemporary democracies. In the MDM, freedom translates into the mandate for the media to freely impart information, to which McQuail’s (2009) monitorial and facilitative roles correspond. Equality refers to the mandate to mediate different interests in an existing society, what reflects the facilitative and the collaborative roles of the media. Control can be translated as the imperative to report wrongdoings by power holders, a demand in the monitorial and in the radical roles (see figure 1).

Figure 1 - Triple mandate of news media to uphold democracy



Source: Elaboration of the MDM research team based on theories of democracy and McQuail’s (2009) roles of news media. Boxes to the left show the roles assigned to news media, while boxes to the right depict the corresponding three dimensions of democracy. For a detailed explanation, see Tomaz, Trappel 2022: 22-24.

3. The process and methodology (conduct of research)

While the theoretical background of the MDM mostly resembles mature scientific endeavours, its empirical operationalisation has undergone a rather unconventional journey. It started traditionally back in 2006 when the Swiss Science Foundation (SNF) allowed for additional projects within the *National Centres of Competence in Research* (NCCR) framework “Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century”. Supported by SNF funds and operated at the premises of the University of Zurich those days, the MDM concept has been developed by much the same team that continued to operate the project over the two decades to follow.

At the time of the project’s development, and seen from a Swiss perspective, leading news media were experiencing an economic and editorial heyday before the global financial crisis hit the world economy and the mass media in 2008. Before that crisis, mass media were powerful political actors, digitalisation had not yet hatched digital platforms in the large scale but offered efficiency gains to newsrooms. Within that context, the research proposal argued that only a few media companies respond to formal democratic requirements, while the majority of mass media publishers follow other imperatives, such as commercial considerations, efficiency gains and technological innovation temptations. Given the importance of the mass media for the functioning of modern democracies, the 2006 proposal argued, it would be essential to ask what mass media actually contribute to democratic governance – and where mass media fail to meet these expectations. Clearly following the tradition of normative approaches describe above, the underlying general hypothesis was that democracy works better when mass media contribute more and more relevant services.

In a first research working package, existing monitors and initiatives were screened by the research team, such as the “Freedom of the Press Survey” by Freedom House, the “Media Sustainability Index” by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), the often quoted “State of the News Media Report” by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), the “Press Freedom Index” by Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) and the “World Press Freedom Review” by the International Press Institute (IPI). All those initiatives were useful at the time, but they lacked a theoretical foundation and operationalisation by social science standards. The MDM, thus, strived to fill that gap.

From the outset in 2006, the MDM was designed as international and comparative research project. The initial funding allowed for including five countries: Germany, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland. For a full and comprehensive understanding of national developments, it was essential to refer not only to journalistic and anecdotal evidence (as most other initiatives were based on) but to the scientific work of national teams of researchers in the field. To this end, the Euromedia Research Group¹, founded back in 1982, provided fertile ground for recruiting national research teams.

Scholars from the five participating countries met in November 2007 at Lake Zurich to discuss the set of indicators to be applied and tested in each country for the

¹ For more information on this group see www.euromediagroup.org

first time. This scholarly debate resulted in 19 indicators organised in dimensions reflecting the triple mandate of the media mentioned earlier, namely *Freedom / Information, Equality / Interest Mediation, and Control / Watchdog*. The list of indicators grew in the subsequent MDM waves and their final form, which is relevant for the results discussed in this article, will be discussed in detail below. For each indicator, MDM researchers formulated a research question and criteria for empirical observation. Data would come from (1) secondary sources – media surveys or national reports – and (2) interviews with relevant stakeholders, mostly reporters, editors, publishers, union representatives and academics.

Although the MDM was to be considered a qualitative monitoring, its initiators developed a quantitative grading system to facilitate comparison. All indicators have been graded as follows:

- 3 points: when all or almost all criteria are fulfilled;
- 2 points: when the clear majority of criteria or the most important ones are met;
- 1 point: when there is poor fulfilment, such as less than half of the criteria
- 0 point: when no major criteria are met.

The pilot study was completed in November 2008 and published in two corresponding articles in *Communications* in 2009 (d’Haenens *et al.* 2009; Trappel, Maniglio 2009). Subsequently, the Swiss Centre for Studies on the Global Information Society (SwissGIS) invited scholars and professionals to contribute to an edited volume published by Peter Lang (Trappel, Meier 2011). This volume includes not only findings from the first MDM wave, but also texts on the experience of other monitoring initiatives, such as Freedom House (Deutsch Karlekar 2011).

The positive academic responses, but also the rewarding collaboration within and between these research teams inspired the group to extend this first pilot project into a second wave of research, including more countries, with the ambition to improve and strengthen comparative learnings from different countries. Although seed money by the Swiss Science Foundation had dried out by that time, members of the Euromedia Research Group and friends outside this group were so convinced by the concept that they decided to participate in the second wave on their own expenses or looking themselves for national funds.

The national teams from the five initial countries and the newly recruited collaborators from Australia, Austria, Finland, Sweden and the UK gathered in November 2009 on the Goldenberg in Winterthur (Switzerland) for an evaluation and planning workshop, amending the instrument with additional indicators.

One year later, in October 2010, the group of MDM scholars met in Hamburg for what they called the “grading meeting”, whereby the teams reported their findings and adapted their grading in the light of the experience of the other countries. In 2011, Nordicom published the findings of this second, extended, MDM wave (Trappel *et al.* 2011).

In 2018, the members of the Euromedia Research Group again addressed the issue of media monitoring in their twice-yearly meetings. They had published a

volume on European media in crisis (Trappel, Steemers, Thomass 2015) and proposed to conduct another wave of the MDM, with a view to monitor the changes in the performance of the leading news media after one decade of fast and ubiquitous digitalisation, and within another media crisis from 2018 forward, triggered among other factors by the stupendous rise of digital information platforms and the aggressive anti-mainstream media campaign by the then US president Donald Trump.

After spreading the word of plans to conduct another MDM wave, scholarly teams from nine additional countries – Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Chile, Denmark, Greece, Hong Kong, Iceland, Italy and South Korea – committed to contribute country chapters, thereby extending the range of comparative learning well beyond Europe. Only one country (Lithuania) from the first and second wave did not participate in the third wave.

Country participation should represent a variety of geographical location and degrees of resemblance to Western liberal democracies. Thus, younger liberal democracies such as Chile, Greece and Portugal were welcome, together with long established democracies such as Canada, Sweden and the United Kingdom. This “most different system design” approach (Anckar 2008, 2020) allowed for a good deal of comparative learning about media performance within this model of democracy. To be sure, this does not mean that the MDM rejects models of democracy outside of the Western framework, but that the instrument cannot grasp the contribution of the media in alternative arrangements, often called developing democracies, or defective or flawed democracies². The justification for choosing this admittedly Western-centric and elitist research perspective is that in other media systems, there is no guarantee that leading news media will have enough freedom to organise and conduct their editorial and journalistic output, and their performance is to various degrees determined by political constraints, which are beyond the scope of the MDM.

Therefore, the MDM 2021 ended up covering 18 countries. EU member states are Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden. Among non-EU member states were Australia, Canada, Chile, Hong Kong³, Iceland, South Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In each of these countries, local teams of scholars affiliated with the project defined their sample of relevant (leading) news media. They were instructed to select around ten media outlets, covering all market sectors (print, TV, radio, online), although the size of the national market could influence the size of the sample. Relevance – to be a “leading” news media – should be assessed by the national team taking into consid-

² See glossary of the ECPS (European Center for Populism Studies) on flawed/defective democracies: <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/flawed-defective-democracy/> (retrieved 5 March 2022).

³ By the time the project was concluded, it was clear that Hong Kong did no longer meet the criteria for contemporary democracies, as interventions from the Chinese government undermines their democracy claim. Countries were selected in 2019. At that time, the protest movement in Hong Kong had started, but elections still prevailed as a core instrument of political participation and decision-making. Furthermore, press freedom was largely respected by the authorities, and the research team from Hong Kong confirmed unfettered working conditions of journalists. However, conditions have dramatically changed, and the press has lost much of its free and independent status. The empirical research on the leading news media in Hong Kong took place before and partly during the dismantling of journalistic freedoms. Therefore, the Hong Kong analysis documents the status quo ante.

eration the market share or agenda-setting potential of the publication. In this last case, a media outlet with lower market share figures would be considered relevant if it is often cited by other media, this way shaping public discussion.

Representatives from participating countries met for two workshops (Roskilde, Denmark, in August 2019, and Lecce, Italy, in September 2019) for revising the instrument. The teams decided to pay tribute to current developments, as well as under-rated perspectives from the past waves. They increased the number of indicators to 30, thus a maximum of 90 achievable democracy points. As such, the MDM reaches its maturity measuring media performance alongside the following criteria: In the dimension *Freedom / Information*, indicators refer to reach and consumption of leading news media, autonomy of editorial staff from political and commercial interference, access to the means of production by historically marginalised groups, and conditions against abuse in online communications, such as the spread of misinformation and hate speech. The indicators of the dimension *Equality / Interest Mediation* refer to the quantity of different media outlets, diversity of news formats, availability of minority and alternative media, costs of access to the media, existence of self-regulation mechanisms, and levels of popular participation in media governance and content. In the third dimension, namely *Control / Watchdog*, the indicators assess the existence of independent media councils, the level of independence of news media, transparency of data, journalists professionalism, training and security, and financial resources for investigation. (For an explanation of each indicator and their theoretical grounding, see Trappel, Tomaz 2021a: 18-52).

Data collection and interviews were undertaken just before and during the first months of the global Covid-19 pandemic, thus reflecting the state-of-the-art before this major disruption sent shock waves across the globe, massively affecting the news media. Nonetheless, the “grading workshop” to adjust and discuss preliminary findings took place in a hybrid meeting in Salzburg, Austria, in June 2020. There, the teams decided to add a section in each country report on implications of the pandemic on leading news media.

Because of the increased number of participating countries, Nordicom published the findings and country reports along the 30 indicators in two volumes (Trappel, Tomaz 2021c; 2021d). In 2022, finally, country authors discussed in mixed teams salient issues identified during the process of the third MDM wave and published the latest book of this longitudinal research project (Trappel, Tomaz 2022).

What makes the MDM unconventional is, first, the high degree of intrinsic commitment by this large number of national teams (up to 60 scholars have been involved in third wave), without any external funding incentives (except for minor contributions to cover dissemination cost⁴). All teams delivered their national research findings according to schedule and in the agreed quality. Instead of peer-reviews, all published chapters have been openly discussed by this heterogeneous group of scholars, with personal comments allowing for an academic debate about strengths

⁴ The research team is grateful for the dissemination support provided by the Dutch Journalism Fund (Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek, SVDJ).

and weaknesses of the texts (which is not possible in the case of blind peer-reviews). This process is a fine example of academic freedom at its best: no funding institution, no institutional pressure, but the free choice of scholars working on a self-determined topic.

Second, all teams agreed to make the research and its findings known beyond academic circles, thus beyond scholarly journals. To this end, the group developed a joint dissemination strategy and elaborated three press releases addressing most pressing issues, such as the impact of Covid-19 on the news industry and the precarisation of the journalistic profession, translated into local languages and synchronically published on the same days (Sept 1st, 2020; Nov 11th, 2020, and Dec 21st, 2020). The impressive press and media resonance created by this joint effort documents the high relevance of the MDM. Furthermore, the team launched the publications in three public and widely promoted and well attended video conferences.

Third, all publications of the third MDM wave have been published full open access. The three volumes (entire books and single chapters) are downloadable from the publisher's website, as well as from the website of the Euromedia Research Group. Given the documented high interest by circles beyond the academy, this publication strategy helps increasing visibility of communication research in the general public. Of course, interviewed journalists helped to increase public dissemination. Consequently, the publisher Nordicom reported unprecedented high download numbers for the MDM book chapters, compared to their many other publications.

Finally, the smooth process of rolling out the MDM in three waves created strong bonds between researchers in the national teams and prepared this group for further joint research projects. The high visibility of the efforts of this group becomes advantageous when applying for transnational comparative research projects in the future, as the efficiency of the group is so well documented.

4. Key findings

After outlining the theoretical background and the unconventional journey of empirically operationalising it, we move now to the discussion of the most important findings, according to the data from the third MDM wave, with a special focus on the EU countries. The main overall finding is that, despite the disruptive digital transformations of the entire news business, leading news media remain surprisingly stable in their democratic performance measured by the indicators of this research. In its quantitative assessment, news media of the nine countries that appeared in the latter two MDM editions performed even slightly better in 2021, reaching 68% of overall points against 66% ten years ago (for the full quantitative results, see Trappel, Tomaz 2021b: 490–491). Findings show that in most countries leading news media are still highly relevant for national democratic deliberations.

The inclusion of both member states of the European Union and non-EU states also allows for a comparative view on these groups of countries. Both groups include large (Germany and Italy on the EU side, Australia, Canada, and the UK on the non-EU

side) and small, northern (North Atlantic) and southern (Mediterranean or further South) countries. The findings show that leading news media in European countries generally come closer to the normative requirements for Western democracies than non-European countries. In the quantitative assessment, EU member states reached 67% of the overall points, whereas non-EU states scored 62% of them.

Extending the range of participating countries from ten to 18 allowed for clustering countries along their characteristics. For example, countries with a strong tradition of public service media generally perform better than countries that rely mainly on private, commercial broadcasting systems. The same applies in the case of gender equality (see below). Newspapers – both printed and online – remain cornerstones of democratic deliberations. Non-editorial digital media (such as digital platforms, so called “social media”) have indeed contributed to the erosion of the business model of news media but have not yet jeopardised newspapers’ democratic contributions.

4.1 Weaknesses in media performance

However, this general finding should not disguise the various weaknesses identified by the research teams. Actually, substantive challenges prevail, such as gender inequalities in the news business (Padovani *et al.* 2022). In quantitative terms, news media scored only 59% of the points regarding “rules and practices on internal gender equality”, *i.e.* how prepared organisations are to promote gender balance in newsrooms. EU countries do not perform significantly better in this indicator than non-EU countries (60% vs. 58%), which is surprising due to the European focus in gender-balanced governance. There are nearly no gender equality policies or codes of conduct related to gender equality in any news organisations. In some cases, male journalists are not even aware of the existence of the problem. This is the case in Greece, where an interviewed journalist affirmed that “there has not been an issue of equality between men and women. Each journalist has the same treatment regardless of gender.” Some Greek male journalists even argued that their female colleagues are more privileged, notwithstanding the complete absence of measures to ensure parity throughout the hierarchy of the profession. Although Greece is an extreme case, it pretty much reflects the lack of structure for gender parity in newsrooms. Among the few exceptions is the Austrian public broadcaster ORF, which has a gender-balance plan aimed at promoting gender equality in employment conditions (Padovani *et al.* 2022: 86; Grünangerl *et al.* 2021). Imbalance is even bigger in leading positions, with public service media both in European Union member states (Portugal, Austria, and Denmark) and non-EU countries (South Korea and Chile), again, representing the exception. Furthermore, gender pay gaps are still a reality in most media, again cutting across EU and non-EU countries. The gap persists especially in higher positions, being the case even in highly developed EU countries such as Denmark and Sweden. However, it is worth mentioning that the few countries reporting significant improvements are European, such as the Netherlands, where reportedly equal pay is the practice, and Finland.

With regard to “gender equality in media content”, the results are even more dramatic, as news media score only 41% of the total points, the worst score for a single indicator in the entire monitor. Women are systematically mis- or underrepresented in media content, excluded from hard news and rarely featured as experts (Padovani *et al.* 2022: 90). EU countries perform somewhat better here (43% vs. 38%), and the best non-EU examples are actually European countries (Iceland and United Kingdom). The BBC has projects, such as the “50:50 – The Equality Project”, aiming at reaching fair representation of men and women in media content. But apart from some isolated initiatives such as this one, women remain mostly absent of media content. It is striking that, after 25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, gender inequalities persist to such an extent.

Another pertaining core problem concerns media ownership concentration. During the decade of digitalisation ownership concentration at the national level remained stable at 57% of the total points (2011: 56%) and was rated at 56% at the regional level in 2021. In only two countries (Netherlands and Portugal) researchers found a satisfactory score for this indicator. Thus, media ownership concentration continues to control editorial boards and newsrooms, curtail content diversity, marginalise less popular and consequently expensive content, and commodify cultural industries altogether (Trappel, Meier 2022). Standardised metrics undeniably demonstrate continuous growth of ownership concentration. Regardless of these strong evidences, concentration of media ownership remains one of the least-regulated media policy issues. The situation is even worse in non-EU countries, which scored 54% of the points both at national and regional levels (against 60% and 57% respectively in EU countries), as concentration is especially high in Australia, Chile, and Hong Kong.

A further critical finding in the third MDM wave is that news media face increasing pressure from advertisers (Tomaz *et al.* 2022). While newsrooms are still relatively separated from owners, the erosion of the advertising-based business model has come to a point in which news media are highly dependent on a few major sponsors. Some managed to reduce their dependence by adopting other business models, such as subscriptions, or by heavily relying on public subsidies, as in most Nordic countries (Tomaz *et al.* 2022: 180). However, most of the media in the 18 MDM countries are fiercely fighting for the remaining revenues from advertisers, making them more susceptible to disturbing practices such as sponsored content.

However, this is one of the few results in which leading news media from non-EU member states perform better (60% EU vs. 67% non-EU concerning protection against pressure from advertisers). This is due to the fact that two Anglo-Saxon countries in our sample, Australia and Canada, have a remarkable performance in this indicator, scoring three points alongside Iceland, which also follows a rather liberal model of the media (Jóhannsdóttir *et al.* 2021). This is surprising, as one would expect that the media in dual systems such as the European ones, with a much stronger role of public service media, would be less subject to commercial interference. On the other hand, Australian and Canadian markets are already highly concentrated in

private brands, making survival of the few influential media companies easier and less dependent on single advertisers (Dwyer *et al.* 2021; Taylor, DeCillia 2021).

Furthermore, new challenges such as journalists' harassment (Baroni *et al.* 2022), misinformation (Mayerhöffer *et al.* 2022) and eroding funds for investigation (Karadimitriou *et al.* 2022) characterise the state-of-the-art of leading news media.

4.2 Major differences between EU and non-EU leading news media

Finally, we break down the finding that leading news media in EU countries tend to perform better by analysing in which areas these differences are most remarkable. The most striking divergence is exactly in the indicator that addresses protections against harassment of journalists (83% EU vs. 54% non-EU countries). European news organisations seem to be much better prepared to deal with this kind of attack, which became more common in the last decade. The Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) reached the maximum score, alongside Austria and the Netherlands. As an example, Dutch journalists report full support by the media company's legal department, and the Dutch Association of Journalists endeavours collaboration with the police and the Public Prosecutor's Office to ensure that journalists can report threats and are protected (Vandenberghe, d'Haenens 2021: 276). In the EU, only Italy has a low score (1 point), because of the non-existence of any specific mechanism to protect journalists from harassment, especially women (Padovani *et al.* 2021). Non-EU countries, on the other hand, often report little to no protection against this threat. This is especially the case in Australia, Chile and Hong Kong, scoring only 1 point in this indicator.

The leading news media in EU member countries also outperform their non-EU counterparts in indicators directly related to the journalistic professional culture. This is the case in the indicators about the existence and applied relevance of code of ethics (83% vs. 58%), journalists' job security (57% vs. 38%), and journalism professionalism (77% vs. 63%). The European labour market is historically better regulated than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, and this seems to reflect in more stable conditions for the journalistic practice and clear professional standards. In a similar vein, EU news media have scored better regarding the existence of internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy (57% vs. 50%) and rules and practices on internal pluralism (63% vs. 54%), showing that the news business in Europe still preserves rules associated with the Western journalistic normativity in a much stronger way than non-EU media. Evidently, these results do not come as a surprise. If normative approaches reflect mostly Western-centric values, as acknowledged both by proponents and critics, European leading news media are expected to perform closer to these norms than those from non-EU countries.

5. Conclusions

The Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) 2021 instigated a debate on the performance of leading news media fostering democratic values in times of digital dis-

ruption and the emergence of digital communication infrastructures that compile and curate news according to algorithmic selections principles, rather than journalistic news values. Despite these fundamental challenges, leading news media in the 18 countries participating in the MDM 2021 remain core actors both in terms of media use and in support of democratic values. Three research waves allow for longitudinal, as well as geographical comparison. While leading news media from EU member states outperform their counterparts external to the European Union with regard to most of the 30 democracy indicators, leading news media in all countries maintained by and large their performance standards during the decade of digital disruption – at least up to the time when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the economy and primarily advertising-financed news media. This general finding should not conceal the severe and persisting weaknesses with regard to gender inequities, economic imbalances regarding ownership concentration and the high level of commercial rather than editorial and journalistic command. If news media are to be considered cornerstones of the liberal democracies of the future, these issues have to be addressed both by media governance and public policy.

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EU participatory democracy and EU news media - between complementary policies and sectoral needs. A reality check

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Introduction

Supporting a resilient democracy and a healthier media sector are at the heart of the recent political debate regarding the future of Europe. Two Action Plans, launched by the European Commission (EC) at the end of 2020 - the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and the European Media and Audiovisual Action Plan (EMAAP) – aim to reinvigorate European democracy and sustain the media sector. These two action plans are interrelated and complementary and reflect the EC's acknowledgement of the need to approach democracy and media holistically. Chiefly, the action plans focus on enabling citizens to participate in the electoral process, by making informed decisions and safeguarding the role of free media as a prerequisite for a pluralist public sphere and democratic debate.

This article 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 the interplay between the European policies and actions of the media, and the specific sectoral needs.

In the scholarly literature of disciplines like communication, democracy and governance studies, the importance of free, independent, and sustainable media for informing citizens, fostering the public debate, and holding policy-makers accountable is widely accepted (Aalberg, Curran 2012; Mughan, Gunther 2000). The same goes for the role of meaningful political participation in a functioning democracy (Carpentier 2011; Michels, De Graaf 2010). The media as a vital element of democracy is a normative postulation in journalism studies (Christians *et al.* 2010). In the context of European studies, a plethora of studies address the impact of media on political participation, particularly concerning the media's effects on European elections (De Vreese, Boomgaarden 2016; Spanje, De Vreese 2014; Demetriou 2012). Limited literature addresses the distinct participatory model of the European Union (EU) and the role of media in it (see Zambelli, Morganti 2021). The recent adoption of the EDAP and EMAAP indicates that the vital role of media as part of the democratic infrastructure was acknowledged by the European regulators and placed at the core of the current Commission mandate.

Based on literature review, policy document analysis and survey inquiry, this article aims to start a broad reflection, by questioning whether the EU approach to link-

ing the strengthening of the European news media sector to the quality of participatory democratic process in the EU is responding to sectoral needs. Specifically, 3 sub research questions (SRQs) helped to investigate the interplay between the EU news media sector and the distinct European model of participatory democracy.

The first SRQ addresses how the relationship between the European news media sector and the distinct model of European participatory democracy is framed in academic literature. Therefore, the article outset with theoretical insights on the role of the news media sector in European participatory democracy.

The second RQ investigates how the relationship between the European news media sector and participatory democracy is presented in EU actions and policies. For this purpose, we analyse how the media's role in strengthening European democracy and its connection to political participation are presented in the two recent Action plans of the European Commission – the EDAP and EMAAP, as well as other policy programmes and actions currently in place.

Lastly, SRQ3 proposes to look directly into the needs of the European news media sector and how media companies engaged in innovative cross-border collaborations perceived the EU approach to support the European news media for strengthening EU democracy. To do this, we have questioned the representatives of 76 media companies from 22 European countries on their perceptions of the EU's role in supporting the media through a semi-structured online survey. The companies took part in the second edition of the pilot European cross-border programme fostering media innovation through cross-border collaboration—Stars4Media¹, implemented in 2021 - 2022. During four months, the selected companies worked in configurations of two or three partners, grouped around common initiatives that helped them gain skills, exchange best practices and improve their financial sustainability. The survey answers were gathered in January 2022, at the end of these collaborations. Based on these answers, we identify and present the perceptions of this group of European news media representatives. By doing this, the article contributes to a reality check on the European policy framework linking media empowerment to participatory democracy and a better understanding of how the needs and expectations of the media sector should be addressed.

1. Theoretical considerations of the role of news media in the European democracy

The main theoretical debates on the role of news media in European democracy are structured around representative and participatory democracy concepts. According to the classic democratic doctrine, free, independent media is an integral part of democracy due to its pivotal role in shaping public opinion, supporting citizens in making informed choices and keeping those in power under scrutiny. These functions are embedded in the normative theories of a free press and social responsibility

¹ Stars4Media is an innovation exchange programme co-funded by the EU and implemented by VUB, Europe's MediaLab, EFJ and WAN-IFRA, aiming at facilitating cooperation between media professionals, to accelerate media innovation and cross-border cooperation. For details, see www.stars4media.eu

(Watson 2008). These theories define the roles of media as informing, educating, and entertaining, but also enabling citizens to scrutinize the government.

The role of news media in a democracy derives as well from the set of values and principles that define the journalistic profession. Particularly, fairness, impartiality, and autonomy dictate that news media should reflect reality without biases, in a way that no view is unduly favoured or discounted (Asp 2007). The two normative functions of news media in democracy, of informing citizens and surveilling those who govern, have been challenged in the last two decades by a series of challenges, which are largely described in the literature concerning the United States, but which are not foreign to the European news media either. Specifically, the increased competition in the market, the shrinking of advertising revenues and the digital shift fuelled the crisis in the media sector and fostered the search for new business models (Nielsen 2019; Franklin 2014; Gueskin *et al.* 2011). In parallel, this encouraged the media's predilection for shocking and sensational news, as well as the focus on personalities, and politics as a game or a soap opera, to become more attractive and interesting to audiences (Blumer, Coleman, 2015). The audiences, nonetheless, can nowadays choose their preferred information channels and consume selective content from the plethora of available news sources. This also implies that, even though politically relevant information is more accessible than before, it also is easier than in the past to avoid it if not specifically looking for it (Aalberg, Curan 2012). In 2020-2021, the European media sector registered an additional drop in revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic (KEA 2021), which exacerbated the aforementioned trends. At the same time, the commercial, profit-driven business models can neither solve the structural crisis of the media nor support its democratic role (Pickard 2019). Democracy needs engaged citizens, capable of making informed decisions for the common good, thanks to a reliable and pluralist information system, not purely customers of media products (Neveu 2004).

A major stream of the literature reflects on the news media as an enabler of political opinion formation and the implications for direct participatory practices (Druckman, Parkin 2005). There is wide agreement that news media have an essential public role since citizens require reliable and up-to-date information about political affairs to be able to engage in politics and participate in the decision-making processes of their concerns (Carpini, Keeter 1996). This is supported by three specific media effects: cognitive, impacting the level of political knowledge, and attitudinal – with implications for political opinions formation and behavioural, affecting the elections turnout and voting patterns (Smetko 2004). The information that media provides allows citizens to obtain specific knowledge, can enable autonomous opinion formation and eventually, can empower them to exercise control over the government, through formal and informal political participation, such as voting in elections and public opinion contributions (Carpentier 2007).

A vast body of literature looks at the influence of the media on the European election results. This is analysed regarding three dimensions—media tone, visibility, and framing. There is substantial evidence that the more positive the media tone and

visibility of a political entity, the more likely the voters to support it (Thesen *et al.* 2020; Geiß, Schäfer 2017; Hopmann *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, a more positive media evaluation of the EU results in less likely support for Eurosceptic parties (Van Spanje, De Vreese 2014). On top of the impact of media discourses on political participation, growing research reflects on the role of visual communication, including media representations of politics and visual personalisation of political players in European elections. When debating the functions of visual images and symbols, political communication scholars highlight that these can support opinion formation and decision-making, by offering visual cues that simplify the cognitive process (Lilleker 2019; Schill 2012). Most research in this area focuses on social media representations, completing the studies on visibility in news media (Carlson, Hakansson 2022; Nahema *et al.* 2021; Heim, Jungblut 2020).

As the framing of the EU is filtered by the national media and national public spheres, these findings are connected to a second major stream of literature that addresses whether news media facilitate the creation of a European public sphere. The interest in the subject crystallized in the background of the discussions about the democratic deficit of the EU (Pfetsch, Heft 2014). The role of a strong, deliberative public sphere for participatory European democracy is widely acknowledged (Fishkin, Luskin, Siu 2014), but the role of media in building it, particularly in the European Union, has been overlooked (De Zúñiga 2012). It is largely agreed that in the specific context of the EU, news media can facilitate an open, multi-perspective discussion about political issues. Building on the classical Habermas' theory (Habermas 1989 [1962]), the media's contribution is analysed as an institution that both reflects and shapes public discourse.

Early studies focus on the media as a facilitator of public discussion about political issues and point out that European citizens are informed about European politics, institutions, and policies mainly through national media. The emergence of a transnational, European public sphere, in which the news media interconnects the local, regional, and national public spheres, and supports the discursive legitimation of the EU, by focusing more on issues that affect the entire Union, has been framed as a panacea to overcome the communication deficit of the Union (Heinderyckx 2015). A connected discussion focuses on the emergence of transnational European wide or pan-European mass media and their potential to organize a general, supranational communication space. While some authors support the idea that the main role in the functioning of a European public sphere belongs to a European-wide or pan-European mass media, which can increase transnational communication flows (Eriksen 2007; Pfetsch, Heft 2014), others challenge it. Koopmans and Statham (2010), for instance, see this approach as deficient because it equals the European public sphere to the replication of the unified national public spheres, while the multicultural, multi-linguistic context of the EU is much more complex. Therefore, Boomgaarden and De Vreese (2016: 20) suggest that when looking at the European public sphere, one should consider the "news convergence across Europe", meaning the shared focus of national media on the other Member States (MS) and European governance, as well as the EU presence in the news.

Historically, the EU coverage in national media has been limited and often linked to domestic politics, while the attempts to establish pan-European media have not been very successful, thus far. The few media that cover specifically the EU affairs, such as *Euronews*, *EURACTIV* or *Politico* are appealing to a rather specialised audience, who is familiar with the EU functioning and/or related in some way to the EU (Morganti, Van Audenhove 2012). Reporting on the EU is challenging for national media, due to the complexity of the subject. The intricate policymaking at the supranational level is difficult to convey to broad audiences in an easily understandable manner. Moreover, the public is only sporadically interested in European politics and institutions, while news editors consider European stories boring for the readership (Lloyd, Marconi 2014). Nevertheless, journalistic attention to European topics has grown over time, even in the absence of strong public demand for such coverage (Hurrelmann, Gora, Wagner 2012). Events such as the Eurozone crisis, refugee management and Brexit fuelled the interest in the politics of other Member States, and implicitly, towards different European policies (Sandbu 2022). Additionally, European elections are benefiting from increasing media coverage at a national level (Cremonesi *et al.* 2019; Boomgaarden, De Vreese 2016). Personalisation of European politics through processes such as the party nomination of candidates for the Commission presidency (*Spitzenkandidat*) leads to the personalisation of news and simultaneous coverage of the same topics, using similar frames and meaning structures across major European media outlets (Fotopoulos, Morganti 2022). These developments seem to mark, arguably, a new step towards the establishment of a European public sphere and, certainly, towards more Europeanised national public spheres.

To conclude these theoretical considerations, the amount of information published about the EU, meaning the EU's visibility in the national public spheres, also its overall tone, and its narrative and visual framing can affect the positive or negative perception of the EU institutions and policies, their legitimacy, and the overall level of satisfaction with EU democracy (Galpin, Trenz 2017; Desmet, Van Spanje, De Vreese 2015). Therefore, by acknowledging the importance of the quality of information for the electoral process and the European public sphere, the two European Action plans - EDAP and EMAAP - which link the empowerment of the European news media sector to improving democracy seem relevant and aligned with the academic literature.

The next section of this article dives deeper into this EU approach, by looking at how different EU actions and policies tackle the relationship between the European news media sector and participatory democracy.

2. The EU approach: Improving the quality of democracy by empowering the European news media sector

In the past decade, European democracy has been challenged by increased polarization, rising extremism, low electoral turnout, elections interference, popular disillusionment with representative politics and democratic institutions, as well as the spread of disinformation and threats against journalists (European Parliament 2020;

Nugent 2017). These developments mount up on the EU legitimacy crisis and democratic deficit debate (Schlesinger 1999), which marked the turn towards participatory EU policy-making in the early 2000s. Since then, numerous initiatives were taken at a European level to ensure a “deliberative democracy” (Blockmans, Russack 2020). Targeting different policy areas, they range from specific legislative and policy frameworks to projects, actions, and recommendations based on expert group consultations.

To address the popular dissatisfaction with the deficient communication and limited accountability of the institutions, multiple venues for stakeholders’ political participation at a European level were created (for example, European Public Consultations, the European Citizens’ Initiative, and the multiple venues for dialogue). These represent a set of direct and indirect participatory mechanisms, which allow citizens to contribute to supra-national politics. The White Paper on European Governance (European Commission 2001) is an early example of a policy document emphasizing the importance of participation in the legitimation of European governance and calling for a code of conduct for consultation with civil society and the public, strengthened rules for public access to EU information and dialogue between authorities in the Member States and the citizens. A particular emphasis on strengthening democratic participation in the EU is made in the Treaty of Lisbon, which frames direct participation as a citizen’s right, and obliges the institutions to provide opportunities for civil dialogues and consultations (Lindner, Aichholzer 2020). Both the possibilities of political engagement through delegation of representational power (direct election of representatives), as well as public participation in discussing topics of public interest, became a norm in the EU political system. Stakeholders are nowadays involved directly in the policy-making process, through mechanisms such as European Public Consultations, citizens’ dialogues, and debates. Citizens’ opinions are consulted as well through surveys, such as Eurobarometer and there exists the possibility to submit petitions with proposals, as part of the European Citizens’ initiative. These forms of political participation, based on the direct involvement of stakeholders in policy-making, together with the delegation of representational power through electoral choices, constitute the specific participatory model of the EU (Zambelli, Morganti 2021).

The criticism of the democratic deficit of the EU is connected to its communication deficit. The development of the professional communication capacities of the EU institutions came as a response to this criticism, in an attempt to better connect to the citizens. Currently, the amount of information published about and by the EU is vast, ranging from specialised websites and social media channels to up-to-date press briefings and interviews. Nevertheless, despite numerous attempts of the EU to create a deliberative, democratic space in which active European citizens express their views and contribute to policymaking, these efforts succeed rather in generating some specialised debate than in creating a vibrant European public sphere (Ivic 2017). Moreover, an increased quantity of EU-related news is not sufficient for the legitimation of the Union. The media discourse is also crucial (Kleinen-von Königslöw 2011), as European democracy is a dynamic communicative process, shaped by the media (Michailidou, de Wilde, Trenz 2014).

When looking at a series of EU measures that link the European democracy at large and the European news media sector, in particular, several areas of intervention can be noticed: (1) supporting media freedom, pluralism, and literacy; (2) countering fake news and disinformation; (3) providing financial support for competitive news media and audio-visual services and (4) regulating the single market. These areas of intervention were identified by reviewing the EU measures that interlace support for the media sector and democracy and which are currently in place. In each of these areas, different actions, at different levels, tackling connected goals can be noticed. For instance, for supporting media freedom, pluralism and literacy, various complementary measures can be highlighted. To identify potential risks to media pluralism across the MS, the Media Pluralism Monitor² project assesses media freedom and pluralism. The project evolved from a pilot supported by the EU. With a similar goal of supporting media freedom, another pilot—the Media Ownership Monitor—was launched in 2021 to ensure transparency on media ownership at the MS level. Additionally, there exists an expert group that monitors good practices concerning media literacy and aims to identify ways of aligning EU policies, programmes, and initiatives regarding media literacy. Pilot projects and monitoring entities are two of the non-binding instruments used by the EU, also in other areas of intervention. With regard to countering disinformation, for instance, the creation of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News in 2017, to counter the spread of disinformation and the approval of the “Action Plan Against Disinformation” in 2018 can be mentioned. Additionally, non-legislative measures include funding schemes such as Creative Europe, aimed to support competitive news media and audio-visual services. Examples of legislative acts include the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) and the Copyright Directive. A detailed overview of the above-mentioned measures is presented in Annex 1 (not an exhaustive list).

To advance in attaining the goals of distinct, interconnected, previous actions and bridge the gap between them, the European Commission launched at the end of 2020, the Democracy Action Plan and the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan. The first - EDAP - aims broadly to strengthen the democratic institutions in the EU and “protect the European values” (Vice-President Věra Jourová in Carnegie Europe 2020). Specifically, it sets out legislative and non-legislative measures for three main pillars: protecting electoral integrity and democratic participation, reinforcing media freedom and pluralism, and countering disinformation (European Commission 2020a). There is no clear cut between the provisions of the EDAP aimed to empower the European news media sector and those to foster political participation. These goals are, directly or indirectly, targeted in a transversal manner, as intertwined, key elements of European democracy. A similar approach is observed in earlier measures. For example, with protecting the freedom of expression in mind, the Commission presented, in September 2019, a “Recommendation on ensuring the protection, safety, and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the EU”. This reminds the MS that respecting media freedom and pluralism are fundamental rights of the EU. Even though the Recommendation focuses on the media sector, its rationale is that an enabling environment

² For details: <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/>

for free media allows citizens to form opinions based on multiple sources, scrutinise governments and exercise an informed right to vote (Commission Recommendation 2021/1534). Therefore, it is obvious that the EDAP reinforces the previous objectives of the Commission and that empowered, free media remains essential for direct political participation in the EU. On top of multiple non-binding targets, the EDAP envisions two specific legislative measures: The Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act aimed to ensure a safer digital space and a more open digital market.

The Media and Audiovisual Action Plan complements the EDAP and distinctly aims to contribute to nurturing a healthier European media sector, mainly affected by declining revenues and facing structural issues. Its ambitions to accelerate the recovery, transformation, and innovation, as well as the resilience of the media sector, including both the news media and the audio-visual entertainment sectors (European Commission 2020b). The EMAAP is a premiere for the European market, striving to boost the European media industry's recovery after the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining its cultural and technological autonomy. Ten concrete actions are foreseen to facilitate and broaden the access to EU funding opportunities and transform the European media data space and media business models while also seeking to ensure a climate-neutral sector and foster European media talents (European Commission 2021a). Among them, the *NEWS* initiative bundles the actions and support for the media in a holistic approach, aimed at providing better access to finance, capacity building and collaborative transformation of the sector. Another relevant action for the scope of this article is focused on citizen empowerment by enhancing the public's awareness and media literacy. The EMAAP should safeguard the 'practical application' of the new media literacy provisions of the AVMSD, which is in place since 2010, in the form of a media literacy toolbox and guidelines for the Member States. These measures would support citizens to make informed choices and not only take full advantage of the new communication technologies, but also use the internet responsibly (Directive 2010/13/EU). At the crossroad between the EMAAP and EDAP, this action brings the citizens to the centre of the policy, as the transformation of the media ecosystem cannot be realised without considering the audiences. Additionally, a European Media Freedom Act was presented in 2022, to build upon the AVMSD and complement the legislative tools derived from EDAP and EMAAP, for stronger support for media freedom and pluralism (European Commission 2022).

Overall, both Plans contemplate strengthening the European news media sector as a panacea for enhancing the quality of democracy. The EMAAP brings an additional value to the EDAP, as one of the main objectives of the former, the economic recovery and competitiveness of the media sector, is a precondition for a healthy, independent, and pluralistic media environment, which in turn is fundamental for democracy (European Commission 2020a). Even though numerous measures with integrative goals were implemented previously by the European institutions, the EDAP and EMAAP represent the first comprehensive framework focused distinctly on the role of the media for democracy and its protection. Nevertheless, their success depends on the commitment of the Member States and their recognition of the ne-

cessity of transversal measures, aligned with the EU vision. The rise of right-wing nationalist parties in MS such as Poland and Hungary pose not only a challenge to the implementation of EU legislation at a national level but also threatens the media with an increasing amount of political pressure, journalists' attacks and limitations, and locally generated fake news (Rech 2018).

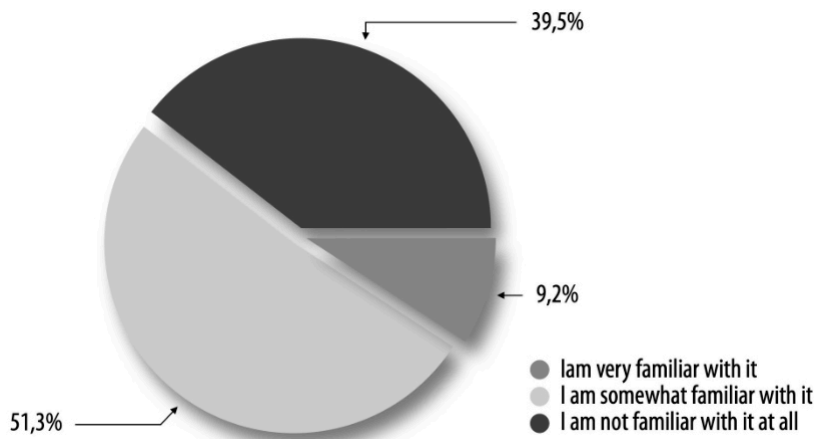
The next section of this article aims to understand whether the Action plans address the real needs of the European news media sector, based on a cross-sectional study.

3. Insights from the European news media sector: a reality check on sectoral needs and perceptions

One of the goals of this research was to understand whether the EU approach to media and democracy is the appropriate one, according to the media sector itself. To this end, a qualitative research method was applied. Specifically, an exploratory, semi-structured online survey was conducted among the beneficiaries of the 2021-2022 edition of the first, European cross-border collaboration programme fostering media innovation - Stars4Media. Co-funded by the EU, the programme started as a pilot action in 2019, to support the European media sector by enabling skills exchange and innovation through collaboration. For this study, primary data was collected from representatives of 76 media companies, based in 22 EU countries that participated in the second edition of Stars4Media. The profile of the companies varies largely from printed and digital national and local newspapers (13.2% of respondents) to digital news media/magazines (17.1% of respondents), start-ups (14.5%), content agencies (5.3%) and other types of entities. The size of the companies ranges, respectively, from small (10-50 employees) and micro (1-10 employees) to big (over 200 employees). Most of the respondents (75%) work for small and micro companies, while 15.8% for big companies. The list of participating companies is available on the Stars4Media website. Due to the nature of the co-funding schemes, these companies engaged to work together with partners with complementary skills and expertise, for four months, to implement initiatives (projects) revolving around editorial, technological, marketing, and other innovations. For most of them, it was the first time that they collaborated. At the end of the implementation of initiatives, in January 2022, one representative per company filled in an evaluation survey. Based on their responses, we aim to answer the SRQ3 of this paper, to outline how companies engaged in innovative cross-border collaborations perceive the EU approach to the media sector and democracy, and better understand their needs.

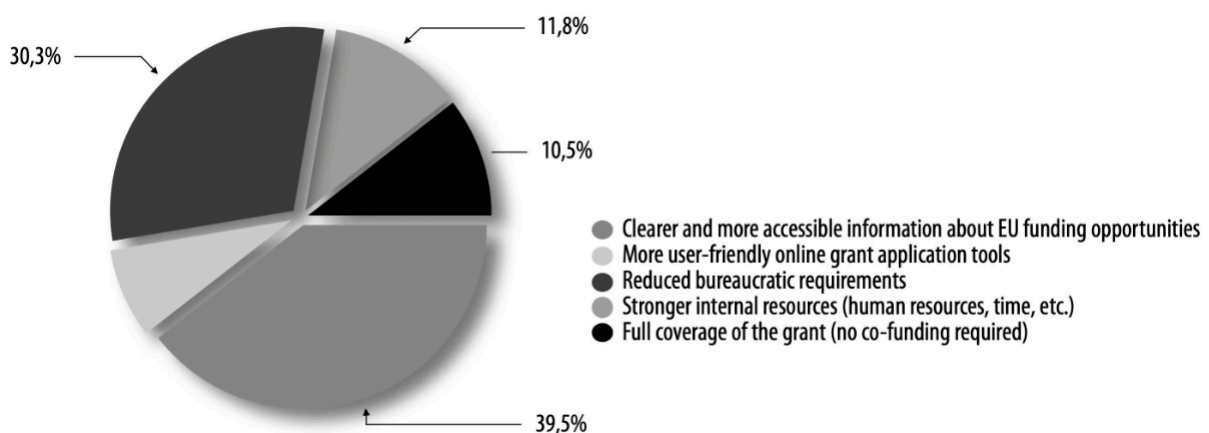
For most of the respondents (64.5%), it was the first time they participated in a European project. Approximately half of them (51.3%) are somewhat familiar with the EU's policy framework and programmes for supporting the European news media sector, such as the EMAAP, EDAP and others. However, 39.5% are not familiar with it at all. This finding implies that the EU is not very successful in its outreach to the media sector for providing support and is aligned with previous criticism of the communication deficit of the EU. Even though opportunities for the media sector exist and plenty of information is published by the EU, this does not fully reach relevant audiences.

Image 1. Survey results - "How familiar are you with the EU's policy framework and programmes for supporting the European news media sector, such as the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, the Democracy Action Plan, and others?"



39.5% of the companies consider that "clearer and more accessible information about EU funding opportunities" would help them access EU funds, while a significant number (30.3%) would benefit from reduced bureaucratic requirements. According to one of the respondents, "something very necessary would be to simplify bureaucratic procedures. Although there is very good availability on the part of the administrators, it is no less true that so much bureaucracy can be a stumbling block, especially for small associations that do not have so many resources" (representative of *En Positivo* outlet, Spain). Another answer adds: Full coverage of the grant (no co-funding required) would be crucial too, especially for small media who cannot afford to employ a person extra for checking grant opportunities and for the administration, and the co-funding puts them out of the game anyway. The current EU-grant system helps just those biggest ones, however for them, it's not so crucial to get supported, and at the same time, big players don't fulfil the role of independent media in local communities anymore - at least in Central-Eastern Europe. (Novinářský Klub Jindřicha Oopera, Czechia).

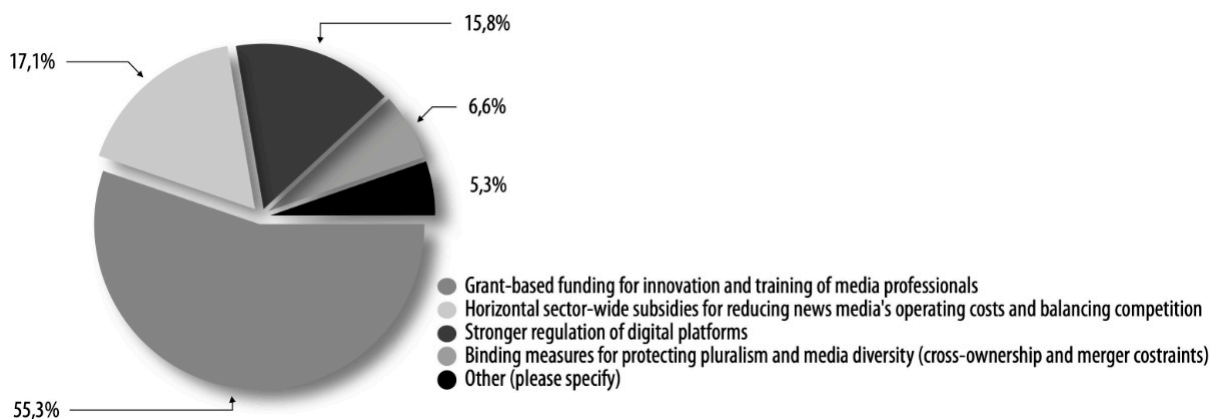
Image 2. Survey results - "What would best help you to access the EU support for the media sector?"



Grant-based funding for innovation and training of media professionals is considered by the respondents to be the most necessary, to support the democratic role

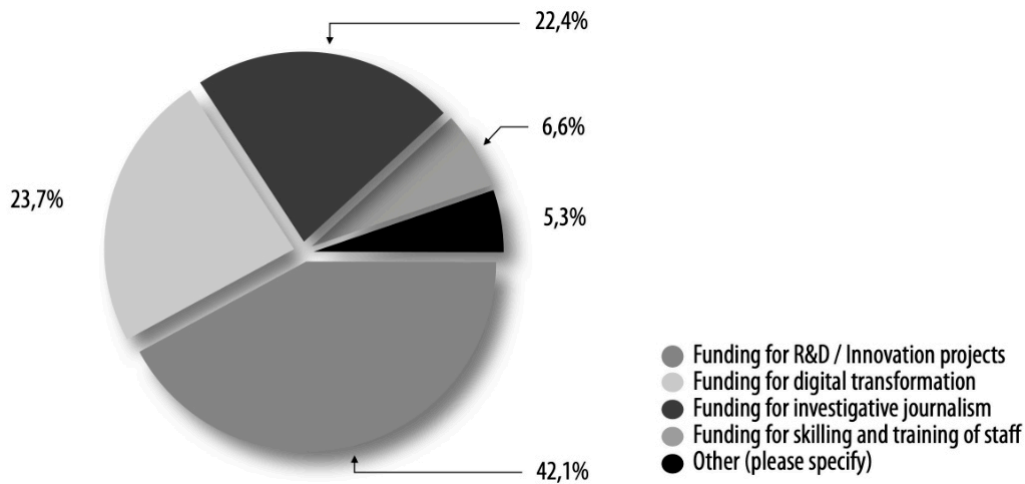
of media. This strong demand for funding, either in the form of EU grants or horizontal sector-wide subsidies, reflects that financial sustainability is the main challenge that news media face. The role of news media as democratic actors has been threatened for over a decade by the rise of digitalisation, technological changes, and economic hurdles. These caused not only an additional loss of advertising revenues but also paved the way for the proliferation of online misinformation and fake news, which negatively impacted the media's credibility (Esser, Neuberger 2019). The demand for news media content is, nonetheless, high, according to the Reuters Institute *Digital News Report* (Newman *et al.* 2021), and there is also a growing concern about the quality of information, on the background of the extensive COVID-19-related disinformation. The specific missions of the companies engaged in Stars4Media vary, but all are aligned with the normative functions of the media in a liberal democracy. When addressed with a multiple-choice question on their societal role, the majority perceives it as informing (76.3%), followed by connecting communities and different social groups (31.6%) and surveilling those who govern and/or exert power (26.3%). To succeed in these endeavours, need-based support is crucial.

Image 3. Survey results - "Which of the following measures do you consider the most necessary to support the democratic role of the media sector?"



When it comes to specific areas of support, funding for R&D projects seems to be the most relevant for 42.1%, followed by funding for digital transformation (23.7%) and investigative journalism (22.4%). These findings are relevant for the implementation of both EDAP and EMAAP. For example, the EDAP devotes distinct attention to preventing foreign interference in elections and disinformation, while dealing with the threat of domestic disinformation campaigns, which is more difficult to assess and tackle, is delegated to the MS. Here, support for national media is crucial to help them achieve their mission. As one of the survey respondents phrased it, "funding for independent journalism acts as a vaccine against authoritarianism and disinformation" (EURACTIV Poland). Additionally, legislative measures are needed to enable the media to freely develop their work: "We need first to have a legal environment that limits abuses of dominant position in our market to be able to thrive in it", mentions the representative of the Spanish media group *Vocento*.

Image 4. Survey results - "What type of financial support would be the most appropriate for your media organisation?"



The insights provided by the survey respondents reveal that there is no doubt among the media professionals regarding the importance of strengthening the European news media sector for achieving a stronger European democracy. Even among beneficiaries of an EU funding scheme, however, the actions of the EU in this regard remain largely unknown. The final section of the article engages in a discussion of these findings.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to start a reflection on whether the EU approach to support the European news media sector for improving the quality of the participatory democratic process in the EU is appropriate, based on theoretical, policy and empirical considerations.

From the literature point of view, there is a consensus that the role of news media in the EU multi-level governance structure is vital for supporting a pluralist debate and enabling political participation. There is mounting evidence of the media's impact on voting patterns and the importance of media framing in democratic debate. The challenge consists in supporting this debate at a supra-national level, in European public space.

The EU approach to tackle this challenge, as well as, more broadly, to support the European media sector is reflected in a multitude of complementary legislative and non-legislative measures, scattered across areas of intervention, and driven by different entities. The European Democracy Action Plan and the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan were introduced, in late 2020, to reinforce and ensemble previous efforts. The overarching principle derived from these Actions is in line with the literature on media and democracy: by investing in a quality information landscape, both citizens and democracy win.

Nevertheless, several challenges to the success of the EU's ambitious Action Plans can be anticipated. First, there is an issue of limited legislative capacity. Except when

specifically foreseen, such as in the case of the Digital Service Act package, included in the EDAP, the EU Action plans are non-legislative. They generally set the level of ambition in specific, key areas and define strategic priorities. The challenge is that co-operation and coordination between the Member States and the supranational EU institutions are needed to translate these priorities and measures into reality.

Second, the EDAP builds upon the key idea that Europeans should have a leading and active role in setting EU priorities and highlights the importance of open democratic debate, in which empowered, informed citizens take part beyond elections. In this regard, the Commission calls on MS to make use of relevant EU structural and investment funds to support civil society. This should be stronger, complemented with tailored support to small-medium local and regional media. Despite the variety of EU measures compiled under EDAP and EMAAP, including financial schemes for the media sector, our empirical research shows that these remain largely unknown to European news media companies. Even if the measures respond to the needs and expectations of the media, which mostly revolve around funding necessities, they are not fully accessed due to hurdles such as the complexity of information, red tape, limited internal resources or the EU requirement for providing co-finance. There are also concerns among the respondents regarding the legal framework that would provide stronger regulation of competition and platforms. The EU addresses these aspects but, most likely, fails in communicating them to the media sector. As the literature suggests, the EU creates nowadays a plethora of information about its activities. The insights provided by the Stars4Media beneficiaries highlight the need for targeted communication and outreach efforts, geared toward national and local news media.

Lastly, as the Action Plans aim to counter multiple complex issues, joint efforts for cooperation between different actors and fields are required. This goes beyond cooperation between MS and the EU. To respond to the informational challenges that, implicitly, affect European democracy, cooperation between European media is essential. Half of the survey respondents engage in cross-border collaboration regularly, the rest are doing it only occasionally or not at all. The analysis of the EU approach to media and democracy reveals that creating a European public sphere is not a clearly expressed policy goal. This might derive from policy spill-overs but will not happen naturally while the media is divided into silos.

As this is a cross-sectional study, applied to a limited sample of European news media companies, further research is needed to understand whether similar perceptions, hurdles, and needs are perceived by other media organisations across the EU, including those not engaged in EU-funding schemes. Expert interviews, including stakeholders and policymakers, would help advance the reflection on whether the EU approach to support the news media sector for improving the quality of participatory democracy is relevant and effective.

While our study reflects the undoubtful agreement that a healthy news industry is necessary for quality democracy, the question of the EU's contribution effectiveness and actual response to the sectoral needs remains.

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Annex 1

List of EU measures concerning the role of the European news media sector for participatory democracy

Title	Type of action	Period of implementation	Goals
Area of intervention:		Media freedom, pluralism, and literacy	
Media literacy expert group ³	Expert group	2011 – Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To monitor good practices concerning media literacy; - To identify ways of aligning EU policies, programmes, and initiatives regarding media literacy.
Media Pluralism Monitor ⁴	Project/ programme	2016 – Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To identify potential risks to media pluralism by monitoring media freedom and pluralism across the Member States; - To assess how digital developments impact media pluralism in the EU.
Media Ownership Monitor ⁵	Project/ programme	2021 - Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To provide EU support for a pilot project that safeguards media freedom and pluralism, by ensuring transparency on media ownership at the Member States level.
Area of intervention:		Countering fake news and disinformation	
“Tackling online disinformation: a European approach” communication ⁶	Communication	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To present the views of the Commission on online disinformation and the specific measures foreseen to be taken for tackling the issue and raising public awareness.
Action Plan against Disinformation ⁷	Policy	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To improve detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation; - To ensure a coordinated response to disinformation through a Rapid Alert System between the EU institutions and Member States; - To mobilise online platforms to tackle disinformation; - To raise awareness and empower civil society to expose disinformation; - To support independent media and fact-checkers.
The Code of Practice on Disinformation ⁸	Code of practice	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To engage the online platforms (Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Mozilla, Twitter and TikTok) in monitoring and taking action against online disinformation. - As of 2021, the code became a co-regulatory instrument in line with the Digital Services Act.
European Digital Media Observatory ⁹	Project/ programme	2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To bring together different stakeholders such as fact-checkers, researchers and the media to understand and analyse disinformation.
Area of intervention:		Competitive news media and audiovisual services	
Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD)	Legislative Act	2010, revised in 2018	<p>Presents a set of measures to enable the adaptation of the audiovisual sector to the digital context. Some specific goals are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To promote cultural diversity in the content of the on-demand service - To strengthen the role of media literacy and encourage Member states and video-sharing platforms to raise awareness about media literacy - To support the availability of broadcasts of political news across the EU - To regulate television advertising and product placement
Creative Europe MEDIA and CROSS-SECTORAL strands ¹⁰	Funding scheme	2021-2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To support the European film and audiovisual industries and improve their competitiveness; - To support the collaboration between different creative sectors; - To support the news media sector to promote media literacy, pluralism and media freedom, as well as innovation; - To enable cross-border collaboration among news media professionals for stimulating the exchange of best practices and business transformation.
Area of intervention:		Regulation of the Digital single market	
The Copyright Directive ¹¹	Legislative Act	2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To modernise the copyright rules for the digital single market, to enhance cross-border access to online content, protect the authors and performers and improve access and use of copyrighted materials for education, research and cultural heritage purposes.
Digital Service Act Package Including the Digital Service Act and the Digital Markets Act ¹² (part of EDAP)	Legislative Act	Proposed by the EC in 2020, in the process of adoption according to the ordinary legislative procedure	<p>Sets out a detailed regulatory framework for the protection of user rights online. Specifically, it presents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A new set of competition rules aimed at regulating and making digital markets more competitive; - A set of rules to ensure transparency and an accountability framework for the online platforms; - Measures to support innovation, growth and competitiveness within the single market.

Annex 2

Survey questions

1. - What term best defines the main societal role of your organisation? (multiple choices)

- a. Informing
- b. Entertaining
- c. Surveilling those who govern
- d. Connecting communities and different societal groups
- e. Other (please specify)

- Please provide further details if you want to elaborate further on your choices (max 50 words):

2. What type of financial support would be the most appropriate for your media organisation? (single answer)

- a. Funding for R&D/innovation projects
- b. Funding for skilling and training of staff
- c. Funding for investigative journalism
- d. Funding for digital transformation
- e. Other (please specify)

3. How familiar are you with the EU's policy framework and programmes for supporting the European news media sector, such as the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, the Democracy Action Plan, and others?

- a. I am very familiar with it
- b. I am somewhat familiar with it
- c. I am not familiar with it at all

4. Which of the following EU measures do you consider to be the most necessary in order to support the democratic role of the media sector? (single answer)

- a. Grant-based funding for innovation and training of media professionals
- b. Horizontal sector-wide subsidies for reducing news media's operating costs and balancing competition
- c. Stronger regulation of digital platforms
- d. Binding measures for protecting pluralism and media diversity (cross-ownership and mergers constraints)
- e. Other (please specify)

Please provide further details if you want to elaborate further on your choices (max 50 words):

5. - What would best help you to access the EU financial support for the media sector? (multiple answers)

- a. Clearer and more accessible information about EU funding opportunities
- b. More user-friendly online grant application tools
- c. Reduced bureaucratic requirements
- d. Stronger internal resources (human resources, time, etc.)
- e. Full coverage of the grant (no co-funding required)
- f. Other (please specify)

- Please provide further details if you want to elaborate further on your choices (max 50 words):



Reacting to disinformation. The multilevel EU fact-checking approach

Marinella Belluati, Alice Fubini

1. Introduction

In recent years, online disinformation in both political communication and in the media has spread pervasively in many countries around the world, posing a growing challenge for democratic systems and their citizens (Trappel, Tomaz 2022).

Complex and multi-faceted, disinformation has no predominant cause, nor can it be solved with a single targeted action. Some forms of disinformation have gained ground not only thanks to the communication environment's increasing digitalization, but also through their use as a tool of political propaganda.

How resilient or how vulnerable a society is to disinformation depends on a variety of factors, including trust in media systems, levels of media literacy, the political setting and legislative guarantees.

Well aware of the need for targeted strategies, the European institutions have taken a multilevel approach in their policies for countering disinformation, extending their more general policy-making model to this sphere. The foundations for this effort were laid by the High Level Expert Group (HLEG)¹ on Fake News and Online Disinformation set up by the European Commission in 2018, the group of 39 experts from several EU countries appointed after an open selection process consists of representatives from academia, journalists, platform managers and NGOs, which formulated the main policy lines and drafted a Code of Practice² that identified four domains for action. First, it urges attention to the political dimension, as it is both a source and a target of the phenomenon. This is demonstrated by the numerous disinformation campaigns during election seasons, and more recently regarding vaccines, undermining trust in the media and politics³. The second domain is the mainstream information system: though the news media play an important part in fighting disinformation, they often contribute involuntarily to propagating it. The third domain is that of involving civil society in fighting disinformation: if forms of participation are expanded and the education tools and skills needed to recognize and deal with fake news are provided, civic engagement can be a valuable resource. Lastly, policy efforts must involve the digital environments and platforms: as social networks, instant messaging and search engines now have a major role in everyday consumption of media content, their activities must be regulated and made more transparent, increasing their accountability.

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¹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/experts-appointed-high-level-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation> (last access February 2022).

² <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation> (last access February 2022).

³ Fake news and disinformation online, Flash Eurobarometer 464, April 2018 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2183> (last access February 2022).

On the European scale, this perspective calls for a multilevel governance approach (Piattoni 2010; Volkmer 2014) to disinformation that: a) stimulates action on all the geographical levels involved, be they international, supranational, national or local; b) deploys a more comprehensive institutional strategy combining top-down and bottom-up solutions in a horizon encompassing the public sector, private interests, civil society and the media systems; c) adopt integrated regulatory measures for content checking.

Starting from the debate around the term fake news and the alternative concept offered in the literature, this article analyzes the EU's response to disinformation, understood "as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm"⁴.

Specifically, the paper investigates the multilevel strategy that the EU is now promoting through the fact-checking network of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), our empirical case study. As its stated mission, EDMO "brings together fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and academic researchers to understand and analyse disinformation, in collaboration with media organisations, online platforms and media literacy practitioners"⁵.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 introduces the concept of fake news, going on to specify how disinformation impacts societies in the digital age and indicate possible ways of countering it. Section 3 illustrates the main components of the European strategy. Lastly, section 4 presents and discusses the findings of 94 fact-checking projects involved in the EDMO network.

2. Disinformation in the digital age

What do we mean by disinformation? Why is curbing its spread more and more urgent? What strategies can be used to fight it? This section first offers some thoughts on the inextricable link that connects disinformation and how it is defined to the macro-phenomenon of fake news. Second, it reviews why it is necessary and urgent to take organized action to combat this phenomenon that takes shape in the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013), whose transformations stem from a process in constant evolution such as digitalization and its consequences in terms of datafication (e.g., Mayer-Schönberger, Cukier 2013; van Dijck 2014) and platformization (e.g., Gillespie 2010; Helmond 2015; van Dijck *et al.* 2018). Lastly, the section discusses the tools introduced to combat disinformation: fact-checking practices, and their limits and potential.

2.1 What do we mean by disinformation: beyond the "fake news" label

"It's Time to Retire the Tainted Term "Fake news"⁶: such was the headline topping

⁴ Communication on tackling on-line disinformation, COM (2018) 236

⁵ <https://edmo.eu/edmo-at-a-glance/>

⁶ Margaret Sullivan, "Perspective | It's Time to Retire the Tainted Term 'Fake news'". Washington Post, January 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/its-time-to-retire-the-tainted-term-fake-news/2017/01/06/a5a7516c-d375-11e6-945a-76f69a399dd5_story.html.

that the term was by then so bereft of specific meaning that it would be better to abandon it altogether. There are two reasons for doing so, or at least for using the term fake news more judiciously, *i.e.*, it oversimplifies the problem, and is subject to politically motivated distortion: “First, it is woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomenon of information pollution. The term has also begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable” (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017:5). The label “fake news” is also criticized as being “too vague, politically dangerous, indistinguishable from past forms of disinformation, charged with an over-simplistic idea of truth” (Bounegru *et al.* 2018: 6-7), and has come to be considered “as a global buzzword” (Farkas, Schou 2018).

At least part of the reason that the problem is so complex and so difficult to define lies in the fact that we are dealing here with an all-encompassing phenomena that makes itself felt in the public and political spheres as much as it does in the media system:

[...] It is precisely because its forms and contents are designed to mimic those of mainstream media — and precisely because it travels through similar circuits — that fake news offers us the occasion to study not just the strategies and formats of fake news, but the politics and composition of the media and information environments of the digital age more generally (Bounegru *et al.* 2018: 7).

Hence the need for other terms that better reflect the problem’s many different facets, such as “misleading information” (Fallis 2015; Giglietto *et al.* 2016) or “information disorder” (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017) and can circumscribe its perimeter: the former, for instance, distinguishes between misinformation and disinformation; the latter between misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.

According to Fallis (2015), the concept of misleading information can be broken down into two categories: disinformation, defined “as a bit of false information deliberately aimed at deceiv[ing]” (Giglietto *et al.* 2016: 5), and misinformation, “intended as a false or inaccurate information circulating as a result of honest mistakes, negligence or unconscious biases” (*Ibid.*). However, while Giglietto and colleagues’ study (2016) recognizes the distinction between misinformation and disinformation, it includes both in a “meta category” that takes a more markedly process-oriented perspective.

In turn, the term “information disorder” comprises and distinguishes between misinformation and disinformation, but adds mal-information, which is “when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017).

The literature has also introduced the “Infodemic” (Cinelli *et al.* 2020, Zarocostas 2020), comparing the diffusion of fake news to the dynamics of viral infection (Tambuscio *et al.* 2015).

2.2 How disinformation impacts societies in the digital age

To understand why it is so urgent to curb disinformation, we must look at what makes it different in the digital age. False and fake news have always existed. What

has changed now is the nature of the problem, from three standpoints (Fubini 2018): first, the way false information is presented has changed, becoming pseudo-journalistic to the extent that the literature now speaks of “the fake news genre” (Egelhofer, Lecheler 2019). Second, fake content has become more pervasive thanks to the very nature of the social environments where it circulates. Social media in particular is an enabler for fake news consumed and shared in echo chambers (Jamieson, Cappella 2010) and filter bubbles (Pariser 2012) whose effect is to reinforce and polarize opinion (Quattrociocchi, Vicini 2016; Sunstein 2002). Lastly, the politicization of fake news is ever more intense, so much so that the European Parliamentary Research Service has spoken of it as a “global phenomenon with political impact”⁷, regarding the 2016 US presidential election as the true turning point not just because it brought the issue into the mainstream, but also because of its political instrumentalization by Donald Trump.

These trends point to the need to consider what the literature has called the risks and consequences for democratic processes of the “global rise of fake news” (Lee 2019). As early as 2013, the World Economic Forum referred to the phenomenon as a worldwide risk, and warnings have been raised of a “fake news crisis” (Nelson, Taneja 2018).

It is a crisis that has roiled both the political and media spheres. In the former, a recent study commissioned by the European Parliament (2021)⁸ found that disinformation has impacted democratic processes by weakening trust in the institutions. In addition, disinformation has impacts on human rights, and specifically on the right to freedom of expression, the right to privacy and more generally on economic, social and cultural rights. As regards the media system, Tsfaty and colleagues (2020) have drawn attention to the causes and consequences of fake news dissemination in mainstream media, noting that fake news (and thus also disinformation) are able to influence agenda-setting processes (McCombs *et al.* 2014) in view of the dynamics typical of network agenda setting (Vargo *et al.* 2018) and the pluralization of pressure spheres (Marini 2017).

2.3 How to fight disinformation: fact-checking, debunking and their limits and potential

The most widespread practices for countering disinformation include fact-checking (Robertson *et al.* 2020) and debunking (Chan *et al.* 2017; Lewandowski *et al.* 2020), whose effectiveness is a key issue in the debate on the topic (Cotter *et al.* 2022). Indeed, while fact-checking and debunking initiatives have multiplied (Amazeen 2020; Graves 2016), recent studies have concluded that these practices have a number of limitations. First, there is the problem of mismatched publics: very often, the public that consumes fake news is not the same as that which has access to fact-checking sites (Guess *et al.* 2018). Second, certain “blocking” dynamics, mostly associ-

⁷ Members’ Research Service, “Fake news” and the EU’s Response”, European Parliamentary Research Service Blog, 2.04.2017, <https://epthinktank.eu/2017/04/02/fake-news-and-the-eus-response/>

⁸ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653635_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

ated with processes of selectivity and hyper-selectivity, have effects that are added to and exacerbate those of confirmation bias. Third, a number of studies have pointed out that there is a gap between the amount of fake news that is shared and the number of fact-checking articles (Vargo *et al.* 2017). Fourth, studies of social network echo chambers have found little interaction in terms of user engagement with posts containing “corrective” content (Quattrociocchi, Vicini 2016): such interactions are not only few in number, but their tone and the statements they make reflect negative feelings that indicate a resistance to accepting checks or denials of content in line with the user’s ideological stance and values.

In addition to these limitations, fact-checking practices have a number of strong points: first, fact-checking (mostly of articles or politicians’ statements) is more effective if it is considered not as an end in itself, but as the starting point for the kind of research typical of investigative journalism. Second, these practices are also more effective if they are combined with network dynamics and collaboration among multiple actors. As the report by the Poynter Institute’s International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)⁹ indicates, networks of debunking and fact-checking groups tend to organize around specific issues in the public interest: from monitoring political communication during national or European electoral campaigns (*e.g.*, CrossCheck for the 2017 French presidential elections, which was then extended to the continental scale as CrossCheck Europe in 2018), up to the Covid health emergency. In the latter case, the IFCN’s efforts were particularly significant: in response to the infodemic, the group set up the #CoronaVirusFacts /#DatosCoronaVirus Alliance¹⁰, a database that unites fact-checkers in more than 70 countries in a single network and includes articles published in at least 40 languages.

In conclusion, fact-checking and debunking practices must become part of the information and communication flows, and their content should be circulated outside their websites and digital platforms, leveraging the potential of the Hybrid Media System in the fight against disinformation. This means ensuring that the agenda-setting power of debunked content is greater than that of fake news so that it can reach different types of audience. Given disinformation’s pervasiveness, moreover, and its impact on many levels and many systems—politics, the media, and the public sphere—it seems clear that the phenomenon calls for a multilevel approach that focuses equally on fact-checking processes, the public actors, and the policy lines to be adopted. We thus choose to analyze the approach taken by the European Union, which is now implementing a line of action which, in institutional and procedural terms, is the world’s most advanced to date.

3. The EU’s multilevel strategy for countering disinformation

The Brexit referendum and the US elections (both in 2016) demonstrated the power of “information disorder” and exposed Europe’s vulnerability. Accordingly, as early as

⁹ <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>

¹⁰ <https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/> (last access February 2022).

2016 the European Commission took steps to protect the 2019 European Parliament elections and subsequent electoral cycles with a complex political and strategic plan for fighting disinformation. When the pandemic crisis broke out in 2020 and began to disrupt European information flows, the EU strategy was thus able to deploy an established governance model for countering disinformation (Lovari, Belluati 2022).

The theoretical and empirical debate outlined in the previous section, together with the fact that a majority of the public is now concerned about the danger that disinformation poses to democracy¹¹ has led the European institutions to adopt a multi-pronged strategy. In the following pages, we will use official data and reports to illustrate the steps taken in this European policy strategy, from its introduction in 2015 to its present-day implementation.

3.1 Multilevel governance as a counter-tactic

In the age of interdependence and globalization, governance processes are increasingly complex and multidimensional: here, the areas of information and the efforts to fight its antithesis, disinformation, are no exception. The circulation of fake news is often orchestrated by parties outside the media system — pursuing interests that are as much economic as they are propagandistic — who take advantage of the fact that fake news' effect is amplified when it goes viral on social media. Without coordinated action on a broad scale and on multiple levels of governance, all efforts to counter fake news are likely to be in vain.

The structural changes now taking place in the European public space must be addressed multidimensionally. For this reason, multilevel governance is now a well-established part of the European policy-making process (Piattoni 2010; Volkmer 2014), which involves ever-denser networks of public and private actors and must thus make increasingly complex decisions if its outcomes are to be effective. The debate on multilevel governance has been going on for over twenty years, ever since Gary Marks (1992) proposed it as a concept that could shed light on the nature of the European Union's decision-making dynamics. Though a purely regulatory approach, it now characterizes the European decision-making process and its innovative features. The European institutional architecture centers as much on balancing sovereignties as it does on constructing a European citizenship¹². Hence, the technocratic response to European questions must be flanked by the pursuit of a common *demos* (Habermas 2001). It is essential that there be a formal and substantive link between all policy levels, where the local level must be able to interact with the national and supranational levels, the public sector must cooperate with the private sector, and civil society must be included in the decision-making process.

The principles of multilevel governance were first applied in the European cohesion and environmental policies and are also at the basis of the communication

¹¹ Flash Eurobarometer 464/2018 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2183>

¹² European Parliament, 2020, Europeanising European Public Spheres, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/654628/IPOL_STU\(2020\)654628_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/654628/IPOL_STU(2020)654628_EN.pdf) (last access July 25, 2022).

policy. The 2006 White Paper on a European Communication Policy¹³ and the subsequent efforts to keep pace with changing times¹⁴ emphasized not only the need to integrate all geographical levels, but also that of giving a plurality of actors a say in process governance. More than any other area, the fight against fake news — which by its very nature impacts multiple levels and multiple systems — calls for deploying multilevel public policies for co-regulation, media accountability and building digital competences. In addition, the technological competences that are currently available in data handling and IT security must be put into play. While the United States was the first to deploy its forces on the fake news front with approaches that were widely imitated, the European strategy described below is now showing itself to be the most effective worldwide, precisely because it encompasses all these aspects.

3.2 Europe in action! Retracing the European policy

As early as 2013, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report¹⁵ numbered “digital wildfires”— the rapid spread of massive digital misinformation—among the greatest threats to political systems, the economy and democracy in general. Accordingly, in 2015 the European Council tasked the Commission with responding to the Russian Federation's disinformation campaigns with the *EUvsDisinfo*¹⁶ project managed by the European External Action Service. From the outset, the fight against disinformation drew on an approach involving multiple levels of governance and a network of actors, public authorities, platforms, media outlets, independent fact-checking groups, academic research and civil society organizations.

In January 2018, after an initial exploratory period, the HLEG on Fake News and Disinformation was set up, and immediately addressed the need to adopt a multi-level, multi-stakeholder strategy with four macro-objectives, *i.e.*, improving the transparency of online news, providing an enabling environment for media pluralism, ensuring media system accountability, and the full involvement of civil society.

After an intensive, two-year process of public consultation and discussions with strategic stakeholders, the HLEG drafted the *Action Plan against Disinformation*¹⁷ which identified four priority areas for intervention: a) improving technological tools for analyzing online disinformation; b) improving cooperation in EU debunking activities to provide joint responses to threats; c) improving cooperation with online platforms; d) raising awareness and improving educational skills in recognizing and combating disinformation. Five areas were singled out for immediate regulatory action: disrupting the advertising revenues of accounts and websites that spread disinformation; improving the transparency of web advertising policies; addressing the

¹³ https://europa.eu/documents/comm/white_papers/pdf/com2006_35_en.pdf (last access February 2022).

¹⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-shaping-europes-digital-future-feb2020_en_4.pdf (last access 2022).

¹⁵ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalRisks_Report_2013.pdf (last access July 2022)

¹⁶ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/> (last access February 2022).

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/action-plan-disinformation-commission-contribution-european-council-13-14-december-2018_en (last access February 2022).

issue of fake profiles and online chatbots; empowering consumers to report untrustworthy content by accessing different web sources while improving the visibility and availability of verified content; and empowering the research community to monitor online misinformation by accessing data from platforms while respecting privacy.

This first stage in the EU's fight against disinformation concluded in 2019, when the HLEG recommended that all stakeholders be involved in a multilateral process including the public sector, online platforms, online and offline news outlets (the press and broadcasters), journalists, fact-checkers, independent content creators and the advertising industry. The *Action Plan against Disinformation* with its multidimensional approach became the centerpiece of European policy in the runup to the 2019 parliamentary elections. In 2020, spurred by the effects of the Covid-19 crisis, the Commission's European Democracy Action Plan¹⁸ strengthened the response to disinformation by proposing the Digital Services Act, which set out new obligations for online platforms. The European Parliament approved the Act in January.

The first Code of Practice on Disinformation¹⁹, issued in 2018, was also a key policy measure. For the first time, the Code put limits on online platforms' actions, as it called on their ownership structure to sign an agreement on the rules for using the European public space, and established sanctions for violations. The first signatories were Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla, who were joined over time by many other digital players²⁰. In 2022, the Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation²¹ entered into force, reflecting the May 2021 Commission Guidance and the lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis.

A second major thrust got under way in 2019 when, pursuant to set policy, tools were identified for recognizing and checking fake news. Consequently, the HLEG asked the European public authorities and those in each member state to develop a network of disinformation research centers, and supported the creation of a debunking consortium, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)²². Through public and private research networks, EDMO has launched a pilot project for identifying technological solutions and building granular fact-checking services. The consortium is governed by an Advisory Board and an Executive Board that are entirely independent of the public authorities—including the European Commission, though it was set up by the

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en

¹⁹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

²⁰ Microsoft signed in 2019, followed in TikTok in 2020, during the pandemic. In October 2021 they were joined by the online video platform Vimeo and social networks such as Clubhouse. Also in 2021, the Code was signed by advertising platforms such as *DoubleVerify*, and by *Avaaz*, *Globsec*, *Logically*, *NewsGuard* and *Who Targets Me*, all of which are organizations providing tools for fighting disinformation. In November 2021, the Commission welcomed another 16 potential signatories who participated in drafting the *Strengthened Code of Practice: Twitch, Adobe, Havas, The Bright App, Neeva, Reporters Without Borders, VOST Europe, the Netherlands Organisation for applied scientific research (TNO), Maldita, PagellaPolitica, Demagog, MediaMath, Integral Ad Science*, the GARM initiative, *Crisp Thinking* and *Newsback*. All signatories are asked to submit monthly reports on how they are implementing their commitments to fight disinformation about Covid-19 and other matters, and in line with the EU's belief in transparency, all reports are publicly accessible.

²¹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation> (last access July 2022).

²² <https://edmo.eu/>

latter—and is coordinated by the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Operationally, EDMO's activities are based on five strands reflecting its multilevel approach: 1) Mapping fact-checking organizations in Europe and supporting them by fostering joint and cross-border activities and dedicated training modules; 2) Mapping, supporting and coordinating research activities on disinformation at European level; 3) Setting up a public portal providing media practitioners, teachers and citizens with information and materials aimed at increasing awareness, building resilience to online disinformation and supporting media literacy campaigns; 4) Design of a framework to ensure secure and privacy-protected access to platforms' data for academic researchers working to better understand disinformation; 5) Support to public authorities in monitoring policies to limit the spread and impact of disinformation.

After the Observatory's core service infrastructure was deployed, EDMO's work began officially in 2020 when eight regional hubs located throughout Europe were chosen via an open selection process. In 2021, a certified community of fact-checkers was established, and public calls for proposals were opened for organizations specializing in the question of fake news, media outlets, independent information projects, civil society associations and research groups in order to build debunking skills and certify them for the public in a spirit of transparency. EDMO's activities are intended to help journalists and fact-checkers in their work. Accordingly, one of the platform's key missions is to assist the fact-checking community by facilitating cooperation and sharing best practices. Through access to the EDMO platform, the objective is to create a dense network of relationships at multiple levels throughout Europe.

To assess the effects of the EU's multilevel strategy, we took the EDMO fact-checking community and its structure as the empirical case study²³.

4. The multilevel strategy in action. The EDMO community of fact-checkers

We need cooperation among fact-checkers. First, because we can better understand and address cross-national disinformation. Second, because politicians often exploit the lack of knowledge in their national audiences about what is happening in other countries. Moreover, because only an ecosystem of fact-checking organizations has all the means necessary to fight such a big enemy as disinformation. Together we are stronger²⁴.

The EDMO project's community of fact-checkers provides a vantage point for exploring the multilevel effort underlying the European strategy for countering disinformation, whose principles are reflected in the EDMO admission criteria. To join the community of fact-checkers, applicants must meet specific structural requirements: they must be non-profit or for-profit public or private sector organizations established in the EU with a demonstrable focus on fact-checking, having participated in projects at one or more of the local, national and international levels. In addition, applicants must demonstrate that they are active and employ a consistent debunking

²³ The European strategy for countering misinformation has also included massive investments in applied research from 2018 to 2021 through the Horizon 2020 program and ERC grants.

²⁴ <https://edmo.eu/fact-checking-community/>

strategy and a clear methodology; being signatories of the IFCN is considered sufficient demonstration in this respect. Applicants' organizational and proprietary structure must be transparent in order to avoid any potential conflict of interest and ensure they are free of political or economic influence over them. For this reason, they must disclose any work, consulting activities, share-owning or funding from any company operating offline and online. Lastly, applicants to join the community must comply with the applicable rules of ethics in their area of expertise.

The community has 94 initiatives that interact with exchanges of experience. The EDMO project also provides training services which in view of the community's highly diverse membership, seek to create a common working framework.

4.1 Research Design

Bearing in mind the year each project began (variable 1), the 94²⁵ initiatives were analyzed in terms of the 12 dimensions making up the quali-quantitative content analysis codebook²⁶ (Losito 1993), which can be grouped into three broad categories: two that refer to the multilevel perspective, and a third linked to fact-checking's nature as a specific application of the multilevel approach to disinformation.

The first category groups together the variables associated with the multi-territorial dimension: (2) the number of initiatives in each country; (3) translation of fact-checked content into other languages (primarily English); (4) the level of news coverage: micro (local) meso (national) and macro (international). The second category consists of the variables associated with the multi-actor dimension, respectively: (5) sector: public or private; (6) nature of the organization: for-profit / non-profit; (7) whether the initiative is dependent on or independent of existing media; (8) whether different professional skills are involved; (9) greater or lesser level of integration between multiple actors and their organizational structures (and, consequently, the complexity of the initiative's network); (10) involvement of civil society and network users in the fact-checking process. Lastly, the third category sheds light on the variables associated with fact-checking practices: (11) the thematic focus of fact-checking, and (12) fact-checking methods.

4.2. Findings

This section summarizes the main findings of the empirical investigation²⁷. Findings are presented and discussed according to each of the categories into which the codebook's twelve dimensions are grouped.

²⁵ For a complete list of the 94 initiatives (as of February 2022), see <https://edmo.eu/fact-checking-activities/>

²⁶ The codebook was compiled manually by the authors after discussing each individual variable between January and February 2022. The EDMO website and each initiative's website were consulted during the compilation process.

²⁷ The findings were discussed informally with two officials from DG CONNECT and DG COMM who asked to remain anonymous.

Fact-checking initiatives and their increase over time

Looking at the year each initiative began indicates that there were three key periods in the rise of online disinformation and efforts to counter it in Europe: prior to 2015; from 2015 to 2017, and from 2018 to the time of the survey in February 2022.

Thus, 24% of the initiatives date to before 2015, when the issue of fake news had already attracted attention in the public debate but was not yet considered a structural problem requiring action on the part of the institutions. Nevertheless, as early as 2013 the World Economic Forum called it a global risk, warning of a “fake news crisis”.

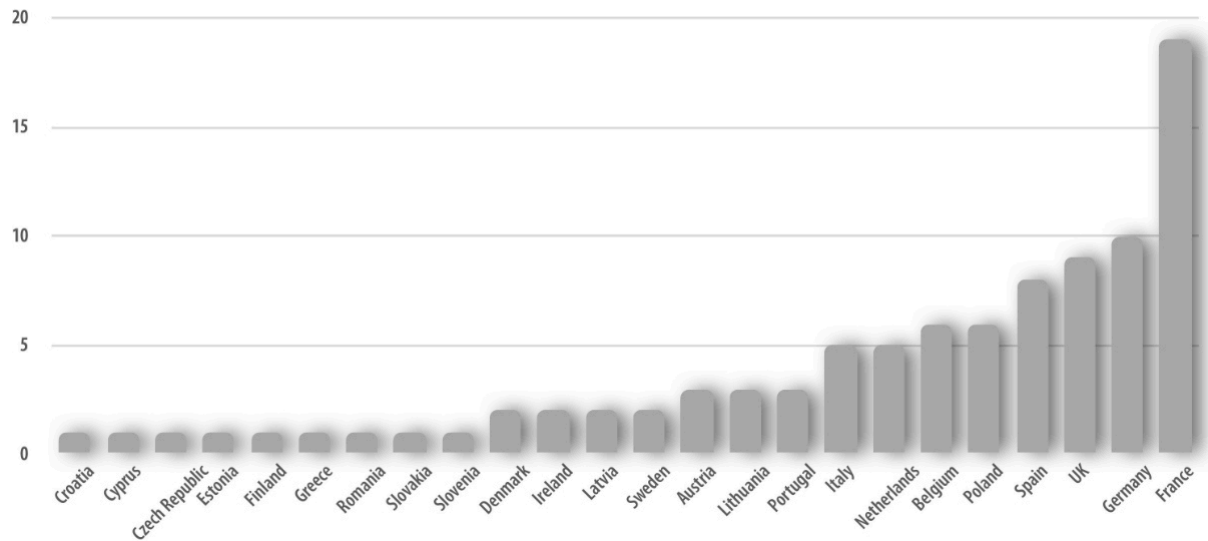
But as we have seen, it was only in 2015 that the problem was put on the European institutions’ docket. From 2015 to 2018, fact-checking activity grew both internationally (IFCN was launched in 2015) and in Europe, where the European Commission began exploring solutions to the problem and the number of fact-checking initiatives increased significantly (+39%).

While the pervasive effects of fake news had begun to be abundantly clear with Brexit and Donald Trump’s win in the 2016 US presidential elections, the real surge came in 2018, when the problem exploded—rising by 37%—and the European public response was put on a formal basis. This was the period when the HLEG embarked on its preliminary work, and the European institutions started to channel massive amounts of funding into research on the topic. Further impetus to the EDMO community’s work then came from the Covid-19 crisis, followed by the onset of the conflict in Ukraine.

The multi-territorial dimension

The first variable in this dimension of the European strategy is the number of initiatives in each country. In the EDMO community, each country is represented with at least one initiative with the exception of four out of 27 member states (there are no projects from Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Malta and Hungary). The number of initiatives is largest in those countries that were the first to become aware of the risks of disinformation and to take action to counter it. With 19 projects, France is the country with the most fact-checking initiatives, and with the greatest diversity among the groups involved. In addition, France, Germany, the UK (which still belongs to the network despite the country’s exit from the EU) and Spain account for almost 50% of the initiatives, a percentage that reaches nearly 75% if we include the efforts fielded in Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy. As can be seen, action centers on the countries that are economically strongest and have long belonged to the Union. At the same time, they are also the countries that are most exposed to the negative effects of disinformation. All the other Member States have fewer initiatives. They include smaller countries that have recently joined and are thus less well integrated in the European space, such as Lithuania, Croatia, Estonia and Romania, as well as the Northern European countries, where the fact that less action is taken against disinformation can be explained by the high level of trust in the countries’ media systems (Eurobarometer 464/2018; Digital News Report 2018).

Figure 1 – Number of initiatives by Member State



The second variable refers to multi-territoriality is the translation of fact-checked content into other languages (primarily English as an official language of the EU). In most cases, each initiative’s first language is its country’s national language (given that the fact-checked content is in the national languages). However, 12 initiatives in non-Anglophone countries use English directly as their primary language, and another 14 initiatives use multiple languages. In the latter case, most of these fact-checking groups are press agencies such as France’s *AFP Factuel*, or initiatives under the European Union’s aegis, such as *EUvsDisinfo* (Belgium). This confirms that using a plurality of languages is one of the dimensions characterizing the multilevel approach.

The final variable refers to the multi-territorial dimension is the level of news coverage. This variable distinguishes between initiatives that chiefly fact-check local news (micro), national news (meso) or international news (macro)²⁸. The data indicates that 65% of the initiatives fact-check at the national level. Only 18% are open to the European and international levels. These initiatives are located in Belgium, which is closest to the headquarters of the European institutions, the UK—facilitated by the fact that English is the Union’s working language—and France, whose press agencies and international media can boast a tradition of fact-checking. Examples of the latter country’s projects include *AFP Factuel*, a fact-checking service developed by Agence France-Presse which takes its inspiration from an outward facing international approach, or *CrossCheck*, which was launched for the 2017 presidential elections. The 17% of initiatives whose target is more specifically local—Scotland’s *The Ferret*, for example—are equally interesting. Though the main work of the EDMO community’s fact-checkers is heavily focused on domestic news, the interweaving of the local and supranational levels confirms their intention of constructing a glocalized public space (Castells 1996, 2008; Robertson 2014) which strives to integrate flows from different territorial perspectives.

²⁸ The classification is based on the fact-checked content appearing on the organizations’ homepages.

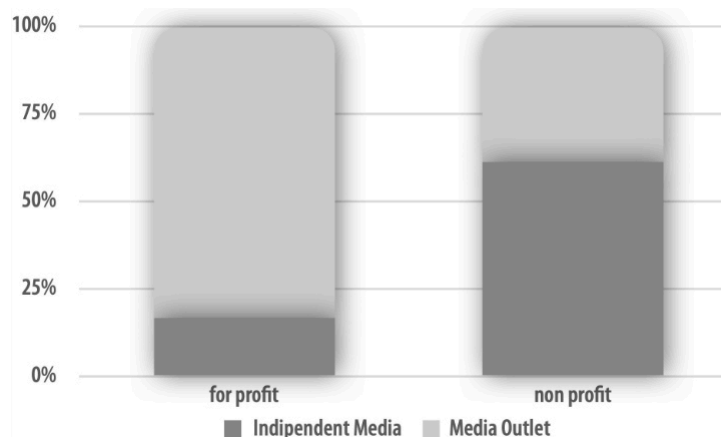
The multi-actor dimension

The multi-actor dimension is also central to the overall process: first, because fighting disinformation does not involve only the information sector; second—as emerges repeatedly from the policy documents—because it is increasingly necessary to bring together an array of different skills. The first variable concerns the initiatives' sector: the EDMO community consists chiefly of private sector groups, who account for 72% of the total, as against 28% for the public sector groups. The private sector seems to be more open to collaborative forms of fact-checking work than the public information service. There may be several reasons for this, starting from the fact that since not all national public services perform the same function in their national media systems (Hallin, Mancini 2004), their complexity makes it more difficult to operate in networks such as EDMO. The Italian public broadcaster RAI, for example, does not participate in the community, unlike its counterparts the BBC in the UK, France TV and Germany's ARD. Deep down, there is also the reluctance to relinquish sovereignty, which in the field of information as elsewhere — and especially for the more institutional media groups — stands in the way of cooperating in a more hybrid setting, even though the very nature of the problem demands it.

Looking at the nature of the organizations reveals an interesting point: over 70% of the EDMO fact-checking initiatives are fielded by non-profit groups (74%), as against 26% by groups in the for-profit sector. This confirms that the community spirit can provide a welcoming environment for civil society as a third force which is independent of the traditional parties involved in the fight against disinformation.

A further variable that enables us to reach a better understanding of the EDMO community's nature is linked to the process whereby individual initiatives are developed: we distinguished between projects originating with established media and journalism groups, and projects outside such groups, which are thus more independent and unconstrained by the media's usual outlooks and routines. Initiatives were evenly divided between the two categories, indicating that there is a significant degree of independence from the mainstream media, and a growing trend towards hybrid and increasingly disintermediated journalism that involves a variety of skills not necessarily associated with journalists.

Figure 2 – Comparing traditional media outlets and independent media: for-profit vs non-profit



As Figure 2 shows, most of the mainstream media's response is driven by for-profit journalism. Many of these initiatives consist of newspaper sections devoted entirely to fact-checking and appearing alongside the traditional sections for news, commentary, politics, etc.; in other cases they are televi-

sion or radio programs that fact-check and debunk current news. The remaining initiatives originate outside of the mainstream media, and only a small minority are run by for-profit organizations. This category includes grassroots projects bringing together a range of different actors. Here, examples include Finland's *FaktaBaari*, which has been active since 2014 and has earned plaudits for its accurate fact-checks of electoral debates, and Ireland's *iHealthFacts*, operated by a scientific community consisting of physicians and experts. By contrast, some of the for-profit initiatives are notable for their high-tech component: the UK's *Fact-checking Observatory* and Spain's *NEWTRAL Fact Checks*, have developed advanced monitoring tools based on artificial intelligence and machine learning to fight disinformation.

Whether an initiative involves different professional skills is another indicator of the multi-actor dimension. The European strategy makes frequent reference to five broad categories of actors and their associated skill-sets: journalists, communication experts, platform and high-tech experts, civil society, and academics and other specialists. In eight out of the 94 projects, at least five different skills are represented on the staff, while 70 have two at most. The initiatives include "paradigmatic" cases of the integration of knowledge and skills: France's *Open Facto*, Spain's *Maldita*, *Debunk.eu* in Lithuania, and *codetekt* in Germany, where professionals from the worlds of open-source journalism and research, academia, IT security, geopolitical analysis, NGOs and investigative journalism work together. A total of 85% of the initiatives were founded by or involve actors belonging to the world of information and/or experts in the sector, and are thus the most widely represented category. Fourteen out of the 94 initiatives are an exception, as no information professionals are involved: most are grass-roots civil society initiatives that have formed spontaneously around specific issues such as the environment, politics, and health. One noteworthy example is *Ellenika Hoaxes* in Greece, an entirely bottom-up initiative that fact-checks news content. *Factcheck.vlaanderen* in the Netherlands and the UK's *Logically Fact Checks*, on the other hand, concentrate on high-tech skills and the use of artificial intelligence techniques. Other projects are staffed almost entirely by academics, like *LAVOCE.INFO* in Italy, *LEI Nieuwscheckers* in the Netherlands, *Les Surligneurs* and the *Fact-checking Observatory* in the United Kingdom. Though the multi-actor aspect is an added value for all network activity, it has still not been fully achieved in the EDMO community.

Whether initiatives involve actors with different skills is not the only factor that helps us understand the multi-actor dimension. The initiatives' organizational structure and consequently, the complexity of their internal networks is also a useful indicator. The data show that 51% of the projects have a highly complex structure that brings together a variety of organizations: editorial boards, universities, high-tech companies and third sector associations that in many cases can count on outside funding. The most notable projects include *EURECOM Corona Check* (France), an example of research in a markedly academic setting. An even more ambitiously organized case is that of the *EU Disinfo Lab* (Belgium), which in addition to being part of the European fact-checking project is trying to replicate the EDMO model at the national level. Italy's *Pagella Politica* is also interesting: initially an independent non-profit

whose operations were restricted to the national level, it now interacts with other international actors and is a member of the EDMO organizing committee.

In 38% of the cases, the initiatives are less complex: these are recently formed organizations, often still at the start-up stage, or third sector associations that are trying less institutional, bottom-up practices for countering disinformation, but are still keenly interested in working collaboratively. Examples include Austria's *Fakt Ist Fakt*, an informal fact-checking blog, or the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism *Re:Baltica*, based in Latvia but working across all three Baltic states. The remaining 11% feature a level of complexity midway between that of the other two groups, and include *Bellingcat* in the Netherlands, a collective journalism project that produces international investigations by freelancers in 20 countries.

Another important aspect that enables us to assess the scope of the EDMO community's multi-actor dimension is the extent to which it involves civil society and network users in the fact-checking process. The basic principle is well stated by the HLEG and reiterated in the Code of Practice, which emphasizes efforts to engage civil society. In practice, this translates into a variety of calls to action. Many projects seek to involve members of the public — students, activists, volunteers and web designers — in reporting fake content and raising awareness about the problem (32 initiatives out of 94). Such involvement can range from merely enabling users to report content that should be fact-checked via email services or chatbots, to more active forms of collaboration with sophisticated tools that the public can use independently. In some cases, the initiatives encourage users to become fact-checkers themselves. Other projects (24 in all) such as *FaktaBaari* in Finland and *Infox.fr* in France propose media literacy activities or include civil society on their editorial staff. Other exemplary cases are the French initiative *Notre-planète* that engages users with a classic forum approach, Germany's collaborative investigative journalism project *CORRECTIV.Faktencheck*, and Italy's *FACTA*, which collects reader input on a daily basis. Also worthy of note are the *Les Observateurs* project (France), which deals almost entirely with user-supplied content, and *Health Feedback*, which launches an explicit call to action by the scientific community. On another level, *CaptainFact* is the only entirely bottom-up fact-checking initiative. Though there are a number of commendable initiatives that see the public as an essential resource, the EDMO community's level of engagement with civil society is still low.

Fact-checking practices

The third and last category of variables considered in the analysis, in parallel with the multi-territorial and multi-actor dimensions, explores the concrete fact-checking practices as regards both their choice of topic and whether initiatives adopt an explicit fact-checking methodology.

In analyzing the thematic focus of fact-checking, it was found that science and politics are the areas that generate the most fake news. In addition, the pandemic's outbreak in 2020 brought extensive fact-checking efforts to bear in this topic as well,

and the European institutions launched a specific action entitled “Tackling coronavirus disinformation”²⁹. Unsurprisingly, 61% of the initiatives focus on health: though their debunking work the initiatives also cover specific contents that deal with Covid-19 and vaccines, thus reaching 74%. A number of projects were set up specifically for this purpose. Ireland’s *iHealthFacts*, for instance, enables the public to quickly and easily check the reliability of health claims circulated on social media. Other interesting initiatives include France’s *Science Feedback*, where a worldwide network of scientists checks the content of science- and health-based media coverage, and *Science Hoaxes* in Cyprus, which as its name implies unmasks hoaxes purporting to be scientifically grounded.

As the Covid-19 pandemic became a central concern, political issues were shunted into the background: according to the data collected, they were addressed by only 16% of the initiatives, including *Demagog* in Slovakia, *Poletika* in Spain, *Pagella Politica* in Italy and Austria’s *Fakt Ist Fakt*, which since 2016 has fact-checked the statements of public figures and politicians. As for climate change and the green transition, though both are very much at the center of the public debate, they do not receive equal attention in the fact-checking community. Only 9% of the initiatives have devoted space to these issues, though one, France’s *Notre-planète* project, is entirely dedicated to them.

As regards fact-checking methods, the EDMO network is moving in the direction of more uniform working practices. A sizable number of initiatives (34%) already belong to Poynter’s International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), founded in the United States in 2015 and now the world’s largest community of fact-checkers. This important alignment is supported by the European strategy, though the Union is seeking to develop its own working method that, without departing from the IFCN principles, is more consonant with the European spirit. Other initiatives present details of their own fact-checking method (17%), aware of the need to employ a transparent, replicable approach to their work and thus embrace best practices. On the negative side, 49% of the EDMO community’s initiatives do not state their methodology. This is chiefly true of the mainstream media, probably because fact-checking is an intrinsic part of journalists’ work, but they do not follow a codified method. The investigative journalism by Germany’s *CORRECTIV* is an example: this initiative deals with cases of corruption, inviting the public to submit anonymous tips about abuses which the staff then investigates. How these investigations proceed, however, is not stated, probably so as not to jeopardize relationships with the project’s sources of information. A few country-by-country comparisons can shed light on the fact-checking methods and their levels of disclosure. Italy has five EDMO initiatives, each of which specifies the fact-checking method it employs. In 20% of these cases, however, the method is generic, while the remaining 80% follow the IFCN guidelines. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in Germany (10 initiatives) and Spain (8 initiatives). In the former country, 60% of the projects do not state their methodology. The remain-

²⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/tackling-coronavirus-disinformation_en (last access February 2022).

ing 40% do, but only 10% of them use the IFCN approach. In Spain, 38% of the initiatives do not indicate the method, while 50% follow IFCN as against 12% that adopt an in-house method. Consequently, the community's working practices still vary widely, even if the EDMO strategy aims to arrive gradually at a shared European method.

5. Conclusions

The problem of disinformation is a priority for media systems and the institutions that regulate them. For several years, the European institutions have implemented a process based on multilevel governance principles for countering disinformation and building resilience. Paradoxically, the Covid-19 pandemic made it possible to increase this process's impact, as it made the assumptions underlying the European policy more vital than ever before. After placing the EDMO strategy in a specific policy line and theoretical framework, this paper has explored the extent to which Europe's largest fact-checking community is multidimensional and multi-territorial.

As regards the first multilevel dimension — that of multi-territoriality — EDMO's strategy is almost entirely successful in representing Europe's territorial complexity. There is at least one active initiative in each Member State, except for Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Malta, and Hungary. Moreover, the network detects fake news on the local, national and supranational level. However, although we have observed that the network includes and integrates the different territorial levels, it remains predominantly focused on the national dimension.

In the second multilevel dimension of the policy action — the multi-actor dimension — the EDMO fact-checkers community is making progress, but some aspects should be strengthened. First, the relationship between public and private is still highly unbalanced in favor of the latter, as institutional action still struggles to become part of the process. Nevertheless, the majority of the initiatives are non-profit, and in many cases are run by independent groups. Second, debunking projects linked to traditional or independent media organizations continue to predominate, though there is a growing number of initiatives involving the civil society and the world of high-tech and applied research. Lastly, progress is also being made in involving a range of different skills, integrating multiple actors and increasing civil society's engagement in the network, but there is room for improvement.

As for fact-checking practices, though it must be acknowledged that although there have been significant steps forward in methodological terms, around one half of the initiatives do not state their working methods. The initiatives that do adopt their own in-house methods or follow those of the worldwide IFCN fact-checkers network, reflecting the debunking community's efforts to achieve accreditation. As regards the initiatives' choice of thematic focus, our survey was conducted in a rather unique period—that of Covid-19—when fact-checking activities concentrated on content dealing with the pandemic and the vaccination campaign, where disinformation reached critical levels. Accordingly, a far lower percentage of fact-checks focused on politics, the area first addressed by the EU's regulatory action, although sev-

eral initiatives have a special section devoted to debunking political statements. There has also been relatively little coverage of scientific and environment topics with a high likelihood of being targeted by fake news.

In conclusion, through the analysis of the EDMO fact-checkers community, this research was able to highlight that since disinformation reaches a systemic complexity that impacts geographical areas and collective subjects with different goals, efforts to counter it must take an equally complex and variegated form. The EDMO network, which brings together public and private, non-profit and for-profit, mainstream media outlets and independents, large projects and small, enables all its members to interact within the same space, exchanging practices and socializing their aims. Media systems are undeniably crucial to the overall strategy for countering disinformation, but initiatives that combine different skills are no less important. It must be acknowledged, however, that efforts to fight disinformation have met with resistance in several quarters. Member States have sometimes balked at transposing EU directives into national law or at participating in the processes, certain professional categories — journalists, for example — have not always been fully cooperative, and online platforms have been reluctant to ensure the transparency needed for fact-checking. But the European Union is moving ahead, and now that the surge in disinformation brought by the Covid-19 pandemic has made the need for decisive action more impelling than ever, has implemented its multilevel strategy thanks in no small measure to its growing network of fact-checkers.

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Le piattaforme per la partecipazione digitale dei cittadini. Un'analisi basata sul modello di UE e Italia

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1. Introduzione

Le piattaforme digitali partecipative (PDP) hanno assunto una rilevanza crescente nel corso degli ultimi 15 anni. Il connubio tra tecnologia e istanze civiche, rivolto a favorire una maggiore partecipazione alle decisioni democratiche delle comunità locali, regionali, nazionali e subnazionali è alla base di questa innovazione democratica, che dispiega un impatto differente per ogni livello istituzionale, decisionale e partecipativo in cui essa si colloca nel rapporto tra cittadini e decisori pubblici. Nella nostra prospettiva, è importante considerare il diverso ruolo svolto dalle PDP nei contesti istituzionali alla luce di quanto rileva l'Organizzazione internazionale per la cooperazione e lo sviluppo economico (OECD 2019) in termini di elementi di analisi degli strumenti partecipativi in quanto a: 1. processo; 2. rappresentatività; 3. impatto. Per leggere questi tre indicatori di efficacia delle PDP, dopo un repertorio della letteratura sul tema, abbiamo considerato due livelli di diffusione delle piattaforme digitali partecipative, UE e Italia, rilevando come, ed è questa la tesi di fondo del nostro lavoro, i diversi livelli istituzionali di applicazione del PDP comportino risultati diversi in termini di costruzione dei processi partecipativi, impatto sui partecipanti, rappresentatività dei partecipanti rispetto alla comunità considerata. La nostra analisi parte dalla considerazione che lo strumento delle piattaforme partecipative digitali non è di per sé neutrale. Esso si pone in una condizione di *path dependency* rispetto a tali piattaforme e ai loro esiti partecipativi rispetto ad una serie di fattori quali: 1. vicinanza/distanza dei cittadini rispetto al livello istituzionale; 2. natura più o meno prossima al sentire civico delle politiche pubbliche su cui interviene; 3. "onere" dei cittadini nel seguire la pratica partecipativa; 4. auto-percezione dell'impatto dei cittadini nella partecipazione alle attività. Questi elementi non solo influenzano gli esiti dei percorsi e progetti partecipativi mediante le PDP ma la percezione stessa che cittadini e istituzioni maturano circa la fattibilità di una partecipazione costruita sulla base di uno strumento tecnologico all'interno di un sistema politico.

In questa prospettiva, le politiche pubbliche ritenute molto rilevanti, per esempio legate allo sviluppo dell'UE e al suo impatto sulla cittadinanza europea, possono essere poco partecipate laddove considerate lontane dall'esperienza dei cittadini, o considerate impegnative da seguire nel processo partecipativo sulla piattaforma, o

ancora, percepite come avente un impatto limitato sul sistema decisionale. Questo avviene indipendentemente dalla forma più o meno dotata di efficace *user experience* delle piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione e nella nostra ipotesi di ricerca la conoscenza sociologica di tali elementi (prossimità al livello istituzionale, percezione dell'importanza delle politiche pubbliche aperte alla partecipazione, oneri di tempo/carico di lavoro legati ai percorsi di partecipazione, auto percezione della utilità di partecipazione civica) rileva tanto quanto l'efficacia e la usabilità degli strumenti tecnologici disponibili.

Così, elementi funzionali e disfunzionali della progettazione di percorsi partecipativi che precedono lo sviluppo delle piattaforme, rilevanza dei contesti istituzionali che attivano tali processi, percezione dell'impatto della partecipazione sugli esiti decisionali sono elementi che a nostro avviso devono essere compresi ed esplicitati nei confronti dei partecipanti ben prima di affidarsi al soluzionismo tecnologico (criticato da Morozov 2013) delle piattaforme, intese come elemento in grado di facilitare, in sé, la partecipazione, anche attraverso dispositivi ludici (Barata et al. 2013; Garbaya, Romano, Hattar 2019). A tal fine, abbiamo condotto uno studio sistematico per l'identificazione delle PDP più rilevanti nel sistema politico dell'UE e nel sistema politico di uno Stato membro (Italia), anche a livello subnazionale (regionale e locale). In una prospettiva metodologica l'analisi ha previsto diverse fasi: 1. la selezione delle piattaforme partecipative digitali presenti nei diversi sistemi considerati, anche grazie al supporto della letteratura scientifica in materia. 2. l'analisi delle stesse a partire dall'operazionalizzazione delle caratteristiche delle PDP considerate, in ragione di alcuni fattori, quali: a) la sua vicinanza alla vita dei cittadini; b) la natura delle politiche pubbliche; c) l'onere dei cittadini nel lavorare sui percorsi di partecipazione ai PDP; d) la percezione di impatto rilevata dall'uso di questo formato. Questa impostazione metodologica, mutuata dalla classificazione di impatto dei processi partecipativi digitali messa a punto da OECD, ci ha consentito di "leggere" il ruolo di questi importanti strumenti digitali alla luce delle prospettive sociologiche e politologiche teoriche sul tema. In una visione volta ad integrare dimensione teorica e impatto operativo, si comprende al meglio, nella nostra valutazione, l'effettivo dispiegamento dell'efficacia di tali strumenti, la capacità di generare percorsi di partecipazione consapevole e significativa per i cittadini, e l'intenzione, ove presente, di superare le questioni legate alle disuguaglianze nell'accesso agli strumenti tecnologici e organizzativi dei processi partecipativi.

2. Le piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione: natura, caratteri e finalità di un dispositivo per l'ampliamento della partecipazione dei cittadini ai processi decisionali

L'idea che il rapporto tra i cittadini e gli organi decisionali pubblici debba essere basato sul dialogo, la consultazione e la partecipazione pubblica ai processi che coinvolgono le decisioni collettive costituisce uno degli ambiti di ricerca relativi all'ampliamento dei formati e delle dimensioni della democrazia rappresentativa, a

fronte della crisi dei meccanismi di quest'ultima (Keane 2009; Manin 2010; Tormey 2014; Martinelli 2016; Grayling 2017; Merkel, Kneio 2018; Innerarity 2019). Trasparenza e apertura delle informazioni sulle scelte relative ad una comunità, consultazione dei cittadini su temi e politiche ritenuti rilevanti per il futuro, costruzione di formati aperti di dialogo istituzionale, partecipazione a fasi e percorsi del processo decisionale pubblico sono tutti strumenti che si sono affermati nel corso degli ultimi 20 anni, con diverse finalità: 1. sostenere la domanda informata di partecipazione civica, 2. sviluppare percorsi di governance condivisa, 3. produrre decisioni pubbliche frutto di consapevolezza e maturate nel confronto con i cittadini che ne saranno destinatari.

Al tempo stesso, i paradigmi della teoria sulla *e-democracy* considerano ogni supporto digitale un utile dispositivo per realizzare questa attività di distribuzione delle informazioni, dialogo istituzionale e partecipazione dei cittadini alle decisioni democratiche (Chadwick 2003; Behrouzi 2005; Qvortrup 2007; Coleman 2007; Spirakis, Spirakis, Nikolopoulos 2010; De Blasio, Sorice 2019; De Blasio 2019; Lindner, Aichholzer 2020; Ceccarini 2020). In questa prospettiva di analisi, la disponibilità di forum elettronici, piattaforme social di carattere generale dotate di pagine dedicate, dispositivi digitali consacrati a sostenere discussione e partecipazione civica aiuta le dinamiche di coinvolgimento dei cittadini in questi spazi digitali, secondo modalità pubbliche significative tanto per i cittadini quanto per le istituzioni (Susha Grönlund 2012; Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013; Hennen, *et al.* 2020). Il rinnovamento delle forme democratiche trova nel contesto della sfera pubblica digitale, dell'*e-government* e dei processi decisionali co-costruiti mediante consultazione e partecipazione civica un territorio di crescita e sviluppo dei formati tradizionali della democrazia rappresentativa, cui si affianca, integrandone le modalità.

Gli studiosi della democrazia partecipativa (Nylen, Dodd 2003; Pateman 2012; Barber 2014; Della Porta 2019; Baiocchi, Hellr, De Silva 2020; Dacombe, Parvin 2021) sostengono l'importanza dei supporti digitali come leva per costruire un ambiente ulteriore di dialogo, confronto e condivisione dei processi decisionali tra cittadini e istituzioni (reti sociali come piattaforme generali, siti, app e dispositivi dedicati a specifici strumenti proposti dalle istituzioni), associando la dimensione digitale e fisica di questi processi (*phygital*, acronimo che prevede che i comportamenti di cittadini ed istituzioni siano integrati nelle azioni e relazioni all'interno delle due dimensioni: fisica e digitale, costruendo processi complessi grazie al sostegno reciproco di reale e digitale, (Mazali 2017)). In alcune esperienze come quella di *Decidim*¹ a Barcellona, i processi partecipativi della comunità sono ibridi (on site e on-line) con un flusso continuo e non interrotto tra la partecipazione *in loco* (incontri faccia a faccia) e la partecipazione on-line (partecipazione continua sincrona e asincrona).

Nella prospettiva della democrazia partecipativa, le istituzioni pubbliche a tutti i livelli si dimostrano disposte ad aprire i processi decisionali a cittadini e gruppi sociali anche mediante le tecnologie digitali, promuovendo la duplice dimensione della partecipazione civica: fisica e digitale. Quest'ultima è sostenuta tanto attraverso il ricorso a canali di informazione e dialogo presenti su piattaforme social di tipo genera-

¹ <https://decidim.org>

le, quanto attraverso lo sviluppo di piattaforme tecnologiche dedicate: sistemi di consultazione online e di petizione elettronica, app per la partecipazione ad obiettivi e pratiche condivise tra cittadini e istituzioni, strumenti digitali per la democrazia deliberativa (forum di discussione e confronto, piattaforme per *meeting* digitali, strumenti per la votazione di proposte di azioni ed interventi riservati a cittadini registrati ai processi di partecipazione). L'obiettivo di questa tendenza partecipativa è promuovere le interazioni dei cittadini e stimolare le conversazioni su questioni pubbliche e politiche. Tale impostazione viene sviluppata con la consapevolezza che questi strumenti - per quanto limitati nella loro efficacia dall'autoselezione dei partecipanti più motivati e con maggiore dotazione di capitale culturale (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990) e digitale (Park 2017) - possano migliorare l'intero processo decisionale pubblico, aprendo al contempo opportunità ai cittadini di far sentire la propria voce direttamente alle istituzioni pubbliche su tematiche politiche specifiche.

In altri termini, l'obiettivo di avviare questi processi di democrazia partecipativa è duplice. Per i decisori pubblici, questo modello di condivisione delle informazioni, consultazione e partecipazione al processo decisionale risiede nella necessità di mantenere aperti canali di dialogo con i cittadini al di fuori dei meccanismi della democrazia rappresentativa, nella volontà di trasferire al meglio temi e questioni rilevanti alla vita collettiva, nella circostanza di ricevere idee, indicazioni e proposte da una società civile organizzata e attiva (Heeks 2001; Rossel, Finger 2007; Bannister, Connolly 2012; De Blasio, Selva 2019; Jagadeesha, Srinivasrao 2020). Per i cittadini, il modello di democrazia partecipativa, seppur con costi di tempo e opportunità, costituisce un'occasione per trasferire temi e contenuti che esulano dall'agenda delle decisioni pubbliche; una modalità per costruire il rapporto e il dialogo con il sistema istituzionale; un modo per entrare nel merito di specifiche politiche o decisioni pubbliche con impatto sui cittadini e sulle comunità (Antonucci, Fiorenza 2016; Binderkrantz, Pedersen 2019; Weiler, Eichenberger, Mach, Varone 2019).

Pertanto, le piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione dei cittadini ai processi decisionali si sono qualificate come il principale strumento tecnologico dell'allargamento partecipativo dei processi decisionali ai diversi livelli istituzionali e costituiscono l'elemento digitale dei formati di innovazione partecipativa dei cittadini nel *decision-making* pubblico, a fianco delle pratiche di partecipazione tradizionale (Mellouli, Luna-Reyes, Zhang 2014; Gil, Cortés-Cediel, Cantador 2019). L'idea che la democrazia partecipativa possa beneficiare della strumentazione delle ICT per favorire l'allargamento dei processi decisionali ai cittadini, a livello locale, regionale, nazionale, sovranazionale, è presente da alcuni anni nella pratica delle istituzioni e nell'analisi scientifica. In quest'ottica, seguendo la definizione di Falco e Kleinhans intendiamo definire le piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione dei cittadini ai processi decisionali aperti dalle istituzioni, come "piattaforme online" che si propongono di coinvolgere i cittadini e stimolare la collaborazione con le istituzioni [...] per la raccolta e lo scambio di idee, soluzioni e saperi localizzati; la discussione e la collaborazione tramite mappe mentali, questionari, spazi per i commenti e forum; strumenti di simulazione come l'allocatione di risorse a bilancio e la trasformazione urbana in 3D; strumenti di voto e classificazione per idee; dispositivi per l'analisi dei formati partecipativi esperiti sulla piattaforma" (2018: 18).

Molti riferimenti di letteratura sottolineano la rilevanza di questa tipologia di strumenti digitali, in solitaria o in associazione con la dimensione partecipativa tradizionale, nello sviluppo di formati di partecipazione e co-decisione nella dimensione istituzionale locale e regionale, grazie anche a profili digitali legati alla geo-localizzazione dei partecipanti, all'interesse di cittadini e residenti per tematiche legate a comunità e luoghi definiti (tra i più recenti: Gil, Cortés-Cediel, Cantador 2019; De Filippi, Coscia, Cocina 2020), per lo sviluppo di risposte co-costruite a temi, questioni e politiche di prossimità. Il maggiore ricorso a questo tipo di applicazione localizzata delle piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione civica non esclude che esse possano costituire una base per la strutturazione di processi di condivisione di informazioni, dialogo istituzionale, partecipazione alla definizione e implementazione di politiche pubbliche anche a livelli più estesi. Il caso delle PDP della UE, associata alle attività partecipative per i cittadini, recentemente orientate a supportare il ruolo dei cittadini per la conferenza per il futuro dell'Europa, ne delinea un esempio degno di analisi.

3. Le piattaforme partecipative nella UE: Futurium, Petition Web Portal, European Citizens' Forum, FuturEU

Il tema del dialogo strutturato con cittadini e gruppi sociali è sempre stato presente nell'agenda istituzionale della UE e ha trovato una sua codificazione nel Trattato di Lisbona (TUE), che all'articolo 11 (1-3), prevede che le istituzioni europee promuovano uno scambio di visioni su tutte le aree di intervento, un dialogo aperto, trasparente e regolare con i cittadini, un sistema di consultazioni con le parti sulle tematiche di azione.

L'esigenza di apertura, trasparenza, confronto e dialogo con cittadini e forze sociali manifestata da parte della UE si è qualificata, sin dall'inizio della storia istituzionale, come una risposta al deficit democratico (Bowman 2006; Moravcsik 2008; Jensne 2009; Hix 2013; Sorace 2018; Mahmutovic, Memic-Mujagic 2019), insito in questa costruzione sovranazionale. Essa ha trovato una codificazione in documenti istituzionali. Nel Libro bianco sulla governance europea del 2001, sono stati posti i principi di migliore coinvolgimento e maggiore apertura dell'azione della UE nei confronti dei cittadini, della trasmissione costante di informazioni online su processi decisionali e politiche pubbliche, e sono stati migliorati gli strumenti di dialogo con le organizzazioni sociali e civili. Nel Libro bianco sulla comunicazione europea del 2006 sono stati indicati i paradigmi di una comunicazione al servizio dei cittadini, una sfera pubblica europea, frutto di dibattito e dialogo, un rafforzamento delle competenze dei cittadini europei, e un migliore e maggiore ricorso alle nuove tecnologie per raggiungere con la comunicazione tutti gli europei.

Così, le differenti istituzioni della UE hanno presto inteso le potenzialità delle piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione per garantire un accesso trasparente e aperto alle informazioni su attività istituzionale e politiche pubbliche; consultare le parti coinvolte in processi decisionali avviati; discutere e in alcuni casi avviare processi parzialmente deliberativi con cittadini e gruppi sociali; cooperare, con idee e dibattiti alla costruzione di nuovi percorsi di sviluppo delle politiche dell'UE. In quest'ottica, l'attenzione delle istituzioni europee per la dimensione digitale volta a sostenere gli ele-

menti giuridici posti dal Trattato di Lisbona in termini di *governance* (informazione, dialogo, consultazione e partecipazione dei cittadini e dei gruppi sociali) ha sperimentato, sin dal 2011, numerosi formati e piattaforme, rivolti, in maniera non sempre chiaramente definita, ad organizzazioni sociali e cittadini. In alcuni casi, la natura tecnica e la conoscenza complessa di materie specifiche, inserite in una agenda di dialogo aperto, trasparente e regolare e di consultazione con le parti coinvolte, ha comportato l'adozione di strumenti rivolti a segmenti qualificati della cittadinanza europea: è il caso di *Futurium*. Scopo di tale attività di sperimentazione nella democrazia partecipativa digitale è, come osserva Bekemans (2018) lo sviluppo di una *governance* partecipativa, rivolta a dare forma e sostegno al senso di condivisione di differenti soggettività con l'UE. In questa prospettiva, *Futurium*, attiva dal 2011, prevede la possibilità che gli utenti registrati discutano, in gruppi tematici specializzati, gli ambiti delle politiche pubbliche europee su cui hanno competenze e interesse al dibattito. Uno spazio digitale dedicato alla partecipazione degli stakeholder, che intende, come afferma Accordino (2013) usufruire della leva delle piattaforme digitali per sostenere la discussione su tematiche rilevanti per il futuro delle politiche pubbliche europee.

Da parte delle istituzioni europee e in una prospettiva di *governance* allargata, l'esigenza di sviluppare piattaforme rivolte a sostenere e qualificare la partecipazione di cittadini dotati di una conoscenza più limitata della meccanica istituzionale della UE ha comportato la creazione di strumenti più inclusivi e trasversali: è accaduto per *Petition Web Portal*, il portale di supporto alla formulazione di petizioni per il Parlamento europeo (inteso come sostegno qualificante per la trasmissione di istanze dal *demos* europeo all'organismo di rappresentanza democratica dello stesso all'interno della cornice istituzionale) e per *European Citizens Forum*, la piattaforma di dialogo tra soggetti coinvolti nella presentazione di una iniziativa europea dei cittadini (considerata come la proposta di legge popolare europea), attiva dal 2020, che ha tra i suoi obiettivi la previsione che i partecipanti possano imparare, dibattere, entrare in relazione, cercare consigli. In entrambi i casi, sostenere e definire al meglio il dialogo tra i soggetti coinvolti, costruire un percorso pre-istituzionale all'attività di partecipazione - petizioni o iniziativa legislativa - garantire informazioni aperte sui successivi processi di sviluppo istituzionale di tali attività sono tutti elementi che si qualificano come autenticamente rivolti ai cittadini, interessati a specifici percorsi di relazione con le istituzioni. Infine, il modello messo a punto con la piattaforma *FuturEU*, strumento digitale per l'organizzazione della partecipazione dei cittadini alla Conferenza per il futuro dell'Europa, intende aggregare e organizzare, secondo le modalità *phygital*, l'attività di partecipazione dei cittadini alla conferenza sul futuro dell'Europa. Attiva dal 2021 e fino alla primavera del 2022, strutturata attorno a 10 macro temi di sviluppo delle politiche UE (cambiamento climatico e ambiente, salute, economia e giustizia sociale, relazioni internazionali, valori e diritti, trasformazione digitale, democrazia europea, migrazioni, istruzione, cultura e gioventù e altre idee) *FuturEU* ha realizzato dei numeri consistenti in quanto a partecipazione digitale e in presenza: 43.406 iscritti su piattaforma, 424.491 presenze ai 5139 eventi dal vivo, 13.818 idee presentate, 19.257 commenti e 55.521 approvazioni alle idee. *FuturEU* propone, in quest'ottica, un approccio complessivo, orientato a tematiche ampie e di sistema. In ciò, la piattaforma si differenzia tanto rispetto alla di-

scussione e dibattito qualificato previsto per gli utenti registrati a Futurium, quanto all'approccio segmentato rispetto allo strumento partecipativo (petizioni e iniziativa europea dei cittadini) immaginato dai due portali per le petizioni al Parlamento UE e per l'iniziativa europea dei cittadini: essa consente infatti una reale e diffusa partecipazione civica dal basso, su cui sviluppare sviluppi di politiche pubbliche europee grazie al confronto tra proposte istituzionali e idee dei cittadini.

In un processo che appare apprendere dai limiti degli strumenti partecipativi già sperimentati (l'eccesso di tecnicità e specificità tematica per Futurium, la concentrazione su strumenti operativi di partecipazione per il portale delle petizioni o il forum per i cittadini europei), *FuturEU*, anche se per un periodo limitato, prova a innovare la partecipazione su tematiche ampie e di sistema, coniugando momenti di partecipazione e dialogo su piattaforma con eventi e incontri in presenza. L'ibridazione dell'esperienza partecipativa fisica e digitale di *FuturEU*, pur se ancorata all'esperienza pandemica che ha aumentato le potenzialità partecipative in digitale e da remoto, offre, nella prospettiva della conclusione del processo della Conferenza sul Futuro dell'Europa a fine primavera 2022, una apertura di innovazione nei tradizionali processi digitali messi a punto dalle istituzioni europee.

Alla luce di queste considerazioni, abbiamo provato a confrontare processo, rappresentatività e impatto delle piattaforme analizzate, alla luce dei principi OECD sull'innovazione digitale per la partecipazione.

Tabella 1 – Raffronto delle piattaforme UE analizzate alla luce di processo, rappresentatività, impatto

Piattaforma	Finalità	Processo	Rappresentatività	Impatto
Futurium	Partecipazione degli stakeholder all'attività di discussione di politiche pubbliche settoriali	Standardizzato (registrazione e discussione nel community group tematico) Livello di interazione elevato e continuo tra utenti (istituzioni coinvolte nella fase finale di lettura degli output)	Contenuta Gruppi auto selezionati con elevate competenze tecniche, necessarie per la discussione nei gruppi di lavoro tematici, altamente specializzati	Contenuto per il ridotto impatto sulle agende decisionali delle Direzioni Generali della Commissione EU coinvolte per materia
European Citizens' Forum	Supporto e community building per la redazione di iniziative europee dei cittadini	Standardizzato (registrazione e inserimento delle richieste di redazione di iniziative) Livello di interazione elevato e continuo tanto con istituzioni quanto con altri utenti	Contenuta Gruppi auto selezionati consapevoli dello strumento della Iniziativa Europea dei Cittadini	Contenuto per il numero di potenziali firmatari di iniziative raggiunti, efficace per il sostegno allo sviluppo delle iniziative
Portale delle Petizioni al Parlamento Europeo	Informazione su procedure e diffusione di petizioni dei cittadini al Parlamento UE	Standardizzato (registrazione dell'utente e inserimento delle petizioni/supporto a petizioni esistenti). Meccanismo di verifica della ammissibilità delle petizioni	Contenuta Gruppi auto selezionati consapevoli dello strumento delle petizioni al Parlamento europeo e consci della non ammissibilità di talune petizioni	Contenuto per l'effetto filtro di ricevibilità delle petizioni e per il successivo meccanismo di ricezione da parte del Parlamento
FuturEU	Partecipazione dei cittadini, in formato digitale e fisico all'avanzamento e alla discussione di proposte su dieci temi relativi alla conferenza per il futuro della UE	Molto complesso (registrazione dell'utente per sottoporre contenuti, condividere e supportare idee, partecipare agli eventi in presenza calendarizzati e geolocalizzati sulla piattaforma) Elevato livello di interazione (dialogo e discussione) tra utenti registrati	Media (anche grazie alla interazione tra digitale e fisico). Elevata auto-selezione di utenti interessati ai 10 temi individuati come rilevanti per il futuro dell'Europa	Efficace per il grande numero di soggetti coinvolti, anche grazie alla partecipazione phygital. Impatto contenuto relativamente ai seguiti dati dalle istituzioni.

Posta la difficoltà di raffrontare strumenti di così differente genesi, finalità, caratteri, sembra di poter delineare un percorso di progressivo sviluppo nella realizzazione da parte delle istituzioni UE di piattaforme per la partecipazione: da una prima attività riservata a pochi utenti, competenti tematicamente e tecnicamente, in grado di dialogare tra loro e con le istituzioni su ambiti di politiche pubbliche segmentati (Futurium 2011) ad una fase successiva, concentrata sulla diffusione digitale della conoscenza degli strumenti istituzionali messi a punto per la partecipazione dei cittadini (portale web per le petizioni 2014; forum per le iniziative europee dei cittadini 2020); ad uno sviluppo, volto a raccogliere, secondo i formati più ampi e inclusivi possibili, le opinioni dei cittadini su segmenti ampi di politiche pubbliche europee (FuturEU 2021). L'idea di un ampliamento di formati e ambiti di partecipazione sembra connotare il percorso di sviluppo delle PDP in Europa, anche se occorre in questa sede notare come l'organizzazione dei processi, la rappresentatività dei partecipanti (una élite europea auto selezionata e consapevole) e l'impatto della partecipazione possano essere progressivamente aumentati e migliorati.

4. Le piattaforme digitali partecipative in Italia: i casi di piattaforme regionali e locali per la partecipazione

L'esperienza italiana di piattaforme per la partecipazione digitale appare ridotta, rispetto al modello europeo per pratiche e sperimentazioni su base nazionale: motivazioni legate al maggiore sviluppo della democrazia rappresentativa, al ruolo centrale dei partiti come collettori di partecipazione politica dei cittadini, alla costruzione di un sistema istituzionale multilivello articolato tra stato, regioni e autonomie, ha lasciato poco spazio allo sviluppo di quella che Meir (2005) definiva democrazia al di là dei partiti. Inoltre, il limitato ricorso nella pratica istituzionale agli strumenti di partecipazione diretta dei cittadini previsti dalla Costituzione con istituti codificati (referendum, proposte di iniziativa legislativa popolare), ha provocato la conseguenza di una ridotta possibilità di sperimentazione delle piattaforme digitali per tali finalità, stanti anche i vincoli e le esigenze di sicurezza di natura tecnica. Questo contesto generale, poco propenso alla partecipazione al di fuori dei canali partitici, caratterizzato da un numero limitato di istituti partecipativi e con un ridotto ricorso a tale strumento ha limitato il potenziale dell'associazione delle piattaforme digitali agli istituti previsti, producendo, a livello nazionale, un certo ritardo anche nello sviluppo di piattaforme partecipative. È il caso di *Consultazione.Gov.it* e *ParteciPA.Gov.it*, le piattaforme digitali per i processi di consultazione e di partecipazione pubblica del Dipartimento della Funzione Pubblica, avviate a fine 2019 e attualmente attive su un numero molto limitato di consultazioni e processi di partecipazione. Sembra quasi che la natura complessa delle politiche pubbliche nazionali, il presidio costante di tali ambiti da parte dei partiti politici e dei gruppi di interesse, la limitata disponibilità istituzionale di formati partecipativi, in altre parole fattori istituzionali e politici di sistema, abbiano condizionato le potenzialità innovative legate allo sviluppo delle piattaforme per la partecipazione digitale su base nazionale. In altri termini, laddove gli istituti di parte-

cipazione civica appaiono ridotti nel novero e nel ricorso, sperimentare l'innovazione mediante le piattaforme, in un'ottica di *path dependance*, appare un'operazione difficile e di residuale portata, anche laddove altri sistemi politici europei ne abbiano saggiato, di recente, le possibilità (*Delib Citizen Space* in Regno Unito, *Gouvernement et Citoyens* in Francia).

Tabella 2 – Raffronto delle piattaforme partecipative italiane analizzate alla luce di processo, rappresentatività, impatto

Piattaforma partecipativa digitale Italia	Finalità	Processo	Rappresentatività	Impatto
Consultazione.gov.it	Consultazione dei cittadini	Standardizzato (registrazione e discussione nel community group tematico) Livello di interazione elevato e continuo tra utenti (istituzioni coinvolte nella fase finale di lettura degli output)	Contenuta Gruppi auto selezionati con elevate competenze tecniche, necessarie per la discussione nei gruppi di lavoro tematici, altamente specializzati	Contenuto per il ridotto impatto sulle agende decisionali delle Direzioni Generali della Commissione EU coinvolte per materia
ParteciPA.gov.it	Consultazione e partecipazione pubblica	Standardizzato (registrazione e inserimento delle richieste di redazione di iniziative) Livello di interazione elevato e continuo tanto con istituzioni quanto con altri utenti	Contenuta Gruppi auto selezionati consapevoli dello strumento della Iniziativa Europea dei Cittadini	Contenuto per il numero di potenziali firmatari di iniziative raggiunti, efficace per il sostegno allo sviluppo delle iniziative

Differente è invece il quadro che si delinea per l'impiego di PDP su base regionale e locale, con realtà e casi significativi per quanto riguarda alcune tipologie di innovazione partecipativa: i bilanci partecipativi, i dibattiti pubblici, le consultazioni civiche, la raccolta e il dibattito di idee sviluppate spontaneamente da parte dei cittadini sono strumenti di democrazia partecipativa che hanno avuto un impulso allo sviluppo dalla disponibilità e diffusione di strumenti digitali. La dimensione di prossimità delle politiche pubbliche, la più vicina percezione dell'impatto dei processi, hanno manifestato sostenuto la crescita di questa dimensione partecipativa su base regionale e locale. In particolare, le piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione hanno avuto occasioni di crescita e innovazione innestandosi sullo sviluppo dei processi partecipativi immaginati da istituzioni regionali e locali nel corso degli anni dal 2000 ad oggi. Come osservano Bobbio e Pomatto (2007) Allegretti (2011) e Bobbio (2010, 2017), appare diverso lo spettro delle finalità perseguite dalle regioni che si sono dotate di una legge regionale dedicata alla partecipazione dei cittadini (Toscana nel 2013; Emilia Romagna nel 2008 e nel 2018; Umbria nel 2010; Puglia nel 2017; Province Autonome di Trento e Bolzano nel 2006 e nel 2014): aumentare la trasparenza e l'informazione sulle attività delle istituzioni pubbliche regionali, diffondere i processi di consultazione, sostenere partecipazione civica e sussidiarietà sociale, organizzare la dimensione digi-

tale dei processi partecipativi, implementare e monitorare digitalmente il dibattito pubblico regionale, nei contesti regionali in cui tale istituto ha trovato disciplina. In quest’ottica, nelle regioni che si sono dotate di una disciplina organica per la partecipazione dei cittadini alle politiche pubbliche, sono state create, come formato di accesso trasparente, delle piattaforme digitali “larghe” (*Partecipa.Toscana, Partecipazione.Regione.Emilia-Romagna* e più recentemente *PartecipAzioni Emilia Romagna, Partecipazione.Regione.Puglia, Io.Map.TN* analizzate nel dettaglio nella tabella 3).

Tabella 3 – Raffronto delle piattaforme regionali italiane analizzate alla luce di processo, rappresentatività, impatto

Piattaforma digitale per la partecipazione regionale	Finalità	Processo	Rappresentatività	Impatto
Toscana <i>Partecipa.Toscana</i>	Informazioni alla cittadinanza Condivisione di idee, pratiche, metodi e strumenti per la partecipazione Definizione governance partecipativa regionale Dibattito pubblico regionale e locale	Standardizzato (registrazione per l’accesso al community group di partecipazione mediante sito/app) Livello di interazione attivo tra utenti e istituzioni coinvolte (governance per la partecipazione)	Medio-elevata Cittadini auto selezionati anche in ragione di competenze tecniche, necessarie per la proposta e la discussione e della motivazione necessaria a partecipare	Medio per la partecipazione a processi generali, più incisivo per dibattito pubblico regionale e locale (stante anche la legge regionale dedicata)
Emilia-Romagna https://partecipazione.regione.emilia-romagna.it/	Processi di confronto preventivo, concertazione, programmazione negoziata e partecipazione mediante percorsi strutturati di dialogo e confronto, avviati in riferimento ad un progetto futuro o ad una futura norma di competenza della Regione.	Standardizzato (registrazione per l’accesso al community group di partecipazione mediante sito con moderazione dei contenuti) Livello di interazione attivo e frequente tra istituzioni e utenti	Medio-elevata Cittadini auto selezionati anche in ragione di competenze tecniche, necessarie per la proposta e la discussione e della motivazione necessaria a partecipare	Medio-elevata
https://partecipazioni.emr.it	Nuova sezione dedicata ai processi partecipativi regionali e locali passati e in corso	Standardizzato (registrazione e login per accesso, moderazione dei contenuti dopo la pubblicazione) Livello di interazione dinamico e costante tra utenti	Ancora da valutare, stante il recente avvio a marzo 2022	Ancora da valutare, stante il recente avvio a marzo 2022
Puglia https://partecipazione.regione.puglia.it/	Informazioni alla cittadinanza Consultazioni Processi partecipativi regionali e locali attivi Dibattito pubblico regionale e locale	Standardizzato (registrazione per l’accesso al community group di partecipazione) Livello di interazione attivo e frequente tra istituzioni e utenti	Media Cittadini auto selezionati anche in ragione di competenze tecniche, necessarie per la proposta e la discussione e della motivazione necessaria a partecipare	Media
P.A. Trento https://iomap.partecipa.tn.it/ <i>Partecipa</i>	Siti web per processi partecipativi regionali e locali attività di partecipazione storytelling relativo alla partecipazione regionale e locale	Standardizzato registrazione per l’accesso al community group di partecipazione mediante sito	Medio-elevata Cittadini auto selezionati anche in ragione di competenze tecniche, necessarie per la proposta e la discussione e della motivazione necessaria a partecipare	Medio. Percorsi fermi al 2019.

Queste PDP si sono mostrate in grado di raccogliere, mediante sezioni dedicate, le differenti funzioni rispettivamente presenti in ogni sistema partecipativo regionale: informazione, consultazione, dibattito pubblico, raccolta di idee e suggerimenti provenienti da cittadini, partecipazione a processi partecipativi digitali e in presenza, sussidiarietà sociale e amministrazione condivisa con i cittadini. In particolare, le esperienze delle piattaforme di Toscana ed Emilia-Romagna, pur nella larghezza dei contenitori digitali, sembrano aver assunto una certa centralità per gestire in modo unitario l'offerta istituzionale di partecipazione e per fornire strumenti istituzionali per la qualificazione delle istanze dal basso per la partecipazione dei cittadini (grazie alla creazione di strumenti accessibili e praticabili). "Hub" di informazioni, pratiche, esperienze, accesso e condivisione di idee e pratiche, le due piattaforme hanno manifestato una centralità informativa, organizzativa e di pianificazione delle esperienze di partecipazione civica, qualificandosi come punti di accesso a tali attività. In questo modo, non solo e non tanto le due piattaforme toscana ed emiliano romagnola hanno conferito informazioni e modellato la forma ai processi (consultazioni, idee, percorsi partecipativi, amministrazione condivisa di beni comuni), ma hanno costituito uno strumento per il trasferimento delle idee e della "voce" dei cittadini che hanno ritenuto di ricorrervi, hanno ampliato gli strumenti per l'empowerment civico e l'espansione della capacità di fare ponte tra cittadini attorno a temi condivisi. In questo modo le PDP regionali, hanno amplificato la possibilità, mediante il canale digitale, di accedere e partecipare su temi e questioni specifiche, di comunità e di prossimità, a quanti, depoliticizzati e orientati all'astensionismo, non vedono nella democrazia rappresentativa l'unica soluzione ai problemi dei territori. Queste pratiche di *empowerment* civico, oltre che di organizzazione istituzionale della partecipazione, sono state rese possibili dalla combinazione di: 1. una volontà politica orientata in questa direzione; 2. piattaforme, chiare nell'accessibilità, semplici nella usabilità, aggiornate e monitorate tanto da utenti istituzionali quanto da soggetti civici; 3. risposte proattive da parte di quei segmenti della cittadinanza attiva aperti e orientati ad intervenire secondo modalità digitali su politiche pubbliche regionali. L'orientamento istituzionale alla partecipazione, la prossimità delle politiche pubbliche considerate, il design di PDP di facile usabilità per i cittadini, sono stati i fattori che, in particolare in Toscana e in Emilia Romagna, hanno generato impatti positivi sulla disposizione partecipativa, producendo in alcuni casi (amministrazione condivisa di beni comuni in Emilia Romagna, dibattito pubblico regionale in Toscana) *output* interessanti, pur in presenza di una non compiuta rappresentatività delle comunità regionali.

Ugualmente significativa, ancorché più situata, è stata la diffusione delle piattaforme partecipative digitali nella dimensione locale in Italia. La capacità di operare su una partecipazione di stretta prossimità, la costruzione di comunità di cittadini più attive su questioni localizzate, la possibilità di creare una *governance* aperta tra istituzioni e comunità locali, la sperimentazione di innovazione nella democrazia urbana sono state le motivazioni che hanno sancito una buona diffusione delle piattaforme per i bilanci partecipativi in ambito comunale. Il bilancio partecipativo, sulla scorta della diffusione globale dell'esperienza pilota di Porto Alegre (Ganuza, Baiocchi

2012), si è diffuso come un formato di partecipazione diretta dei cittadini alla vita pubblica della propria comunità urbana, consistente nell'assegnare una quota di bilancio della città alla scelta diretta dei cittadini di progetti e attività da realizzare. Lo strumento, che ha presto trovato una propria dimensione di sviluppo all'interno delle piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione, ha consentito un innovativo formato di interazione e dialogo tra istituzioni locali e cittadini su tematiche e progetti di prossimità. In altri termini, si tratta di esperienze volte a codificare la partecipazione dei cittadini tanto nella produzione e presentazione di progetti - prevalentemente negli ambiti della rigenerazione urbana, della co-gestione di beni pubblici locali, inclusione sociale, sport e attività per il tempo libero dei giovani, assetto ambientale ed economia circolare - destinatari di finanziamenti in bilancio da parte del Comune, sulla scorta di una attività di consultazione e voto da parte di tutti i cittadini interessati. Le piattaforme digitali per il bilancio partecipativo hanno costituito un elemento molto significativo per semplificare le modalità di selezione dei progetti e di voto da parte dei cittadini chiamati a scegliere, affiancando, secondo modalità anche in questo caso *phygital*, i processi partecipativi in presenza. Nella seconda metà degli anni 2010 esperienze come *MilanoPartecipa* e *IperboleBologna* hanno rappresentato le due principali modalità di associazione di processi partecipativi ampi e sempre più istituzionalizzati nella vita cittadina, con piattaforme ideate, realizzate e valutate per garantire la massimizzazione delle potenzialità partecipative grazie ad una *user experience* accessibile e gratificante. In termini di processi, rappresentatività e impatto di queste esperienze di piattaforme partecipative digitali, si può affermare che dati i numeri di utenti iscritti, considerata la capacità di dare avvio, seguito e conclusione ai processi partecipativi di bilancio, rilevata la qualità e costanza delle informazioni sui progetti proposti, selezionati, finanziati e realizzati, questo tipo di piattaforme consente di fornire una adeguata viabilità digitale ai processi partecipativi locali, affiancando le occasioni di partecipazione in presenza. Emerge in questi due contesti una coerenza parallela tra bilancio partecipativo e strumento della piattaforma (con funzioni partecipative quali il voto, ma anche con attività abilitanti della cittadinanza attiva, come i forum di discussione, la possibilità di accedere a informazioni sia istituzionali sia legate ai realizzatori dei progetti). Al tempo stesso, piattaforme come *Iperbole* e *MilanoPartecipa* consentono, seppure in una prospettiva diacronica di medio termine, di "leggere" l'impatto complessivo del bilancio partecipativo, dalla fase di proposta dei progetti alla votazione da parte dei cittadini, dalla assegnazione delle risorse finanziarie ai progetti vincitori fino alla realizzazione degli stessi da parte di proponenti e amministrazione. La verifica dell'impatto viene esemplificata dall'aggiornamento costante dello spazio riservato ai progetti all'interno delle piattaforme, consentendo a tutti i cittadini di aggiornarsi sul tema e monitorare l'azione delle istituzioni sulle singole attività progettuali e sui relativi tempi. Resta da considerare la dimensione della rappresentatività di tali formati di partecipazione mediante piattaforma digitale. Secondo un lavoro recente (Cellini, Antonucci 2020), il tema della mancata rappresentatività di segmenti interi della comunità urbana appare una questione problematica, laddove l'inclusione di tutti i cittadini nei processi di democrazia parte-

cipativa urbana si qualifica come strumento per conseguire decisioni pubbliche autenticamente democratiche.

Sempre in ambito locale, un'esperienza eccedente la frequente pratica dei bilanci partecipativi si è sviluppata a Reggio Calabria. La piattaforma digitale di prossimità *EKEI* va collocata all'interno di un processo più ampio di sviluppo sociale di comunità a Pellaro, quartiere di circa 10.000 abitanti di Reggio Calabria, che ha previsto per due anni un lavoro capillare integrato di processi educativi, relazionali e partecipativi nello spazio comunitario e territoriale reale e digitale. L'obiettivo della ricerca-azione era quello di avviare preliminarmente un generale processo di attivazione delle persone all'interno della comunità aumentando il livello di relazionalità e di *communicative thickening* intorno a temi e problemi specifici (Maier, Stoltenberg et al. 2022:187) con il supporto di attivatori di comunità opportunamente formati per sviluppare, dopo un periodo di ascolto e osservazione partecipante, una relazionalità diffusa significativa. La crescita della densità relazionale intorno a temi e problemi è stata favorita sin dall'inizio anche attraverso una piattaforma digitale di prossimità che ha consentito di intersecare le relazioni costruite negli spazi del quartiere con quelle agite nella piattaforma. Questa doppia presenza, reale e digitale, non è semplicemente un rispecchiamento. Come afferma Bastos (2022) "mentre l'interazione attraverso le piattaforme sociali può evolversi in assenza di legami fisici, le esternalità di rete derivanti dalle interazioni sviluppate online possono impattare sul nostro senso stesso di ciò che è reale offline" in modi e direzioni inaspettate.

Le persone che sono state contattate dagli attivatori e che sono entrate in piattaforma hanno, inizialmente, mostrato dubbi e perplessità su cosa fare con l'ennesima piattaforma social da frequentare. Questa incertezza iniziale è stata ancora più rilevante da parte delle fasce più vulnerabili - che erano prioritarie nella ricerca-azione - della popolazione di Pellaro perché era diffusa l'idea che il digitale ed in particolare le piattaforme dei social media commerciali rappresentano solo uno spazio di divertimento o di superficiale relazionalità. La socievolezza connaturata ai social media che alcuni indicano essere una delle *affordances* rilevanti, in questo caso ha funzionato come un blocco iniziale a chi aveva desideri e aspirazioni strettamente connessi con le varie sfere della vita quotidiana (relazioni familiari, problemi occupazionali, problemi di salute, presenza diffusa della criminalità organizzata) e, soprattutto, una familiarità pubblica (Blokland 2017) lontana dall'idea di relazione, partecipazione e capacità di decisione. In realtà dai colloqui e dalle interviste realizzate² inizialmente emergeva che la "nuova familiarità pubblica" proposta sia in presenza sia on-line era vista con sospetto perché non era coerente con tutto quello che era dato per scontato nelle relazioni quotidiane. In altre parole, se all'interno delle piattaforme social commerciali si stabiliscono relazioni con estranei, in una piattaforma social di prossimità il costruire relazioni con le persone più vicine è risultato inizialmente imbarazzante. Sembrerebbe un paradosso, ma in realtà è in linea con quanto sta emergendo da alcune ricerche che hanno smantellato metodologicamente ed empiricamente i presupp-

² Gli attivatori di comunità insieme ai ricercatori hanno realizzato durante il processo di ricerca-azione 50 interviste in profondità, 250 colloqui informali e 15 focus group.

sti che le persone hanno un insieme fisso e durevole di persone con cui parlano, e che parenti e amici equivalgono a vicinanza e intimità (Small 2017; Blockland 2019). Non è che i legami forti non contino, ma piuttosto i legami deboli sono stati sottovalutati. Proprio su questo aspetto, le persone vulnerabili una volta presa confidenza e familiarità da un lato con la piattaforma digitale e dall'altro con la presenza fisica degli attivatori di comunità, hanno iniziato ad usarla per costruire legami con gli "sconosciuti" della loro comunità. La spazialità dei momenti di incontro conta sia reale sia digitale e fornisce alle persone diverse opportunità di "incontro e accoppiamento" (Small e Adler 2019). In linea con quanto immaginato in altri contesti per l'impostazione di un lavoro di ricerca sulle comunità (Blockland *et al.* 2022), a Pellaro l'esplorazione prima e l'esperienza poi di legami sociali deboli con gli altri membri della comunità, ha consentito l'incremento lento della partecipazione in presenza e sulla piattaforma per conoscersi e discutere insieme del futuro della comunità. Un passaggio dall'io al noi all'intersezione tra reale e digitale che non era scontato in un contesto dove tradizionalmente la cultura storica e sociale stratificata e prevalente, tuttora privilegia il ben noto familismo amorale di Banfield (1954) seppur molto attenuato.

Nella nostra prospettiva, quindi, le piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione civica sviluppate in contesti regionali e locali, soprattutto con riferimento al genere del bilancio partecipativo, presentano alcuni elementi di efficacia, quali l'accessibilità per i cittadini degli strumenti per la partecipazione digitale, la capacità di fornire trasparenza e informazione ai processi, la rendicontazione istituzionale delle attività condotte, il sostegno alla partecipazione; al tempo stesso essi presentano elementi di criticità con riferimento alla capacità di essere autenticamente inclusivi di tutte le componenti civiche e pongono questioni molto concrete su come assicurare la parità delle occasioni di partecipazione a tutta la cittadinanza.

4.1 Dalle diseguaglianze alla partecipazione significativa: problemi e prospettive

Per riflettere adeguatamente sulle piattaforme partecipative, è necessario affrontare congiuntamente il tema delle diseguaglianze e del senso e degli obiettivi della partecipazione.

Le vulnerabilità sociali hanno subito un processo di radicalizzazione e di espansione nell'epoca della *deep mediatization* (Hepp 2020) sia perché alle tradizionali diseguaglianze sociali, economiche e culturali si sono aggiunte le nuove diseguaglianze digitali (Ragnedda 2020; Ragnedda, Ruiu 2020) sia perché l'ampiezza, l'articolazione dei repertori mediali (Hasebrink, Domeyer 2012) e del media *manifold* (Couldry, Hepp 2017) si è espanso in quantità offrendo, però, una illusione della scelta (Morlino, Sorice 2021) e una forte opacità e manipolazione nella comprensione del mondo contemporaneo da parte delle persone. Con l'accesso alla sfera digitale, l'individuo è esposto a un paradosso: può trovarsi di fronte sia a opportunità (connettere persone, condividere e gestire informazioni e dati, migliorare le condizioni di lavoro e di salute) sia a minacce (possibili discriminazioni, manipolazioni, sfruttamento individuale, esclusione sociale).

Infatti, l'accesso digitale può allo stesso tempo ridurre e/o esacerbare la vulnerabilità degli individui o dei gruppi. Si tratta di una questione che riguarda la tensione tra autonomia personale e imposizione eteronoma, l'integrità dell'identità individuale e il dominio algoritmico (Zuboff 2019). Le conseguenze della vulnerabilizzazione sociale e digitale sono rilevanti in almeno tre aree: 1) come consumatore nel mercato, dove il processo di datificazione ha saturato gli spazi di scelta individuale consapevole (Coul-dry, Mejias 2019); 2) come cittadino nell'ambito dei processi di partecipazione politica e democratica dove la presenza di processi di disintermediazione ha prodotto trasformazioni nel dibattito pubblico (Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri 2021: 163-172) e una sostanziale assenza di partecipazione significativa (Sorice 2021: 174); 3) come cittadino nell'ambito della vita quotidiana e delle comunità al plurale per poter trasformare le capacità in opportunità di vita (Squillaci, Volterrani 2021).

Concentrandosi sul secondo aspetto, è rilevante anche utilizzare la differenziazione tra partecipazione inclusiva e partecipazione significativa proposta da Geissel e Joas (2013). La prima fa riferimento alla questione dell'accesso da parte di gruppi sociali e minoranze specifiche ai processi partecipativi, mentre la seconda riguarda le modalità con le quali chi partecipa può definire l'*agenda-setting* e contribuire a trasformare le proprie preferenze in policies. Come afferma Sorice (2021) uno dei problemi della partecipazione è che essa dovrebbe provocare cambiamenti reali (significativi) sia nelle priorità dell'agenda delle politiche pubbliche sia nelle misure da intraprendere sia nell'incremento della trasparenza delle procedure sia infine nell'empowerment della cittadinanza. È proprio su quest'ultimo punto che convergono e potenzialmente confliggono i due temi, diseguaglianze e partecipazione, perché l'accesso alle piattaforme digitali non è condizione sufficiente per poter poi avere una partecipazione significativa, ma, allo stesso tempo, senza questa non è possibile colmare quelle diseguaglianze che non consentono di partecipare con consapevolezza e con la possibilità di incidere. Dopo aver presentato il quadro delle PDP proveremo a riflettere su alcune esperienze di frontiera che stanno tentando di colmare le diseguaglianze digitali aggiuntive rispetto a quelle tradizionali nei processi di partecipazione e nell'ambito della vita quotidiana attraverso processi di edu-communication (Barbas 2020; Freire 1970) e di partecipazione significativa dal basso nell'ottica della riconfigurazione degli spazi sociali (Knoblauch, Low 2017; Million, Haid, Ulloa and Bauer 2022).

5. La terra di mezzo. Cosa possiamo imparare dal confronto tra il modello generale dell'UE per le piattaforme e le esperienze italiane localizzate

Il raffronto tra il modello europeo e italiano di utilizzo delle piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione deve prendere in considerazione una serie di elementi. Il sistema della UE per le PDP nel corso degli ultimi dieci anni appare orientato ad un modello estensivo e progressivo, che è passato dal coinvolgimento di ridotti e qualificati *stakeholder* in ambiti di policy molto specifici (*Futurium*) alla disponibilità digitale aperta a tutti degli strumenti istituzionali per la partecipazione (Piattaforma web per le petizioni, *European Citizens Forum*), fino ad un tentativo di allargare il coinvolgi-

mento di tutti i cittadini su un novero ampio di politiche pubbliche, per delineare, anche con i contributi di idee e progetti dei cittadini, il futuro della UE (*FuturEU*). Per quanto l'impatto dei processi partecipativi mediante piattaforma e la rappresentatività dei partecipanti rispetto alla cittadinanza europea siano ancora al di sotto del potenziale di attivazione, si ha la percezione che le piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione messe a punto dalla UE rispondano ad una idea di processi partecipativi orientata ai principi istituzionali di dialogo aperto, trasparente e regolare con i cittadini, scambio di visioni su tutte le aree di politiche pubbliche su cui si interviene e consultazioni sulle parti tematiche. La volontà istituzionale di conferire una più ampia ed inclusiva forma digitale a questi processi istituzionali potrebbe manifestare i propri frutti a partire dagli esiti della attività di consultazione e dialogo con i cittadini affiancata alla Conferenza sul futuro dell'Europa.

Nel contesto italiano, d'altro canto, le modalità di sviluppo delle tecnologie per la partecipazione digitale dei cittadini hanno trovato un terreno resistente a tale formato di innovazione, stante un assetto istituzionale orientato a massimizzare gli spazi di democrazia rappresentativa, un *gatekeeping* della partecipazione civica ancora esercitato dai partiti politici, una flessibilità degli strumenti tradizionali di democrazia partecipativa. Questo contesto istituzionale e politico ha limitato l'impatto dell'innovazione digitale applicata alla democrazia partecipativa su base nazionale, favorendo esperienze di PDP per la partecipazione solo nei sistemi di prossimità, regionali e locali. Piattaforme regionali per la partecipazione, bilanci partecipativi su base comunale, dispositivi digitali per lo sviluppo locale di comunità hanno riempito quegli interstizi istituzionali lasciati liberi alla sperimentazione democratica, all'*empowerment* dei cittadini e al dialogo istituzionale rivolto alla sussidiarietà sociale in contesti dotati di una maggiore sensibilità politico-istituzionale per la partecipazione digitale. In quest'ottica, brilla l'assenza di un quadro di sviluppo di sistema di tale innovazione digitale applicata alla partecipazione civica in ambito nazionale; questo elemento emerge in misura ancora maggiore nel momento in cui si confrontano gli elementi di impatto, processo e rappresentatività delle pur limitate esperienze. Concentrate su un numero ridotto di politiche di ambito urbano, focalizzate su esiti molto circoscritti, ripiegate sulla dimensione partecipativa di prossimità, queste pratiche di innovazione vedono racchiuso il proprio potenziale di innovazione nel ristretto e non coordinato quadro di sviluppo, nella carenza di analisi sugli impatti, nella mancanza di correttivi volti a sostenere una partecipazione civica digitale realmente inclusiva ed espressiva.

In conclusione, ci sono almeno quattro temi dai quali possiamo apprendere che emergono dal confronto fra il modello europeo e le piattaforme italiane localizzate.

Il primo tema riguarda il *continuum* reale/digitale all'interno del quale si collocano le esperienze realizzate. Le *affordances* delle piattaforme digitali di aprire un dialogo che sia capace di muoversi con processi comprensibili e fluidi tra esperienze nella vita quotidiana reale ed esperienze nella vita quotidiana digitale hanno la capacità di coinvolgere sia quantitativamente che qualitativamente le persone di una comunità. Talvolta la rigidità delle piattaforme non consente di sviluppare quella fascinazione

emotiva necessaria per poter avviare un processo partecipativo tra coloro che sono maggiormente vulnerabili da un punto di vista culturale.

La questione della partecipazione è il secondo aspetto sul quale provare ad individuare elementi di apprendimento. Spesso la confusione tra coinvolgimento e partecipazione è particolarmente evidente in tutti i processi che prevedono un ruolo dei cittadini. Il coinvolgimento prevede, ad esempio, che il processo partecipativo sia eterodiretto dalla politica attraverso l'individuazione preliminare degli obiettivi o per una non meglio specificata *governance* collaborativa. Come sottolinea Sorice (2021: 91) tutto questo "contribuisce allo sviluppo di forme di partecipazione disconnessa, in cui la stessa partecipazione si esaurisce in un accesso sterile a procedure burocratizzate, che non consente né un reale *empowerment* delle cittadine e dei cittadini né la creazione di interlocuzione con i corpi intermedi". Se la partecipazione non consente la possibilità di poter decidere o almeno co-decidere rispetto alle scelte gestionali e politiche che riguardano il territorio, sarà solo partecipazione inclusiva (se riesce a far accedere anche le parti marginali della popolazione) e non significativa (Geissel, Joas 2013).

Infine, un apprendimento che riteniamo importante da sottolineare è quello che evidenzia la frattura tra partecipazione di *élite* e partecipazione popolare. In molte piattaforme l'accesso, le regole di partecipazione interna, i contenuti proposti sui quali discutere e soprattutto il linguaggio usato sono appannaggio di un numero ristretto di persone che hanno capitale culturale e sociale qualitativamente più articolato e complesso. La distinzione ben rappresentata da Bourdieu (1983) è una delle chiavi di lettura possibili alla quale va affiancata l'incapacità apparente oppure la volontà di chi gestisce le piattaforme di rivolgersi solo a chi già comprende o a chi è già attivamente partecipe nel discutere delle questioni pubbliche e politiche. Certamente alcuni temi e problemi sono difficilmente semplificabili perché sono oggettivamente complessi, ma non è visibile nemmeno un tentativo di aprirsi a chi non ha tutti gli strumenti per comprendere. Questa riproduzione delle diseguaglianze nell'opportunità di partecipare e, eventualmente, decidere è forse l'aspetto che più dovrebbe essere affrontato nelle esperienze di partecipazione digitale dei cittadini per consentire un processo di innovazione democratica che non sia solo formale ma sostanziale.

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Piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione

EU – Futurium - <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en.html>

EU FuturEU <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>

EP Petition Web Portal <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/petitions/en/home>

European Citizens Initiative Forum https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative-forum/_en

IperBOle <http://partecipa.comune.bologna.it/>

PartecipaToscana <https://partecipa.toscana.it/home>

Partecipa Emilia-Romagna <https://partecipazione.regione.emilia-romagna.it/>

Partecipa Puglia <https://partecipazione.regione.puglia.it/?locale=it>

Participedia, The Tuscany Regional Participation Policy, Italy [https://participedia.net/me-
thod/5594](https://participedia.net/method/5594)

OPP Umbria <http://www.oppumbria.it/opp/progettoopp>

Bilancio partecipativo Milano <https://bilanciopartecipativo.comune.milano.it/>

Reggio Calabria <https://webapp.ekei.it/app/tor/login>



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

Rossana Sampugnaro

1. Introduzione

Il contributo dei cittadini all'edificazione di una Europa più democratica è centrale nel Piano d'azione Europeo per la democrazia¹ (2020). Nel Report sul *Public Consultation for the European Democracy Action Plan* a corredo del piano, si evidenzia la necessità di un maggiore coinvolgimento dei cittadini per contenere la disinformazione e per animare un dibattito democratico sulle politiche europee. Nella direzione di un *open government* si muove anche la Conferenza sul Futuro per l'Europa, apertasi nel 2021, che ha messo in campo una pluralità di strumenti, cercando di evitare il coinvolgimento dei soli 'eurocrati' e promuovendo una serie di attività: la costruzione di panel tematici in cui sono inclusi semplici cittadini o la presenza di eventi decentrati organizzati in presenza o con modalità mista.

Il rilancio dell'Iniziativa dei Cittadini Europei (ICE) può rientrare in questa strategia di supporto alla partecipazione. Questo istituto, in vigore da oltre 10 anni, fornisce ai cittadini la possibilità di una interlocuzione diretta con la Commissione Europea e tramite quest'ultima con il Parlamento Europeo. Prevista nei trattati dell'Unione, la ICE è diventata una concreta opportunità per gli europei solo nel 2012² anche se poco conosciuta dalla popolazione. Nel 2019 avviene un cambio di passo: viene pubblicato un nuovo regolamento che semplifica l'accesso e viene lanciata una intensa attività di comunicazione che ne supporta l'utilizzo.

Lo studio di carattere esplorativo propone una indagine diacronica sul complesso delle proposte avanzate dai cittadini europei per capirne la natura e l'evoluzione nel primo decennio di applicazione. La ricerca muove dall'ipotesi che l'interesse per questa misura non sia stata la stessa nei 28 stati (poi 27 dopo la Brexit) e che vi sia un coinvolgimento minore di quelli di più recente ingresso nella Ue. Ci siamo chiesti inoltre se esistesse una ciclicità delle *policies* oggetto delle iniziative e se questa dipendesse dall'appalesarsi di crisi sistemiche in grado di modificare il peso delle istanze post-mate-

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¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_it, Realizzato grazie ai fondi Erasmus+ Modulo Jean Monnet EUROpean RENovate ACTors in European Public Sphere - EuReact (2019-22), PROJECT NUMBER - 611654-EPP-1-2019-1-IT-EPPJMO MODULE

² Le norme relative all'iniziativa dei cittadini europei si basano sulle disposizioni del Trattato di Lisbona e sono attuate inizialmente mediante il regolamento (UE) n. 211/2011 applicato dal 1° aprile 2012. Successivamente questo regolamento è stato abrogato per essere sostituito con il regolamento (UE) 2019/788 che si applica dal 1° gennaio 2020 e i cui effetti si dispiegheranno pienamente nel 2022.

rialistiche. L'esplorazione delle iniziative lascia immaginare un'altra Europa possibile, diversa da quella attuale, nella quale accanto alle funzioni correnti, se ne affiancano altre, ritenute urgenti o meramente desiderabili dai suoi abitanti.

2. ICE e ordinamento democratico della UE

Il processo di costituzione dell'Unione Europea si è accompagnato ad un intenso dibattito sul carattere democratico delle sue principali istituzioni. Non si tratta di uno stato considerando la mancanza di sovranità sui territori né di una vera e propria federazione dal momento che non vi sono gli organi di un governo federale. Il suo carattere mutevole è stato evidenziato sia dagli studiosi di orientamento realista sia da quelli di orientamento funzionalista: per i primi sono gli accordi tra gli stati a costituire il cuore dell'Unione Europea, per i secondi bisogna guardare ai suoi organi per inquadrarne realmente la natura e rivolgere l'attenzione alle *policies* ma soprattutto al tentativo di costruzione di una nuova *polity* che prescindano, in parte, dagli stati nazionali.

L'assetto democratico dell'Unione è multilivello perché riguarda il ruolo della UE nel panorama internazionale, la relazione tra gli stati della UE, il rapporto tra la UE e i cittadini europei. Nel quadro dello sviluppo della democrazia cosmopolitica (Archibugi 2005: 6-11), è necessario rafforzare gli istituti di partecipazione per compensare il peso crescente di organismi e attori sovranazionali che non hanno alcuna legittimazione democratica. L'equilibrio tra le forme di democrazia rappresentativa e partecipativa dovrebbe tener conto del fatto che l'estensione della "macro democrazia" che caratterizza grandi comunità che abitano territori vasti ed eterogenei determina una riduzione della intensità della "micro" che si nutre di relazioni che si sviluppano in piccoli gruppi e della comunicazione diretta (Sartori 1995: 37). In questo senso è bene richiamare la necessità di un rafforzamento della sfera pubblica europea, più volte tematizzato dal Habermas (1999) e da Beck (2003) con l'obiettivo di costruire un nuovo tipo di cittadinanza a partire dalla integrazione delle culture e dalla costituzione di un comune sentire.

L'Unione Europea dovrebbe quindi impegnarsi nella "democratizzazione della democrazia" (Giddens 2000) ossia nel rafforzamento delle politiche che garantiscono la trasparenza dei processi, nel decentramento del potere e nel rafforzamento di quei valori che rafforzano il confronto democratico, individuando la società civile come "l'arena dove gli atteggiamenti democratici, come la tolleranza, devono essere sviluppati" (ivi: 95).

Le politiche che puntano al rafforzamento della partecipazione partono dal presupposto del superamento del *digital divide* che, tuttavia, il rapporto *Digital Economy and Society Index* (DESI) del 2018 mostra ancora presente. Molti istituti partecipativi richiedono la piena funzionalità dell'infrastruttura digitale che diventa indispensabile per promuovere una petizione o per prendere parte alle consultazioni aperte dalla Commissione per definire nuove politiche. A partire dalle riflessioni del Libro bianco sulla Governance dell'Unione Europea (2001), molte misure sono rivolte a supportare

la partecipazione nell'ottica del miglioramento dei regolamenti e delle direttive grazie al contributo della società civile. Il coinvolgimento è teso quindi a potenziare la qualità, la pertinenza e l'efficacia delle politiche dell'Unione, ritenendo che una partecipazione estesa sia in grado di assicurare questi risultati e di rafforzare la fiducia nelle istituzioni da cui emanano tali politiche.

L'inclusione dei cittadini nel processo decisionale europeo è progressiva e si lega ad un processo di maturazione dell'idea di democrazia all'interno della UE. Non bisogna dimenticare che "la UE non era stata inizialmente concepita come una *polity* democratica e per un certo numero di anni si presumeva che non potesse essere democratica anche perché mancava un singolo *demos*" (Alemanno e Organ 2022: 5). Anche se è il Trattato di Lisbona ad introdurre elementi di democrazia partecipativa, è possibile rintracciare degli elementi che spingono verso una maggiore inclusione dei cittadini nei processi decisionali europei a partire dal Trattato di Roma (1957) che contemplava (art. 193) l'istituzione di un Comitato Economico e Sociale Europeo (CESE). Con funzioni consultive, l'organismo (art. 257, par. 2) aveva il compito di migliorare la qualità della rappresentanza. La strategia era quella di includere alcune categorie della vita economica e sociale e di prendere in considerazione così gli interessi di agricoltori, commercianti, artigiani, liberi professionisti, lavoratori e consumatori, etc. (Picchi 2009, Siclari 2003). Pur con tutti i problemi connessi alla individuazione dei soggetti da includere nel Comitato e ai meccanismi di selezione (Picchi 2009: 130), il peso di questo organo è aumentato per una serie di ragioni: è diventato un luogo di ricerca di soluzioni e di sintesi tra visioni diverse dello stesso problema ed è stato capace di incidere sul lavoro di Parlamento e Commissione anche grazie al parere espresso in "uno stadio precoce, quando ancora vi sono ampi spazi di manovra per incidere sulla decisione da adottare" (ibidem).

L'istituzionalizzazione del dialogo tra le parti sociali avviene più tardi con la definizione del Protocollo Sociale, un allegato al Trattato di Maastricht (TUE) del 1992. È la Commissione ad assumere un ruolo centrale che non si limita alla consultazione degli stati membri: questa diventa la facilitatrice del dialogo tra le parti sociali a livello comunitario con l'obiettivo di produrre una convergenza sulle proposte di politica e di colmare il deficit democratico delle istituzioni comunitarie (Siclari 2003).

Questo metodo trova conferma anche in atti successivi come il Trattato di Amsterdam (1997, TCE) che ne recepisce i principi, adottando tre strumenti: consultazione, accordi liberi e accordi vincolati (Picchi 2009: 131). Si conferma il ruolo propositivo della Commissione ma si attribuisce alle parti sociali la facoltà di avviare un negoziato sulle materie considerate nel Trattato, anche senza l'intervento delle istituzioni comunitarie, per favorire gli accordi tra stati membri e organizzazioni della società civile e degli interessi³.

³ L'art. 138 TCE stabilisce che la Commissione "debba promuovere la consultazione delle parti sociali a livello comunitario" circa i possibili orientamenti dell'azione comunitaria e sulle proposte della Commissione. L'art. 139 del TCE ha attribuito alle parti sociali la possibilità di avviare autonomamente dei negoziati sulle materie previste, al fine di raggiungere accordi da attuare secondo le procedure delle parti sociali e degli Stati membri. In una prima fase questo non comporta un coordinamento delle istituzioni comunitarie. Gli accordi possono tuttavia divenire rilevanti all'interno dell'ordinamento europeo con il recepimento in un atto formale delle istituzioni comunitarie.

Queste aperture rendono necessario trovare un equilibrio tra il diritto alla partecipazione e il rischio di un'eccessiva pressione esercitata dai gruppi di interesse più organizzati e forniti di risorse economiche. La strada intrapresa è quella di elevare il livello di trasparenza del processo decisionale e di favorire la partecipazione anche dei soggetti non inseriti in consolidate organizzazioni nazionali e transnazionali.

Una serie di atti sono i presupposti della successiva istituzione dell'ICE: il Codice di buona condotta amministrativa della Commissione (2000), in cui sono elencati i principi che ne devono orientare l'azione per garantire un servizio di qualità verso i cittadini; il Libro Bianco sulla Governance Europea (2001) che sottolinea il valore delle consultazioni e della partecipazione per la definizione delle politiche, il Libro Verde (2006) che dà una spinta alla "Iniziativa europea per la trasparenza", sottolineando che l'Unione debba essere "aperta a un controllo pubblico e renda conto del proprio operato" e che gli europei abbiano il diritto ad istituzioni pubbliche efficienti e trasparenti, improntate ad una cultura di servizio.

Dall'analisi dei documenti, il valore della partecipazione è ora declinato, più che come diritto del singolo cittadino a prendere parte alla vita dell'Unione, come elemento in grado di migliorare le politiche europee attraverso il dialogo e lo scambio di informazioni tra organizzazioni sociali e istituzioni. Le opportunità di partecipazione si situano all'interno di una concezione di democrazia associativa che vede le organizzazioni della società civile come soggetti in grado di farsi portatori di "interessi divergenti".

L'uscita da questo paradigma di partecipazione mediata dal tessuto associativo avverrà per gradi con istituti che vanno nella direzione di una partecipazione diretta del singolo cittadino. Questa necessità appare evidente in presenza di una crisi di legittimità delle istituzioni rappresentative di livello europeo, successiva alla fase del *permissive consensus*. L'inclusione dei cittadini *affected* avrebbe lo scopo di migliorare la qualificazione democratica delle *policies* pubbliche e la loro implementazione: il vantaggio atterrebbe sia al processo e sia al prodotto contribuendo a migliorare il senso di appartenenza e la qualità delle politiche che promettono di influenzare le vite degli europei (Moro 2009).

La svolta è impressa dal Trattato di Lisbona, entrato in vigore nel 2009, che sancisce la complementarità tra democrazia rappresentativa e democrazia partecipativa. La piena legittimazione della partecipazione dei cittadini trova spazio negli articoli 10 e 11: a costoro è conferito "il diritto di partecipare alla vita democratica dell'Unione" (art. 10, c. 3) rilanciando il principio di sussidiarietà per cui "le decisioni sono prese nella maniera il più possibile aperta e vicina ai cittadini". Nei fatti l'art. 11 TUE stabilisce che gli interlocutori siano sia i singoli cittadini sia la società civile⁴, stabilendo che "le isti-

⁴ Nel *Libro Bianco sulla governance europea*, gli attori rappresentativi sono elencati: organizzazioni sindacali e padronali, organizzazioni non governative, associazioni professionali, volontariato, organizzazioni di base, organizzazioni che coinvolgono i cittadini nella vita locale municipale con il particolare contributo delle chiese e delle comunità religiose. Successivamente vengono definite come società civile "le principali strutture della società al di fuori degli organi governativi e della pubblica amministrazione, compresi gli operatori economici che generalmente non sono considerati come facenti parte del cosiddetto terzo settore o delle ONG", il cui ruolo "nelle democrazie moderne è strettamente connesso col diritto fondamentale dei cittadini di formare associazioni per perseguire finalità comuni, come sancito dall'art.12 della Carta dei diritti fondamentali dell'UE" (Mascia, 2010).

tuzioni danno ai cittadini e alle associazioni rappresentative, attraverso gli opportuni canali, la possibilità di far conoscere e di scambiare pubblicamente le loro opinioni in tutti i settori di azione dell'Unione», e afferma che «le istituzioni mantengono un dialogo aperto, trasparente e regolare con le associazioni rappresentative e la società civile»⁵.

Il trattato istituzionalizza il dialogo tra cittadini ed istituzioni con misure diverse che rispondono anche a modelli diversi di partecipazione. Più *top-down* le consultazioni (11.3), avviate dalla Commissione per stabilire e mantenere un dialogo vivo e diretto con la società europea ma che si rivelano spesso “meccanismi utili alle istituzioni per creare consenso attorno alle proprie scelte” (Sapienza 2020). Più aderente ad una logica *bottom-up*, è la proposta di iniziativa legislativa (art. 11.4). Questa “apre l'accesso ad una interlocuzione diretta delle cittadinanze di Europa con la Commissione Europea, istituzionalizzando un diritto individuale di partecipazione ad una iniziativa collettiva dei cittadini europei rivolta alla Commissione e non più solo al Parlamento europeo, come era finora in base alla previsione della petizione” (Allegrì 2010: 3). Sulla carta i cittadini possono influire sull'agenda dell'Unione Europea con proposte e sollecitazioni e rendere le istituzioni capaci di rispondere a nuovi bisogni di tipo materialistico e post-materialistico (Bordino 2013).

3. I limiti della ICE

Dai documenti emerge che le aspettative riposte nell'istituto sono elevate sia rispetto agli effetti sulle politiche sia rispetto alla intensità della partecipazione. Quello che emerge è che l'istituto stenta a “decollare” e che i cittadini ne hanno una scarsa conoscenza. Ancora nel 2020 l'Eurobarometro (2020: 15) rilevava che solo il 9% della popolazione aveva preso parte ad una European Citizens' Initiative (9%) mentre nel 2021 un sondaggio di *YouGov-Deutschland* metteva in luce una scarsissima consapevolezza dell'istituto che non superava il 2,4% per il campione considerato⁶.

Nei documenti preparatori si immaginava che questo istituto avrebbe attenuato la forza della democrazia consociativa espressa dall'Unione attraverso la possibilità data anche alle minoranze “di inserire nell'agenda politica questioni fino a questo momento ignorate o a cui non è stata prestata sufficiente attenzione da parte delle istituzioni della democrazia rappresentativa” (Alber 2013:62). Nei fatti la presenza di un perimetro stretto degli ambiti tematici agibili e un'interpretazione particolarmente restrittiva della Commissione, fa sì che l'ICE non funzioni per sollecitare un ampliamento delle questioni trattate con un potenziale effetto destabilizzante ma nella direzione di un arricchimento e un'articolazione dei campi di azione del Parlamento (Bouza 2013). Vincoli precisi precludono la possibilità di presentare iniziative “al di fuori delle finalità dei Trattati dell'Unione Europea, o dove non si applica il cosiddetto metodo comunitario. Allo stesso modo, un'ICE non può essere usata per disgregare la UE o per far regredire l'integrazione europea» (Sigalas 2013: 82).

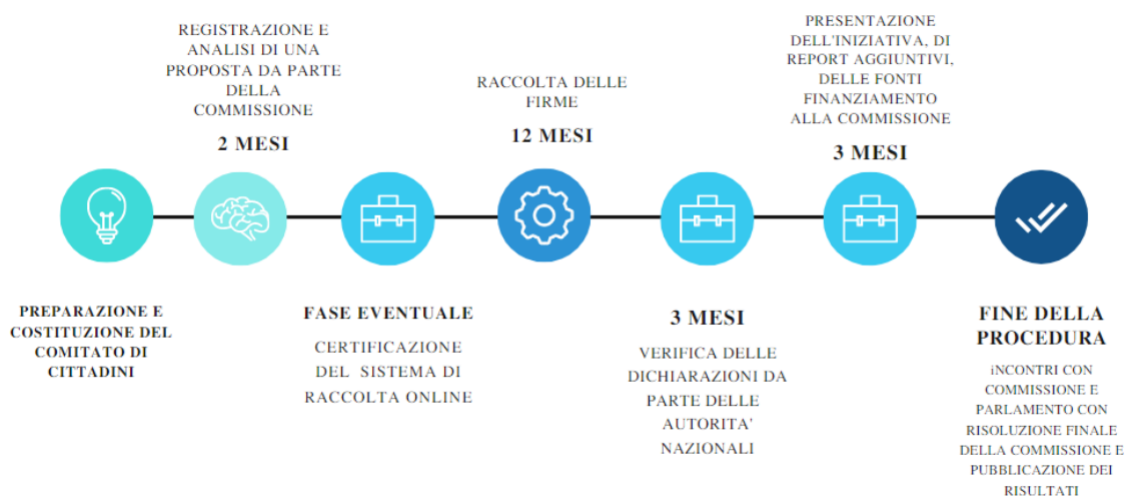
⁵ Ricordiamo ancora il diritto di petizione al Parlamento europeo (articolo 227 del TFUE) e l'Ombudsman europeo (articolo 228 del TFUE).

⁶ Il campione di 5,094 cittadini intervistati tra aprile e maggio 2021 in Germania (n= 2,057), Italia (n= 1,034), Finlandia (n= 1,002) e Portogallo (n= 1,001). Vedi <https://www.eumans.eu/europe-day-yougov-survey-shows-only-24-eu-citizens-are-informed-about-their-democratic-rights>.

Anche sul versante dell'utilizzo, emergono delle criticità che sono legate alla particolare complessità del meccanismo di avvio delle singole proposte, anche in presenza di costanti miglioramenti del quadro normativo e di una intensa attività di comunicazione "dedicata" che si è sviluppata specie negli ultimi anni.

Il processo previsto per la registrazione della iniziativa, per la successiva raccolta firme e per l'approdo al Parlamento è lungo e complesso (Fig. 1) anche dopo l'adozione del nuovo regolamento del 2019. È pur vero che la logica di alcune regole, che possono apparire particolarmente gravose, è riconducibile agli obiettivi strategici dell'Unione. L'ICE è stata ritenuta uno strumento in grado di sviluppare processi di integrazione europea proprio a partire dalle modalità di presentazione della proposta alla Commissione. Prendiamo ad esempio le caratteristiche del comitato promotore e i vincoli sulla raccolta del milione di firme necessarie per presentare la proposta⁷. Riguardo a quest'ultimo il regolamento del Parlamento Europeo (2019/788) prevede un comitato organizzatore composto da sette persone con residenza in sette differenti stati europei. Il lancio di una iniziativa presuppone la collaborazione tra associazioni di paesi diversi e la costruzione di uno spazio di discussione sovranazionale su questioni condivise. Questo determinerebbe un'attenzione precipua dei cittadini "su materie che hanno una dimensione transnazionale, il che li aiuta non solo a pensare al di là dei confini dell'interesse nazionale, ma anche di aver coscienza di ciò che essi hanno in comune con gli altri europei" (Sigalas 2013: 81). Nella fase di definizione della proposta e successivamente della mobilitazione per il milione di firme, nascerrebbero e si consoliderebbero nuovi *transnational networks* tra organizzazioni della società civile operanti negli stati aderenti la cui azione si estenderebbe orizzontalmente, cercando di "Europeanising their respective national public spheres", e verticalmente "putting pressure on EU institutions" (Nicolaidis, Markovic 2021), in particolare Parlamento Europeo e Commissione Europea.

Fig. 1 - L'iniziativa dei cittadini europei: procedimento lungo la linea del tempo



⁷ Le proposte vengono prese in considerazione solo se sottoscritte da un milione di cittadini europei e in almeno un quarto degli Stati Europei con una soglia minima di firme che dipende dalla grandezza dello Stato.

Anche se entrambi coinvolti nella riuscita dell'ICE, essi svolgono ruoli differenziati. La Commissione è da considerarsi un *gatekeeper* dell'intero processo, specie per l'attribuzione di ammissibilità della proposta dal momento che si occupa di esaminare il "fascicolo" depositato dai proponenti: la regolarità formale e quella sostanziale della singola iniziativa che determinano l'accesso alla fase successiva, quella della raccolta delle firme nei singoli stati. La sua competenza si estende al monitoraggio della fase di raccolta (per censurare eventuali comportamenti non conformi) e alla pubblicazione delle iniziative (vedi *intra*). Accanto al ruolo preventivo e a quello di facilitatore del processo, la Commissione diventa il traduttore della iniziativa dei cittadini europei in proposta legislativa (Regolamento) per il Parlamento e per il Consiglio. Questi ultimi ne valuteranno il contenuto all'interno di una procedura legislativa di tipo ordinario che può essere preceduta da una audizione pubblica dei proponenti in Parlamento. La possibilità che la ICE modifichi o orienti le politiche pubbliche è legata a molti fattori contingenti ma soprattutto a quanto l'iniziativa si sia "politicizzata" nel corso del tempo, ossia se abbia prodotto un coinvolgimento di gruppi parlamentari o di singoli parlamentari. Sono questi che la sosterranno durante il suo iter legislativo (Marchetti 2013:104-105).

Sullo sfondo rimangono problemi di non facile soluzione e la presenza di un *digital divide* che interessa, trasversalmente e in misura diversa, tutti gli stati europei. Ancora nel 2020 il *Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2020* della Commissione Europea descrive un'Europa in cui permangono ancora molte differenze (nonostante i notevoli passi in avanti) e sottolinea le criticità che non consentono una piena convergenza. Gli intenti inclusivi dell'ICE trovano un limite invalicabile nella previsione di una partecipazione ai processi decisionali che prevede un utilizzo consapevole della piattaforma digitale con conseguenze sulla platea potenziale di soggetti che hanno la possibilità di partecipare.

4. La domanda di "Europa" attraverso lo studio delle iniziative

Lo studio intende occuparsi dell'insieme delle iniziative presentate, anche di quelle il cui percorso si è interrotto per un intervento della Commissione o per una scelta del Comitato proponente. Da un punto vista formale è importante ricordare che le iniziative presentate si suddividono in:

- *Respinte* perché nella fase di registrazione il contenuto può essere ritenuto dalla Commissione "non in linea" con le competenze della UE;
- *Ritirate* dagli organizzatori prima o durante la fase della raccolta firme;
- *Senza il sostegno necessario*, ossia per mancanza del raggiungimento della quota di un milione di firme nei dodici mesi previsti dalla legge;
- *Riuscite (success)* ossia sostenute, dopo la fase di registrazione, da un milione di firme certificate di cittadini europei e con percentuali per singolo stato conformi alla normativa.

Quest'ultima definizione, comunemente adottata, si presenta molto problematica perché non tiene conto dell'iter successivo della proposta⁸, né degli effetti sulle politiche di iniziative che, pur non raggiungendo il tetto necessario, hanno influito sull'opinione pubblica e sui programmi delle formazioni politiche. Anche per queste ultime ragioni, riteniamo che l'osservazione debba estendersi ben oltre il confine delle iniziative riuscite per ricomprendere anche quelle che non hanno raggiunto il traguardo del milione di firme. Campagne lanciate senza troppa convinzione ed iniziative ritirate dalla firma dopo poche settimane lasciano intendere che una parte dei comitati diriga l'attenzione, più che alle istituzioni europee, alla sua popolazione e che la ICE diventi qualcosa di diverso rispetto alle finalità che il legislatore presupponeva: uno strumento di pressione o un *transnational agenda-setting tool* (Nicolaidis e Markovic 2021), un mezzo che la società civile organizzata ha per costruire un'agenda dei problemi e delle priorità per Parlamento e Commissione.

La prospettiva che abbiamo prescelto per guardare le iniziative è quella di guardare all'agenda dei temi proposti per comprendere quale sia l'Europa immaginata dagli europei e quale sia la "domanda inevasa" con la quale le istituzioni (non solo europee) devono fare i conti. Nell'immaginario dei cittadini è possibile che, accanto alle funzioni attuali della UE, se ne affianchino altre, ritenute desiderabili dai suoi abitanti o che, al contrario, la UE diventi una istituzione meno presente nella vita dei cittadini. La ricerca verte sulla domanda che le iniziative esprimono, ipotizzando che le crisi – in particolare quella economica – abbiano influito sulla formulazione di richieste di intervento normativo rivolte alle istituzioni europee. La crisi pandemica, ad esempio, ha rafforzato le istituzioni europee nella misura in cui dai cittadini proveniva una richiesta di intervento su vaccini e sulla circolazione delle persone che andava ben oltre quanto previsto dai trattati. Per queste ragioni, l'indagine si estende anche a tutte le proposte avanzate dai comitati promotori e di cui è stata richiesta la registrazione, anche a quelle rifiutate dalla Commissione prima dell'avvio della raccolta firme.

Inoltre, nonostante l'ossatura dell'ICE sia rimasta immutata, è ipotizzabile che le domande espresse dalla popolazione siano cambiate nel corso dei primi 10 anni di applicazione. L'onda lunga di quella è stata definita come la "rivoluzione silenziosa" (Inglehart 1977, 1989) si estende fino ai giorni nostri e trova spazio in Europa ossia in quei paesi che hanno un livello di benessere socio-economico tra i più alti del pianeta. Si modificano lentamente le priorità di *policies* dei cittadini europei perché la rivoluzione cambia l'ordine dei valori: lo sviluppo economico lascia alle spalle i problemi spiccioli di sopravvivenza – in parte risolti con un rafforzamento delle forme di welfare – ponendo in primo piano nuovi obiettivi di carattere esistenziale propri della fase post-materialista: la qualità della vita, le questioni ambientali, la salute (inquinamento, sicurezza alimentare, naturalità), l'integrità fisica. Il presupposto è che questi obiettivi diventino rilevanti laddove il principale problema di sopravvivenza fisica sia stato risolto e che esista una gerarchia dei bisogni sociali (Maslow 1987). Questo cambiamento investe prioritariamente i più giovani, a partire da quelli che, nati nel secondo dopo-

⁸ Non consideriamo il successo dal punto di vista legislativo che appare limitato a solo una delle proposte che hanno superato il milione di firme, ossia *Right2Water* e che ha prodotto una revisione della *Drinking Water Directive*.

guerra, hanno goduto di un relativo benessere economico e hanno avuto accesso all'istruzione superiore. A partire dal '68 si affermano movimenti contro-culturali e libertari, il movimento femminista, i movimenti giovanili, tutti espressione di un anelito alla libertà personale, all'autorealizzazione e ad una compiuta democrazia. La struttura è antiautoritaria e libertaria, contraria ai vincoli della tradizione (Lyotard 1981). Le rivendicazioni economiche lasciano il posto a quelle identitarie (le donne, gli omosessuali, le minoranze linguistiche e culturali) con il presupposto che il benessere sia frutto delle condizioni materiali e di quelle esistenziali. Tuttavia "i postmaterialisti non sono non materialisti e neppure antimaterialisti. Il termine postmaterialista indica un insieme di fini che sono ritenuti importanti solo quando le persone hanno ottenuto la sicurezza materiale e proprio perché l'hanno ottenuta" (Inglehart 1998: 57). La perdita di sicurezza, quindi, potrebbe portare ad un "graduale ritorno alle priorità materialiste" (ibidem). Il post materialismo "non riflette una giravolta delle preferenze ma un mutamento delle priorità" (ibidem) ossia i post-materialisti non attribuiscono un valore negativo alla sicurezza economica e fisica dal momento che le attribuiscono rilevanza. Diversamente dai materialisti, danno priorità all'autoespressione e alla qualità della vita. In questa logica appare coerente il declino del voto orientato dalla classe. È possibile osservare – come in Italia - lo *shift* del ceto medio verso sinistra per perseguire valori postmaterialisti e un contemporaneo orientamento della classe operaia verso le formazioni di destra che si appropriano di questioni materiali e relative alla distribuzione del reddito⁹. Non si tratta di un rifiuto dei beni materiali e della sicurezza economica ma di una loro riconsiderazione che interessa quei soggetti che pensano di disporne sufficientemente.

La manifestazione della crisi economica greca nel 2009 e lo spettro di un effetto a catena sull'intera Europa segnano la fine del *permissive consensus* (Bréchon, Cautrés, Denni 1995) che aveva caratterizzato la prima fase di costituzione dell'Unione Europea, dando nuova linfa a coloro i quali (sempre esistiti) erano portatori di una visione euro-pessimista (Marletti 2000:176). È in questo nuovo spazio che possono aver voce le istanze della contromodernizzazione (Sampugnaro 2016) che esprime la sua forza nell'assenza di incertezze e nell'unitarietà delle soluzioni. Secondo Beck (2001) la modernizzazione riflessiva aveva sbiadito e, in alcuni casi, cancellato i confini tra classi, nazioni e continenti, modificato i ruoli di genere e resi possibili modelli alternativi di famiglia. Nello stesso tempo può affermarsi la contromodernizzazione che vive ricostruendo e consolidando vecchi confini e creandone di nuovi. Di vecchie e nuove fratture si alimenta anche il populismo in Europa (Taggart, Sczerbiak 2002; Kopecky, Mudde 2002; Conti 2014), puntando sulla divisione tra *winner* e *losers* della globalizzazione (Kriesi *et al.* 2008) o sulla difesa della identità culturale.

Appare chiaro che queste ultime tendenze siano più difficili da rilevare attraverso l'analisi delle ICE per un prevedibile processo di autoselezione dei partecipanti. È più probabile che i cittadini interessati siano quelli che, anche da una prospettiva eurocritica, ripongono fiducia nell'Europa piuttosto che coloro che ne disconoscono qualsia-

⁹ Di fronte all'affermarsi negli Usa e nel Regno unito di leader espressioni della destra, Inglehart sottolineò l'importanza del cambiamento valoriale e comportamentale, non sempre rilevabile attraverso un cambiamento del consenso alle formazioni politiche (1990).

si valore. Inoltre, come vedremo, il limitato sostegno raccolto dalle singole iniziative non consente di proiettare quella che abbiamo definito come "domanda di Europa" sull'intera popolazione ma di individuare delle esigenze emergenti di cui le formazioni politiche non sanno o non vogliono farsi carico.

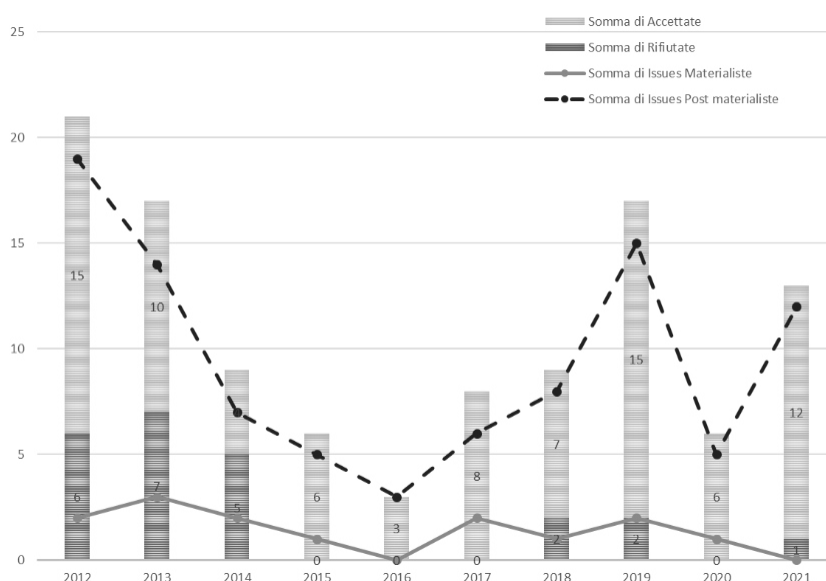
5. Le 110 iniziative: la partecipazione e le questioni proposte

Lo studio esplorativo realizzato sulle iniziative europee è stato condotto attraverso le informazioni disponibili sul sito dell'Unione Europea dedicato alla misura e attraverso il Report (2021) "European Citizens' Initiatives: Data & Figures". Oggetto di analisi sono le 110 iniziative presentate dai comitati proponenti nello spazio di 10 anni, quello che va dal 2012 al 2021. Tra queste si contano anche quelle per le quali la raccolta firme era ancora in corso al momento della rilevazione. Dell'universo delle iniziative presentate, l'indagine ha preso in considerazione l'ambito tematico in cui si collocava la richiesta e una serie di altre variabili: la issue trattata, lo status della singola proposta (ritirata, sostegno insufficiente, registrata, etc.), il sostegno economico ricevuto, le caratteristiche sociodemografiche degli organizzatori, il numero di firme raccolte.

Nei dieci anni che ci separano dalla sua istituzione, l'iniziativa dei cittadini europei è rimasta centrale nel quadro delle misure che promuovono la partecipazione dei cittadini europei e che sono costruite per raccogliere le domande di cambiamento provenienti dal basso senza la mediazione degli stati o delle organizzazioni degli interessi. Tuttavia è bene considerare la sua evoluzione all'interno di un quadro più complessivo nel quale si sono rafforzati altri canali di partecipazione, meno vincolati dai trattati europei.

In linea generale (Fig. 2), dopo un avvio particolarmente promettente nei primi due anni (2012-2013), il numero delle iniziative decresce fino a raggiungere il minimo storico nel 2016 per poi risalire (2018-2019). Negli ultimi due anni caratterizzati dalla pandemia determinata dal COVID-19, il numero è nuovamente diminuito.

Fig. 2 - Le iniziative dei cittadini europei 2012-2021



Il numero di proposte presentate nei primi anni dalla istituzione (2012-2013) mostra un grande interesse da parte delle organizzazioni che ripongono una grande fiducia in questo strumento di partecipazione. Il numero complessivo di proposte è molto elevato – 21 nel primo anno e 17 nel se-

condo – ma il numero di quelle non ammesse alla raccolta - ben 13 nei primi due anni – evidenzia una diversa interpretazione delle norme da parte dei proponenti e della Commissione, incaricata del vaglio.

Negli anni successivi l'ICE perde parte del suo appeal: il numero di proposte diminuisce fino a raggiungere il suo minimo nel 2016 con solo 3 proposte presentate. Allo stesso tempo si azzerano tra il 2015 e il 2017 le proposte non ammesse alle firme. Questo andamento è imputabile probabilmente, più che ad un cambiamento della domanda, ad una maggiore consapevolezza delle organizzazioni circa il perimetro di accoglimento delle proposte tracciato dalla Commissione. Nei documenti in cui si esprime il rifiuto, si evidenzia una interpretazione delle norme che è apparsa eccessivamente restrittiva rispetto al possibile spazio di accettazione delle proposte, registrando solo quelle che rientravano pienamente negli scopi istituzionali dell'Unione.

Gli aggiustamenti della normativa intervenuti nel 2019 hanno contribuito a dare nuovo slancio all'ICE, rilevabile dall'andamento del numero delle proposte presentate (Fig. 2). Gli interventi sulla regolazione avvengono sulla base di una valutazione interna della misura di partecipazione, avviata dalla Commissione e dal Parlamento a partire dal 2015¹⁰, che aveva già determinato delle azioni correttive negli anni precedenti, specie sulla comunicazione. L'inversione del trend discendente è attribuibile anche ad una intensa attività di supporto della misura che si concretizza in una serie di azioni specifiche rivolte, da una parte, ai soggetti interessati alla presentazione di proposte e, dall'altra, ai potenziali sottoscrittori. È bene ricordare a questo riguardo, a partire dal 2018, la campagna *#EUTakeTheInitiative*¹¹ con la quale la Commissione intende intervenire su quella che sembra essere una perdita di interesse verso la ICE. Le azioni mirano ad aumentare la consapevolezza della esistenza di questo strumento e delle sue potenzialità¹².

Si tratta di una strategia complessiva di rilancio piuttosto tradizionale nei suoi aspetti essenziali perché basata principalmente su strumenti poco interattivi. Al centro di queste iniziative vi è un sito aggiornato rivolto principalmente ai potenziali soggetti che propongono le iniziative. Sul sito sono presenti numerose infografiche che spiegano in cosa consista l'ICE (https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/_it) e una serie di podcast di supporto che forniscono suggerimenti per l'organizzazione della campagna: dalla ricerca dei partners alla definizione della proposta, dalla raccolta delle firme al

¹⁰ Rilevante è la relazione della Commissione (31 Marzo 2015) sull'applicazione del primo Regolamento n. 211/2011 e la posizione del Parlamento europeo che, con la risoluzione del 28 ottobre 2015, invita la Commissione a procedere a un riesame del regolamento (UE) n. 211/2011 e del regolamento di esecuzione (UE) n. 1179/2011. Il nuovo regolamento (UE) 2019/788 nasce dalla consapevolezza delle difficoltà di realizzazione delle iniziative e dalla necessità di realizzare dei cambiamenti che tengano conto di queste criticità. La procedura deve divenire "più accessibile, meno onerosa, di più facile utilizzo per gli organizzatori e i sostenitori" e bisogna "rafforzarne il monitoraggio, al fine di realizzarne appieno il potenziale come strumento per promuovere il dibattito". A corredo di questi propositi, è necessario analizzare ulteriormente l'impatto della nuova normativa rispetto alla sua efficacia.

¹¹ Questo *hashtag* viene proposto per seguire il dibattito sulle iniziative europee sui social network (Twitter, LinkedIn e Facebook).

¹² Esistono anche numerose iniziative private a sostegno come ad esempio quella promossa dal sito <https://eusignday.eu/> che costruisce un percorso semplificato per firmare le singole iniziative e ne promuove la pubblicizzazione.

fund raising che si affiancano ad un servizio di prevalidazione delle iniziative e di supporto agli organizzatori (*Seek advice*). Accanto a queste funzionalità istituzionali, il sito contiene altre sezioni (Blog e Forum) che mirano a sostenere le iniziative attraverso il racconto di casi di successo e potenziando la comunicazione orizzontale che si sviluppa tra soggetti che possono mettere a disposizione la loro esperienza di organizzatori di precedenti iniziative, esperti che condividono analisi critiche e studi e potenziali nuovi soggetti interessati a presentare proposte. Tra gli strumenti tradizionali anche una newsletter che, con cadenza quindicinale e proposta in sole tre lingue, si rivolge ad una platea progressivamente più vasta di cittadini europei (non sempre quindi interessati a essere promotori) fornendo un aggiornamento sulle iniziative presentate e su quelle aperte alla firma e informando su eventi promozionali.

Tabella 1 - Percentuale di partecipazione alle 6 iniziative riuscite per Stato

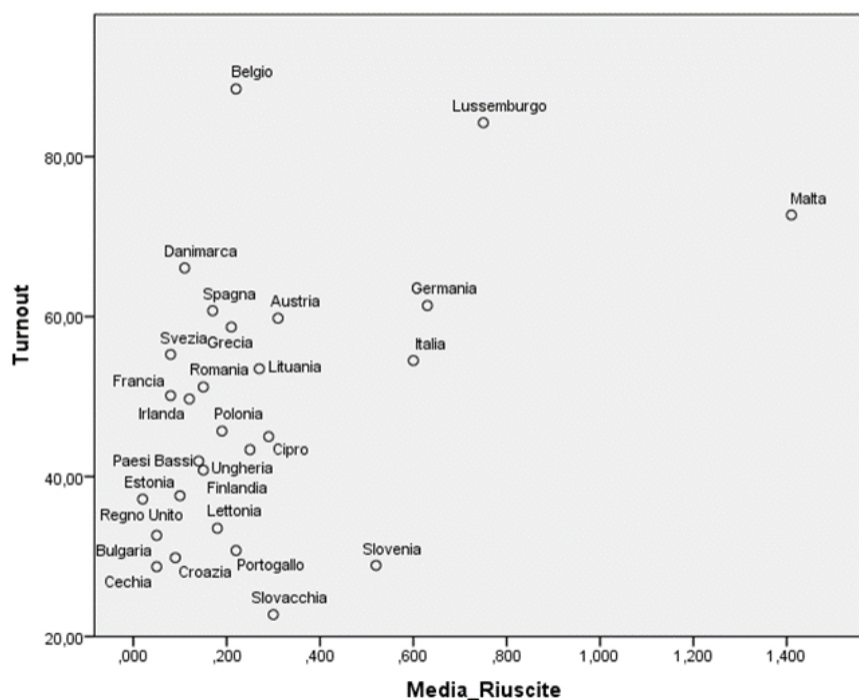
Paesi	2012 * Acqua potabile (%)	2012 * Vivisezione (%)	2013* Uno di noi (%)	2017 * Glifosato (%)	2017 * Minority SafePack (%)	2018 * End of cage (%)	Media firmatari per iniziativa su popolazione	Totale firmatari per le 6 iniziative (V.A.)
Austria	0,653%	0,104%	0,283%	0,466%	0,095%	0,231%	0,306%	161727
Belgio	0,356%	0,000%	0,048%	0,492%	0,008%	0,547%	0,224%	165420
Bulgaria	0,020%	0,179%	0,013%	0,008%	0,291%	0,255%	0,055%	53992
Cipro	0,338%	0,062%	0,741%	0,033%	0,004%	0,186%	0,294%	11792
Croazia	0,000%	0,000%	0,311%	0,036%	0,409%	0,304%	0,087%	43579
Danimarca	0,000%	0,080%	0,131%	0,233%	0,203%	0,819%	0,111%	84737
Estonia	0,039%	0,190%	0,183%	0,000%	0,044%	0,270%	0,103%	9582
Finlandia	0,265%	0,227%	0,022%	0,069%	0,068%	0,593%	0,146%	68575
Francia	0,000%	0,092%	0,125%	0,087%	0,011%	0,134%	0,076%	300111
Germania	1,408%	0,187%	0,157%	0,756%	0,020%	0,541%	0,627%	2694746
Grecia	0,309%	0,018%	0,493%	0,010%	0,027%	0,084%	0,208%	101134
Irlanda	0,053%	0,070%	0,140%	0,236%	0,006%	0,306%	0,124%	38739
Italia	0,108%	1,141%	1,032%	0,118%	0,121%	0,149%	0,600%	1614380
Lettonia	0,020%	0,164%	0,472%	0,0619%	0,344%	0,188%	0,179%	24181
Lituania	0,472%	0,169%	0,415%	0,023%	0,676%	0,301%	0,270%	57727
Lussemburgo	0,925%	0,214%	0,908%	0,948%	0,016%	0,915%	0,749%	23639
Malta	0,344%	0,349%	4,839%	0,123%	0,008%	0,356%	1,414%	28629
Paesi Bassi	0,125%	0,058%	0,159%	0,231%	0,019%	0,896%	0,143%	255574
Portogallo	0,136%	0,110%	0,637%	0,000%	0,001%	0,136%	0,221%	104891
Polonia	0,010%	0,102%	0,621%	0,019%	0,067%	0,142%	0,188%	365318
Regno Unito	0,011%	0,029%	0,040%	0,000%	0,003%	0,082%	0,020%	108652
Rep. Ceca	0,071%	0,038%	0,108%	0,000%	0,006%	0,464%	0,054%	72972
Romania	0,016%	0,008%	0,565%	0,000%	1,305%	0,043%	0,147%	378405
Slovacchia	0,386%	0,221%	0,587%	0,000%	1,162%	0,540%	0,299%	157679
Slovenia	0,849%	0,944%	0,168%	0,132%	0,298%	0,172%	0,523%	52993
Spagna	0,124%	0,101%	0,310%	0,155%	0,104%	0,184%	0,173%	456811
Svezia	0,114%	0,076%	0,024%	0,120%	0,018%	0,458%	0,084%	82004
Ungheria	0,187%	0,276%	0,470%	0,060%	5,396%	0,026%	0,248%	627262

Note: * % partecipanti su intera popolazione dello Stato rispetto alla singola iniziativa

Tramite un rafforzamento della piattaforma digitale, si mira non solo a supportare i promotori ma ad ampliare il numero di persone potenzialmente interessate alla proposta, facilitando l'adesione, anche senza la mediazione delle organizzazioni proponenti. In questo quadro è rilevante la presenza di nuove funzionalità per la raccolta delle firme: lo *ECI Central Online Collection System*¹³ è offerto in maniera gratuita ai proponenti; consente di sottoscrivere in maniera estremamente semplificata attraverso i sistemi nazionali di certificazione dell'identità digitale e garantisce standard elevati per la protezione dei dati e per la certificazione del numero di firme.

Lasciando da parte il tema dell'*output* in termini di politiche dell'Unione - non rientrano nelle finalità specifiche di questo lavoro - è possibile riflettere su alcuni *outcome* che si legano all'iniziativa a partire dalla partecipazione dei cittadini dei singoli stati. Il semplice conteggio delle firme nasconde una realtà complessa di cui possono essere evidenziati alcuni aspetti. Considerando le solo sei iniziative riuscite¹⁴ e la popolazione di ogni stato, è possibile avere un dato ponderato che tiene conto dell'insieme di cittadini¹⁵ (Tab. 1). La media delle percentuali di partecipazioni dei singoli Stati vede prevalere il piccolo Lussemburgo (0,749%), l'Italia (0,627%) e la Germania (0,600%) seguite dalla Slovenia (0,523%). Alla fine della graduatoria con valori inferiori all'0,1%, troviamo paesi con consolidate tradizioni democratiche come Francia, Svezia e Regno Unito insieme a Bulgaria e Repubblica Ceca¹⁶.

Fig. 3 - Electoral turnout e valore medio di adesione alle ICE per Stato



¹³ Il sistema di raccolta firme il cui utilizzo diventerà obbligatorio per le iniziative registrate a partire dal 2023 costituisce un elemento fondamentale per il supporto delle iniziative e sostituirà gradualmente gli *own collection system*.

¹⁴ Solo di queste è possibile avere il numero di firme per Stato.

¹⁵ Il dato è quello riferito all'intera popolazione.

¹⁶ Non consideriamo la Croazia che sconta un ingresso nel Parlamento solo nel 2013.

La vicinanza alle istituzioni europee che è possibile ricondurre al valore della partecipazione alle Elezioni Europee (2019) appare debolmente correlato (Pearson 0,445*) al valore medio della partecipazione alle sei ICE analizzate (Fig. 3). Nei fatti questo potrebbe dipendere dal fatto che gli attori della mobilitazione per le elezioni e per le ICE non sono gli stessi: nel primo caso, sono attivi i partiti politici, specie quelli nazionali; nel secondo caso troviamo organizzazioni della società civile, sindacati, gruppi di interesse o *networks* in forma singola o associata che costruiscono reti sovranazionali.

La partecipazione dei singoli stati (Tab. 1), anche in presenza di valori simili, segue *patterns* molto diversi: in alcuni casi il valore medio è condizionato da una sola delle sei iniziative come succede per Malta e per l'Ungheria che ottengono valori molto elevati grazie a un sostegno elevato ad una singola iniziativa, altri stati, invece, hanno un valore della partecipazione più costante con uno scarto meno significativo (Italia, Germania). Anche considerando la partecipazione a iniziative che ricalcano una sensibilità simile, la partecipazione dei singoli stati non presenta delle regolarità: confrontando la partecipazione all'iniziativa che riguardano la difesa degli animali (Vivisezione 2012; End of Cage 2018), la difesa dell'ambiente (Acqua potabile 2012; Glifosato 2017) o quelle più orientate a difendere valori più tradizionali (Uno di noi 2013; Minority Safe Pack 2017) non si riscontrano corrispondenze in presenza di una differenza dei soggetti promotori, né una partecipazione più elevata nei paesi di origine del principale organizzatore della ICE.

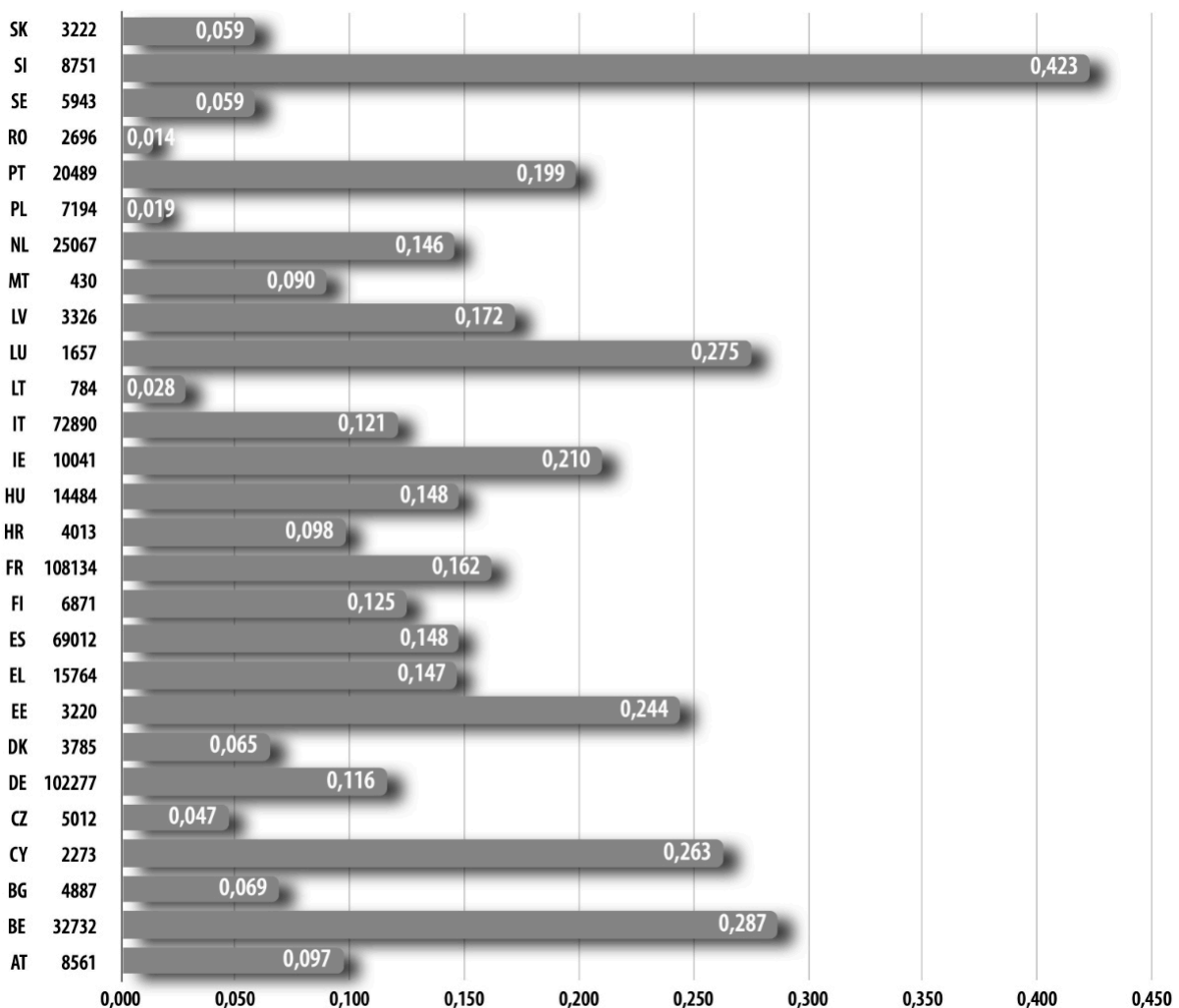
In compenso, la valutazione diacronica dei risultati evidenzia come si riduca progressivamente il numero di stati che non prendono parte alle singole iniziative. Questo lascia ipotizzare la presenza di reti di mobilitazione che si muovono nella direzione della transnazionalità, sulle quali influisce la presenza della piattaforma digitale (e del suo consolidamento in tutti gli stati) e una maggiore consapevolezza degli ostacoli che si frappongono tra la registrazione dell'iniziativa e la scadenza. In questo caso è da segnalare il supporto che l'Unione Europea destina a chi vuole portare avanti una iniziativa: da semplici decaloghi per la raccolta dei fondi e delle firme, a seminari introduttivi fino ad arrivare alla apertura di uno spazio pubblico digitale (Forum) che aiuta a trovare partner potenzialmente interessati. Negli anni le campagne di mobilitazione assumono un carattere più strutturato e al tradizionale sito web, si affianca una gestione professionale dei social e delle piattaforme di raccolta delle firme (Es. Change.org) che servono da catalizzatore della partecipazione.

Negli ultimi anni qualcosa è mutato grazie alla piena funzionalità del *Central Online Collection System* che agevola i promotori abbattendo i costi legati all'attivazione di una infrastruttura tecnologica di raccolta delle firme e alla certificazione di quelle raccolte. Una ricerca promossa dall'*European Citizens' Initiative Forum*, sulle firme raccolte tramite questo sistema evidenzia un complessivo miglioramento della partecipazione. Da una rilevazione che riguarda quattro iniziative¹⁷, dal gennaio 2020 al maggio 2021, la raccolta di firme susseguente all'adozione di una nuova piattaforma (Fig. 4) riduce le differenze tra i paesi europei. Pur non potendo comparare i dati delle due rilevazioni

¹⁷ *Right to Cure; Stop Finning, Stop the trade; Start Unconditional Basic Incomes (UBI) throughout the EU; Voters Without Borders, Full Political Rights for EU Citizens.*

proposte, diverse per ampiezza della rilevazione e per criteri di computo delle firme, è possibile affermare che la raccolta digitale si afferma in stati, inizialmente tiepidi nei confronti dell'ICE e che questo rafforza complessivamente la misura, anche qui in una pluralità di condizioni: paesi, originariamente poco attivi nella raccolta, che raggiungono i valori più elevati, superiori o vicini allo 0,2% della popolazione (Slovenia, Portogallo, Irlanda, Estonia, Cipro), altri che confermano un elevato interesse come il Lussemburgo (0,275%). In questo nuovo ambiente si riducono le differenze marcate che avevano riguardato gli stati più popolosi della UE: Francia (0,162%) e Spagna (0,148%) si affiancano a quelli tradizionalmente attivi nel sostegno alle iniziative come Germania (0,116%) e Italia (0,121%) che perdono qualche posizione.

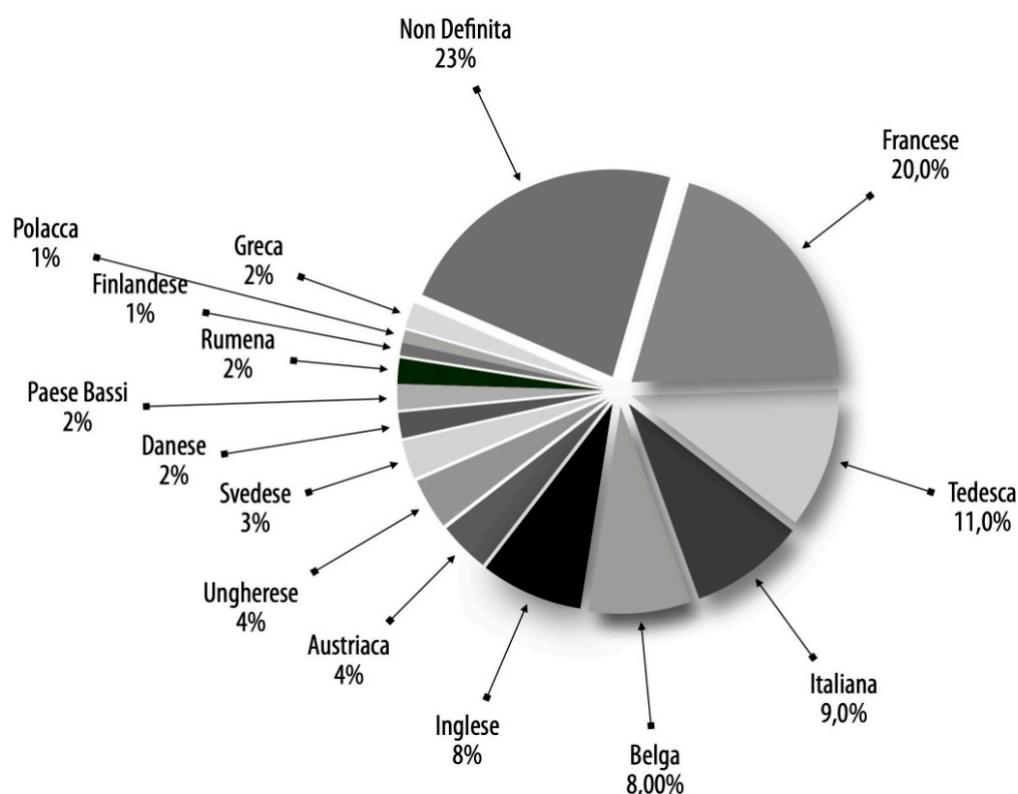
Fig. 4 Firme raccolte attraverso il Central Online Collection System da gennaio 2020 a maggio 2021 (V.A. e percentuale su popolazione dello Stato)



Alcuni stati mantengono una centralità per la ICE perché da questi arrivano i più cospicui finanziamenti e perché sono quelli che esprimono "il primo rappresentante del gruppo degli organizzatori" (Fig. 5) della singola ICE per residenza dichiarata, referente che diventerà l'interfaccia del gruppo proponente con la Commissione e con il

Parlamento. Guardando al complesso delle ICE presentate, si vede la maggiore presenza di coordinatori francesi (20%), tedeschi (11%), italiani (9%), inglesi (8%) e belgi (8%). In quest'ultimo caso si osserva la presenza di soggetti non di nazionalità belga ma che sono esponenti di importanti organizzazioni con sede a Bruxelles. Bassa è la presenza dei paesi dell'Est e inesistente quella dei paesi del Sud Europa (ad esclusione dell'Italia). Nella gran parte dei casi (84) non troviamo nei materiali pubblicati – specie nel caso delle ICE più vecchie – un riferimento ad associazioni che sostengono l'iniziativa anche se è possibile ipotizzarne generalmente un coinvolgimento guardando al curriculum del primo rappresentante e del suo vice e, ancora di più, attraverso l'elenco dei *donors* che sostengono l'iniziativa¹⁸. Attenendoci a quanto pubblicato sul sito, è evidente il ruolo di promotore svolto dalle organizzazioni di tipo transazionale: i raggruppamenti protempore (16) legati allo sviluppo di una specifica ICE, le *umbrella organizations* (3), le organizzazioni che difendono specifici interessi (4). Tra le problematicità emerge anche il carattere effimero di questi *networks* che spesso si dissolvono nel giro di pochi mesi, specie se l'iniziativa non supera la soglia delle firme.

Fig. 5 – Nazionalità del primo rappresentante del gruppo degli organizzatori¹⁹



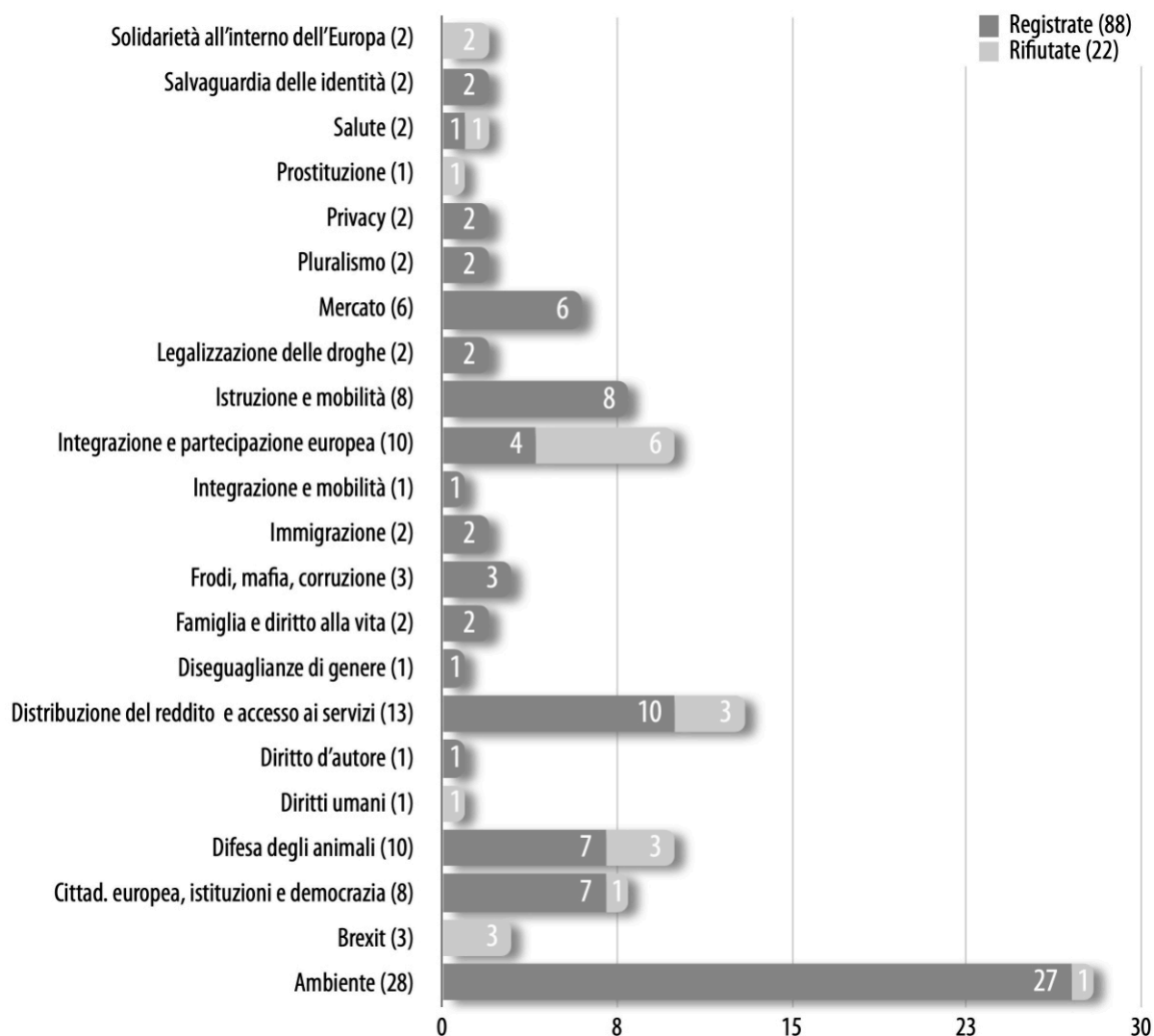
Entrando nel merito delle proposte di *policies* che vengono sottoposte alla Commissione, è importante cogliere la varietà delle questioni trattate e le domande che le singole iniziative esprimono.

¹⁸ I dati raccolti sul finanziamento non vengono presentati in questo articolo.

¹⁹ Nel 23% dei casi non è stato possibile definire con certezza la residenza del primo organizzatore per dato mancante o palesemente contraddittorio.

Rispetto alla natura materialista o postmaterialista delle questioni affrontate, è evidente che la domanda di una maggiore attenzione per la distribuzione delle risorse economiche non ha come principale interlocutore la Commissione e susseguentemente il Parlamento. Contrariamente a quanto ipotizzato non esiste una relazione diretta tra issue materialiste e crisi economica.

Fig. 6 - ICE registrate e rifiutate (non registrate) per tipo di issue



Le ICE con temi che fanno riferimento ad una redistribuzione delle risorse sono una piccola parte di quelle presentate: solo 14 su 110 con un andamento decrescente nel corso del tempo (Fig. 2). Se nel primo triennio di applicazione se ne contavano 7, negli ultimi tre il loro numero è sceso a 3 nonostante la crisi economica successiva alla pandemia. I temi trattati sono ripetuti: un reddito universale per chi è in situazioni di bisogno, il diritto alla casa e il sostegno che garantisca un accesso all'istruzione anche per chi non dispone di risorse economiche sufficienti.

Nel quadro di quelle che in una prima approssimazione possono essere considerate postmaterialiste, ritroviamo una pluralità di nuclei tematici ricorrenti (Fig. 6) con la richiesta di politiche che individuano la UE come principale attore in grado di garantirne un successivo sviluppo. Tra tutte, quelle più importanti sono quelle che esprimono una sensibilità verso questioni che riguardano l'ecosistema: la difesa dell'ambiente (28), la difesa degli animali (10). Seguono in ordine di peso quelle che chiedono una Europa diversa, più attenta alle forme di integrazione e partecipazione (10), incline a ridefinirne le istituzioni, la democrazia e la cittadinanza (8) e attenta alla solidarietà (2). Un richiamo alle funzioni esplicitate nei trattati emerge in larga parte di quelle iniziative che richiedono una nuova regolamentazione del mercato interno (8). Le iniziative sotto l'etichetta "Brexit" – tutte respinte – individuano l'Europa come ultima speranza per invertire l'exit del Regno Unito e chiedono di impedire la Brexit o di temperarne le conseguenze. Poco spazio hanno le richieste che vogliono attenuare il processo di integrazione attraverso la riproposizione di confini geografici o identitari: anche nelle due ICE che propongono "la salvaguardia delle identità" (in particolare *Minority SafePack*) la legittimità dell'istituzione non è messa in discussione

L'ICE si dimostra un contenitore ampio e plurale in grado di contenere da una parte istanze tradizionali di salvaguardia della famiglia tradizionale, e di difesa dell'embrione sin dal concepimento o abolizione della prostituzione legalizzata (presente in alcuni stati) e dall'altra istanze libertarie come la legalizzazione della cannabis.

Nel complesso e considerando le ICE rifiutate, la domanda appare orientata a richiedere una espansione delle funzioni dell'Europa, chiamata a svolgere azioni di "supplenza" rispetto agli Stati nazionali, individuata come organismo regolatorio in grado di intervenire meglio che altri su problematiche europee sovranazionali come quelle ambientali o come soggetto (Stato federale?) destinato a svolgere funzioni di politica estera.

6. Conclusioni

Il valore della partecipazione dei cittadini nella definizione delle politiche europee è maturato nel corso di questi anni attraverso riflessioni che hanno prodotto una modifica della struttura delle opportunità. In una prima fase l'unione si è aperta al contributo del mondo degli interessi organizzati, individuando nella mediazione delle associazioni e dei gruppi di interesse la strada maestra per l'inclusione di istanze che provenivano da basso. In una fase successiva, l'obiettivo è stato quello di permettere la partecipazione del singolo al processo di definizione delle politiche sia con strumenti poco regolati come le consultazioni sia attraverso la costruzione di istituti di partecipazione più formalizzati come le petizioni e l'iniziativa dei cittadini europei. Quest'ultima rappresenta uno degli strumenti più importanti che i cittadini europei hanno nelle loro mani, anche se appaiono eccessivamente positivi i giudizi espressi da alcuni studiosi: "l'iniziativa è veramente dei cittadini!" (Porro 2014). La complessità della procedura e la necessità di avere dei fondi sufficienti per la comunicazione e per

associazioni sovranazionali o ad *umbrella organizations*, in grado di affrontare e gestire un tale sforzo organizzativo. Il ruolo dei singoli cittadini non associati è secondario rispetto alle organizzazioni promotrici (Marchetti 2014).

Rimangono sullo sfondo numerose criticità. Il numero basso di iniziative approdate al Parlamento – solo sei in 10 anni – pone degli interrogativi sulle conseguenze di questo elevato grado di insuccesso sulle potenziali nuove proposte.

Tuttavia, l'ICE ha un ruolo nell'innalzamento del livello di inclusione dei cittadini europei nei dieci anni: anche se i comitati promotori sono riconducibili a pochi paesi europei, le iniziative hanno coinvolto progressivamente tutti gli stati, anche i paesi dell'est, inizialmente poco interessati a questo istituto di partecipazione. Se all'inizio del percorso si evidenziava una Europa a più velocità in termini di partecipazione, con profonde differenze tra i paesi di vecchia adesione e quelli di più recente "arrivo", il gap appare attenuarsi nelle ultime iniziative.

Bassissimo, tuttavia, è da considerarsi l'impatto della partecipazione sulle politiche.

Sbilanciato è il rapporto tra i singoli e le associazioni da una parte e la Commissione dall'altra. Nel ruolo di *gatekeeper*, quest'ultima ha margini di manovra estesi e il suo giudizio diventa nei fatti inappellabile. Il rischio è quello di avviare un processo che produce molte aspettative ma che raramente porterà un cambiamento delle politiche tanto da diventare controproducente in termini generali (Mendez e Mendez 2017: 49-50).

Eppure, soffermandoci sulle conseguenze – spesso non valutabili -del processo di avvio di una iniziativa è possibile immaginare che esso abbia generato un "*advanced training in active european citizenship*" (Venables *et al.* 2022) mettendo in relazione organizzazioni e singoli cittadini appartenenti a differenti nazioni, anche se i *networks* formati non hanno avuto spesso le risorse necessarie per consolidarsi.

Se invece pensiamo alla ICE principalmente come ad un *transnational agenda-setting tool* (Nicolaidis, Markovic 2021), un mezzo che ha la società civile organizzata di costruire un'agenda dei problemi e delle priorità per Parlamento e Commissione, ne possiamo affermare l'utilità dal momento che dal "paniere delle proposte" compaiono emergenze, sensibilità, proposte che non trovano spazio normalmente nei programmi dei partiti politici. L'analisi diacronica ha permesso di confermare la prevalenza progressiva delle issue postmaterialiste su quelle materialiste, evidenziando anche la presenza di iniziative che affermano valori tradizionali e bisogni identitari. Nel complesso emerge con forza il sogno di un'altra Europa, più attenta ai problemi ambientali, ai diritti umani e alle questioni internazionali. Molte delle istanze respinte richiedono una ridefinizione delle funzioni dell'Unione Europea e che questa possa agire oltre i limiti dei trattati istitutivi per acquisire nuove competenze e un nuovo ruolo nel quadro delle relazioni internazionali.

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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

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Involvement of Young Citizens in Transnational Communications flows: Together for Europe*

Lucia D'Ambrosi, Mariaeugenia Parito

Introduction

The citizens' rejection, distrust and distance from institutional Europe emerged several times during the integration process (Hix 2008; Beck 2012; Habermas 2012; Giddens 2014; Fabbrini 2017). Brexit is the most traumatic example, introducing the disintegration issue, the pandemic and the war are the latest one, challenging the EU's ability to deal with an unprecedented event. Also in these cases, scholars have highlighted a generational cleavage (Norris, Inglehart 2019) with the youngest more pro-European Union than the older generations (Lubbers, Scheepers 2010; Lauterbach, De Vries 2020).

The young citizens born in one of the European Union member states have always lived in a Europeanized society without borders for studying, working, and travelling; a lot of them share a common currency and they vote in the European elections as well as in their national ones. We can assume they are properly European citizens in the way they live. However, their experience is socially constructed in everyday interactions and through a hybrid media ecosystem, eventually in a context that could be affected by a nation-based way of thinking (Beck 2004). Mainly, the multiple crises which have afflicted the EU over the last twenty years (economic-financial recession, management of migration flows, and institutional reforms) are intertwined with a cultural backlash as a response against progressive cultural change (Norris, Inglehart 2019) that often turn towards nationalistic reaction linked with populist dichotomous frames. The youngest people, used to living in a deeply mediatized environment, do not inevitably become more cosmopolitan or pluralistic through digital media, even if the ways of communicatively building a community have changed, and a variety of different communities are accessible (Hepp 2020:186). Nevertheless, we assume young people are relevant agents in the European public sphere tending to be reconfigured through horizontal processes of communication encouraged by digital platforms.

A lot of European policies, above all those related to cultural and social dimensions, consider the young people a priority target for supporting knowledge, values, trust, and sense of belonging to the EU. In addition, communication strategies underline the importance of empowering citizens, in particular the youngest, in order to sustain social cohesion and democratic process (Fossum, Schlesinger 2007; D'Ambrosi 2019; Parito 2012, 2019; Belluati, Marini 2019).

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In this scenario, the paper aims to analyse emerging communication flows of transnational public debate supported and promoted by the European institutions. In particular, innovative and autonomous experimental practices that involve young people will be considered.

1. Citizens' involvement in European Public Debate

The research comes within the sociological approach to European integration that is focused on cultural and social dimensions (Beck, Grande 2004; Castells *et al.* 2018), highlighting the importance of sustaining the making of a collective European identity and a European public sphere (Fossum, Schlesinger eds. 2007; Koopmans, Statham 2010; Habermas, 1992 1996, 2014) in order to face common issues, to deal with global challenges, and to manage crises. Mainly, European integration is considered as a project in identity in which a communicative construction is fundamental, indeed, the communication process allows the sharing of meanings and the shaping of a symbolic common space (Delanty, Rumford 2005; Parito 2012; Hepp *et al.* 2016; D'Ambrosi 2019).

The public communication point of view is adopted in this study as an opportunity for European institutions to strengthen democracy and affect citizens' attitudes (OECD 2021), also contributing to a greater societal culture of integration. Several studies have highlighted how the use of a unidirectional process of communication and public bureaucracy's performances, with an institution-centric view, have influenced the relationship between the EU and its citizens, both at national and transnational level (Valentini, Nesti 2010; Luoma-aho, Canel 2020). Moreover, the crises have accelerated the processes of growing distrust in institutions (Edelman 2020).

Considering this scenario, it must be observed that the European Commission and Parliament have developed strategies taking into consideration several dimensions of public communication, in order to improve relationships with Europeans. At the same time, the pervasive use of digital and social media in the context of open government (Lovari *et al.* 2020; Ducci *et al.* 2020), have enhanced communication practices to increase transparency and interact with citizens also in digital activism (Barisione, Michailidou 2017).

The different presence of citizens in public space refigured by the characteristics of social media (Canel, Luoma-aho 2019; Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri 2021) has stimulated new forms of public engagement at local level on political and societal issues (Mosca, Vaccari 2011; Firmstone, Coleman 2015; Bartoletti, Faccioli 2020) and also recent changes in citizens' participation, in particular the move towards a bottom-up approach to debate regarding European values and protection of democratic systems. These innovative forms of connective actions (Bennett, Segerberg 2013) that gain visibility in informal arenas of public debate, highlight a significant mobilisation of citizens on social media to influence policies as well as supporting common causes, such as social media campaigning after the Brexit referendum, petitions on climate change, pro-EU movements (Della Porta 2020; Brändle, Galpin, Trenz *et al.* 2021).

Using a social constructivist perspective, this contribution considers the European public sphere as emerging in the process during which people debate controversial issues (Risse 2011). This is a space fuelled not only by issues spread by legacy media or by debates fed by the political-institutional actors, but also by citizens and civil society organisations. In particular, public communication becomes constitutive for a European public sphere when it is related to the common issues of an emerging society. Thus, to what extent everyday people have a connection to the European public sphere becomes an important question, how they are involved in common European issues, and how controversial these issues are (Hepp et al. 2016).

The suggestion is the European public sphere¹ reconfigured through discursive and horizontal processes encouraged by digital media and within which, we assume, young people are interesting agents (Lauterbach, De Vries 2020). According to Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri (2021), a multitude of coexisting arenas, with different dynamics of power, converge in the public debate, developing differentiated “networked publics” (boyd 2010), “micro public spheres” (Dayan 1998) or smaller “sphericules” (Cunningham 2001) clustered around affinity interests and orienting the flows of communications towards specific “public issues” (Habermas 2006). These processes became even more articulated at the EU level where the political-institutional and social actors and their relations multiply, and also the extensions of the issues, going through local, national and transnational dimensions. Nevertheless, in the European context, governments and civil society organisations could have a relevant and proactive role in negotiating public values on behalf of citizens, also countering information disorder and “polluted” debates because of the characteristics of social media platforms as social bubbles of discussion and often featuring partisan polarisation (van Dijck *et al.* 2018, Marinelli 2021).

In this multifaceted and articulated space, we can argue that young people, mainly those with a higher level of education and socialisation and used to living in a digital environment, have a significant role (Parito *et al.* 2022). The most educated young people tend to have a postmaterialist values orientation, related to autonomy, and self-expression that could generate support for the EU’s normative role in political cooperation (Inglehart 1984). In addition, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards the EU and they feel that European institutions are influential in their time (Down, Wilson 2017; Fox, Pearce 2018). For example, in the 2016 Brexit referendum, age and education divided the EU public more than social class: Brexit reflects the points of view of older voters who feared the cultural threat of open borders and migrations (Norris, Inglehart 2019: 36).

In this context, we assume that a composite European public arena with a variable geometry takes shape through different kinds of information flows, also encouraged by digital media: those produced by European and national institutions, those

¹ For the epistemology of the European public space see Belluati, Marini (2019). The conceptualization of this space is a tricky point. The most used definitions are based on an institutionalised infrastructure, considering the space of interaction between politics and media (Koopmans, Statham 2010; Esser, Strömback 2015). For the aims of this contribution, we remark the role of the citizens in the ongoing process of Europeanization of the public sphere.

produced by news media, and those managed by the various components of civil society. This articulated and dynamic set of information flows shapes a de facto European public space structured in spontaneous and creative forms (Sampugnaro 2015; Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, Trenz 2018; Belluati, Marini 2019). In particular, citizens activating transnational flows of communication, could discursively participate in creating an EU common environment (Barisione, Michailidou 2017), in which they discuss and debate about what the European Union is, how it could be or how it should be.

In such environments, the formation and developing process of Europeanisation can be considered the result of a network of interactions with different actors (civil society organisations, trade unions, political parties) and crossed by journalistic representations about EU-related issues (climate change, immigration, health, human rights). It must be underlined that controversial debates on EU related issues are interesting elements of the Europeanisations. For instance, political party campaigns, such as those for the Brexit referendum, or NGO and civil-society movements on immigration policies or those that take bold actions to stop the war Ukraine - Russia can be considered as a sentinel tool to monitor public opinion through media coverage and discursive strategies around hashtags.

Thus, the crises, stimulating the politicisation of the EU-related issues are occasions for building a post-national public sphere (Statham, Trenz 2013; Grande, Kriesi 2015).

European communication policies, in particular since 2005, have aimed to foster the involvement of citizens, promoting listening and dialogue initiatives, also using the opportunities provided by social media (D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2021). Commission and Parliament have settled goals, tools and strategies to deal with challenges and crises improving information and communication activities. Often they used a reactive approach rather than a proactive one to anticipate the problems to be addressed and a bureaucratic logic tending to evade the controversiality of the common issues, even if this is a proper feature of a European public debate. Most of the various and fragmented initiatives have had less impact than expected (Parito 2016, 2019). Nevertheless some initiatives have used innovative methods, mainly supporting networks of debate and not top-down contents: we can argue whether these kinds of proposals may have been effective.

2. Aims and method

The paper aims to analyse the emerging communication flows of transnational public debate promoted by European institutions. In the context briefly described above, the initiatives supporting the involvement of citizens will be considered, in particular those that encourage, through funding or collaborations, networks of interactions from which contents and actions emerge spontaneously. The hypothesis we investigate is that European institutions can act as "activators" of participatory actions and practices that involve citizens, according to spontaneous trajectories and outcomes not necessarily predefined from formal processes.

The study is focused on the *together.eu* initiative, a pan-European community promoted by the European Parliament after the 2019 elections, as an extension of the *#thistimeimvoting* campaign launched at the end of October 2018. The project is oriented in a decisive way towards citizens' involvement, in particular the youngest, stimulating both participation via social media and the organisation of autonomous initiatives.

Starting from these considerations, some questions arise: how do young people consider the role of European institutions in promoting participation? How are young citizens involved in autonomous initiatives and in emerging flows of communication? What does it mean to be EU ambassadors and which European values do they most adhere to?

The methodology of the research adopts both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The analysis follows two main steps:

- a) A background investigation aiming at studying the project *together.eu*, how the network encourages citizens to participate in democratic processes and to take action as volunteers in the pan-European Community. This first phase of the research rested on a meeting with the coordinators of the project *together.eu* (European Parliament) and on a quantitative analysis of existing datasets on young people's behaviours in respect of EU engagement (Eurobarometer 2021).
- b) A qualitative analysis aiming to explore how young people mobilise others in order to raise awareness towards EU policies and to promote participation. This phase of the research was supported by 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews with young Italian volunteers enrolled in the *together.eu* community, who had a relevant role in getting the citizenry involved in initiatives and actions led by the EU. In particular, some volunteers of the community, and some co-founders of independent youth organisations about Europe² were selected.

The interviews are focused on the ways participation in spontaneous networks around the EU is organised and the meanings and narratives these experiences can have for young people in increasing their sense of belonging in Europe. Some main dimensions of analysis were considered: the educational background of young volunteers, the aims and form of engagement, the perception of the role of European Institutions in getting the citizenry involved, and opinion on their contribution as 'EU ambassadors'. The interviews were carried out during the period October 2021 – January 2022.

3. The *together.eu* initiative: feelings of community?

The first step of the research considers the impact of initiatives or events promoted by the European Parliament in which young Italians become engaged. The analysis is focused on the events and activities organised by *together.eu* to support EU democracy.

² The volunteers (5 women and 5 men) were selected from #together.eu and the following youth networks: *One Hour for Europe*, *#Coffe4EU*, *Eu & U*, *Young European Society (YES)*. Most of them have been launched in Italy and then they have spread through other countries of the EU.

The Youth Eurobarometer survey (2021) highlights that a majority of young Europeans (64%) have heard of at least one initiative promoted by the European Parliament: specifically, more than 20% of respondents have actively participated in activities mostly those for students, included in primary and secondary school programmes, through both online and in-person initiatives, visits, and events. Half of these agree that participation made them feel relevant actors in contributing to debate and in influencing what happens in the EU.

This trend appears to be quite similar in Italy, especially for events organised by the European Parliament Liaison Office (38%), the Charlemagne Youth Prize (31%), or initiatives for debate involving contacting a Member of the European Parliament (30%). Specifically, a good proportion of young Italians express interest in programmes, which are more likely to create a feeling of community and public debate, like the #*This time I'm voting* campaign (33%) and the activities organised by *together.eu* (30%). In both these initiatives, citizens have been involved in the political process or have helped to promote the importance of voting in previous elections (fig.1).

Figure 1 The European Parliament's offer: some ways young Italians actively get engaged
Base: Respondents who have heard of these activities (n=1498)



Source: Eurobarometer, 2021

This propensity toward different forms of political and civic engagement is particularly interesting if it is compared to the average at the European level (Eu27): half of young Italians (50% vs 46%) consider voting an important duty in supporting the EU (Eurobarometer 2021). At the same time, young Italians are voicing online their opinions on political and social issues more than others (31% vs 26%), taking part in street protests or demonstrations (28% vs 24%), or joining a youth organisation (17% vs 14%). In this perspective the youth participation moves towards new transnational agencies and trajectories of activism dealing with EU-related issues and values (Deželan, Moxon 2021) in which expressions of "self-actualizing citizenship" (Bennet 2008) and

new alternative forms of resilience in offering support to others and influencing political outcomes (Teorell, Torcal, Montero 2007; Kousis 2017) emerge. Although the institutions remain in the background, young people consider these actors as a source of inspiration for them in fostering the political debate in regards to the EU.

An interesting case study concerns the *together.eu* project from the European Parliament, a pan-European community non-partisan and independent from any political party and ideology, where people of all ages can support the EU. The initiative is promoted by European Parliament Liaison Offices (EPLOs) in the Member States, with the support of the Web Communications unit of the European Parliament.

The official website – *together.eu* – is organised as a collaborative online platform, available in different EU languages, which encourages citizens to participate in democracy, to take responsibility for the future and to promote other people's involvement in the European project. As it reports:

together.eu has been developed in order to empower citizens and organisations to play an active role in creating a brighter future in the EU. Users can also share stories and personal testimonies, record actions and events, suggest and organise events for the rest of the community, and contribute promotional material to support Parliament's communications.

Some preliminary considerations concern the impact of this initiative. More than 83,000 people joined the *together.eu* platform, around 19,000 of whom were more deeply involved in the activities promoted and organised by the offices or in spontaneous initiatives. The countries with the highest number of subscribers are Germany (over 9 thousand), Spain, and Italy, which far exceed the threshold of 8 thousand subscribers³. Most of the members turned to the *together.eu* platform after their experience in the *#Thistimelmvotingcampaign*, which, as we have seen above, had engaged a good proportion of young people.

A focus on participation in Italy shows that, according to Eurobarometer (2021), respondents who have taken part in this activity are mainly male (56%) and in young adulthood, aged 20-25 years (42%) and 26-30 (30%), with higher educational level (table 1).

Table 1 Events or online activities organised by *together.eu* (IT) by gender and age

Base: Respondents who have taken part in this activity (base n: 121)

Gender	
Male	56%
Female	44%
Age	
16 - 19 years	28%
20 - 25 years	42%
26 - 30 years	30%

Source: Eurobarometer, 2021

One of the main aims of the project *together.eu* is promoting Europe-wide integrated debate on cross cutting issues. In particular, the EU-related issues involving Italian citizens are more focused on the 'future for Europe' and the 'opportunity for young'. Moreover, questions on universal values and social problems (such as 'human rights', 'environment') are reported as relevant.

³ Information was provided by the coordinators of the project and dates to 31 August 2021. Data relating to age, gender or level of education are not required for registration on the platform and are therefore not available.

The interaction with the volunteers is managed through the online platform. For better monitoring the engagement and the discursive dynamics of the *together.eu*-community, other institutional social channels are not used. An informal pan-European Facebook group is used by the community members to share ideas and best practices, with the Webcomm unit of the European Parliament in a facilitating role.

As the coordinators of the project claim:

The goal is to foster dissemination of actions and development of pan-European actions by providing together-volunteers with a space to exchange ideas between themselves, share experiences and meet other volunteers across Europe, as well as for the European Parliament team to support them in their volunteering journey with visuals, tutorial videos or with events such as Facebook Lives or Zoom cafés.

An open approach is promoted by the European Parliament in using the *together.eu* community to foster cooperation around EU-related issues and building opportunities for interactions. Interesting is the attempt to motivate the more active members to play a sort of role as opinion leader or micro-influencer in reaching out and connecting people from different transnational networks of the debate. The coordinators of the project declare:

Members decide to participate in the proposed activities or to organise autonomous initiatives of their own. In this way, through a more intensive participation in the initiatives, a direct contact is established in supporting the project locally across the countries (e.g. school visits) and online (such as community events).

However, despite these statements, different problems arise in the effectiveness of the participation. First of all, engagement on the platform (in terms of social interactions and comments) appears irregular over time and is often related to some specific initiatives held by people in collaboration with national, regional and local authorities. Especially some trigger events – such as elections or protest campaigns on rights – are important in increasing reactions from citizens and stimulating bottom-up debate. As noticed above, citizens perceive voting in European elections as the most effective way to make EU decision-makers hear their voice. Also the “migration” from the *#thistimeimvoting* campaign to *together.eu* was prompted by a core event that encouraged the activists to still be part of the community.

In the absence of events with high news value at European level, the top-down process prevails, and the online platform plays a purely informative role providing evidence of how European institutions bring *together* volunteers across EU related activities. For example, reporting projects or initiatives, such as *The Conference on the future of Europe*, in order to promote the role of supranational institutions in supporting the feeling of community and European public debate.

Furthermore, involvement in the *together.eu* community, online and offline, is stronger among people, especially youngsters, who are already interested in promoting and protecting EU democracy and common values. Most of these activists come from other networks and trajectories of life where the attitude toward the EU is the framework through which they experiment their role in European society (from

studying to working). The involvement in the institutionalised network is an opportunity for them to build connections and activism in a transnational common space.

4. Young ambassadors: how to turn ideas into experiences

The in-depth interviews with young Italian activists aim to explore their experience and perception about the pro-European involvement.

The interviewees are young adults aged 20-29 with higher educational level. Almost all of them are university students⁴ or are attending postgraduate programmes. Interviewees, considering their experience, suggest that activists involved in the Italian *together.eu*, and also in other pro-Europe networks, are largely university students or have joined the communities during the university period.

The relevance of this educational stage is linked with different kinds of reasons. First of all, the disciplines studied provide a better knowledge and awareness as to the importance of the integration process and living in the European Union; indeed, the youngsters interviewed all have an educational path concerning languages, social, juridical and economic sciences, often with an international view, as do the other activists they declare they know. Of course, disciplines studied may impact on pro-European attitudes and engagement because students who are already more interested in political and social issues tend to choose to study related subjects. However, some researchers suggest that social science subjects can impress greater political interest, awareness, and engagement by leading towards significant changes in how students think about the world and their own role within it (Abbas et al. 2016).

As some interviewees highlight, it is more difficult to involve those who have not developed a European awareness during their studies. Interest in being an active citizen of the EU public sphere is polarised into narratives, online and offline, related to an *echo chamber* effect (Pariser 2011): this explains the difficulties of including in the community people with different beliefs or educational background.

Some respondents claim:

Students from social sciences and humanities are more likely to get involved (Andrea).

Involving people with different ideas into the pro-European “bubble” is almost impossible. We need a cultural change that lies at the root. You can't expect volunteering to do this (Carola).

The opportunities provided by their teachers are other significant elements: some professors seem to have inspired students' activism offering not just disciplinary competences, but enthusiasm too and information about the chances for being actively involved. Also the relationship among students with the same interests is mentioned, both with respect to opportunities for discussion and for sharing activities.

Some research has been carried out on students' political engagement, and it suggests some results coherent with our exploration: the higher education institutions can play important roles in developing students' engagement, for example providing

⁴ It's interesting to highlight that just one of the interviewees, after school, decided not to attend a degree course; in any case, he shows a pro-European attitude in joining the European Solidarity Corps.

safe spaces for new solidarities to form, and gathering together people with particular interests (Crossley, Ibrahim 2012; Loader *et al.* 2015; Brooks *et al.* 2020).

The impact of the institutions emerged with regard to the role of school and EU local offices. Events on European issues promoted by schools have inspired early curiosity and knowledge, suggesting that European policy and strategies aimed at involving the youngest citizens could have an actual impact. The EU local offices affect the young citizens' involvement not just in promoting information regarding EU initiatives, but also in offering a space for discussion and by providing the perception that European institutions are close to the citizens.

Interviewees living in places in which the EU local offices are absent or lacking report difficulties in sustaining their interests and the need for better support. Social media, in this case, are useful in information campaigns aimed at the "general public" but are not at all adequate. Young people are critical of the way institutions communicate with citizens about EU policies and actions, especially to facilitate consensus on the political decisions and the sense of belonging to the European project. A large part of them argue that European institutions promote unidirectional information, increasing the distance between the places where decisions are taken and leading people to think that European issues do not affect their local life (Michailidou, Trez 2010; Parito 2012; Maresi, D'Ambrosi 2017).

Relationships with the men and women working for the European institutions help to see them closer and in a more real-world situation. For this reason some of the interviewees refer that visiting the European Parliament and understanding how members work was an important and inspiring experience. As some volunteers declare:

After being in the European Parliament I realised that politics, and the world of institutions is actually made up of people (Francesco)

In my opinion, European activism is born by doing. The closer you approach European institutions, the more you understand that they are not so far away and that each of us counts (Natasha)

These results seem to confirm the impact of an assumption of the European communication policies which insist on promoting several kinds of personalization strategies and disintermediation. These strategies could be relevant, in particular, in reaching young people.

For the interviewees the involvement with *together.eu* is the continuation of the *#thistimeimvoting* campaign, but, without a clear goal, the renewed community is a structure in which the contents and purposes need to be defined. If some difficulties emerge in reorienting the lines of actions, the young activists plan autonomous initiatives promoting independent networks linked with the institutional structure. As an interviewee has pointed out:

Institutions have stimulated an awareness that we did not have before. This message has passed: Active participation is important at European level. 'One hour for Europe' was born from this awareness. And things took place in parallel with *together.eu*. Two paths that are strengthened and go together with each other. 'One

hour for Europe' is something made with "heart", not institutional. together.eu is the institutional container. We are a kind of rib.... A kind of branch of together.eu (Carola).

The 'volunteers' – as some of them define themselves – consider the role of European Institutions for promoting citizens' involvement as very important, both for planning initiatives and also for supporting the arrangement of autonomous experiences:

The Europe Direct Centres are our strength, since I met them, I have been a 'subscriber'. They are essential and have immense strength. Unfortunately, they are little known, and they are not valued by the local administration they rely on (Pietro).

The interviewees' experiences show several pro-Europe initiatives, with different organisations and aims. The independent activities and the informal network are promoted for trying to respond quickly to specific needs they perceive as urgent. Their main mission is to develop an informed critical attitude (Bakker, de Vreese 2015) on current affairs and with some focus on European cultural and political issues. In such a way, most of these networks are likely to discuss controversial issues and encourage debate to offer a perspective about what Europe is or should be.

In addition, the activists think that information regarding the EU needs to be improved, especially information directed towards young people:

During the first phase of the pandemic, we always heard about the EU, but it often seemed that the EU was doing nothing. So we made an Instagram account, first just for our friends, to explain what EU was actually doing, things that newspapers do not say or not properly (Luca).

This project was born to bring EU closer to young of our age, to underline the weakness, because there are, but also the strengths, and how much European structure affects the national public sphere. But we can do very little compared to television and newspapers, which still consider the EU as a national issue of foreign policy (Martina).

The different kinds of initiatives, those promoted by EU institutions and those autonomously promoted by volunteers, shape a network with a variable geometry in which the young easily operate mixing formal and informal relationships, local and transnational levels, online and offline activities. The organisation model is based on a multifold approach, quite flexible in fitting quickly with the idea and moving towards action and interactions.

Social media are used to interact and debate about Europe considering their differentiated dispositions and functions. For example, the Instagram page is developed and updated to stimulate the network activities, considering the use of visual contents (images, live stories, video animatic), the friendly language and direct communication are more suitable in reaching young people. Some interviewees declare the use of interactive channels as being a key point of the success of these initiatives for infusing enthusiasm and positive feeling towards the EU. In these informal

communities, young people feel more “comfortable” in expressing their voice, even for political ideas. Instead, they perceive some barriers in institutional forms of engagement, mostly due to the processes and language used, sometimes experienced as asymmetric and distant.

It would be nice looking at our webpage as a friendly voice of the European Union (Luca)

It's not easy when a guy interacts with institutions: you don't feel them at the same level. On the other hand, seeing other guys like you who are involved stimulates you to participate too (Andrea)

In this perspective, the interviewees' sense of belonging to the EU seems linked with a view of the transnational public sphere as the common horizon of principles and values in which they live, and they feel they are properly agents of social change. In this European space the role of “facilitators”, “spokespeople”, “influencers” is part of their trajectories in life, made of experiences, relations, actions, and it is encouraged by the strong belief that they are European citizens.

As an interviewee has highlighted:

[...] to create a common sense of European identity we must recognize ourselves in something “unique” or at least similar. Volunteering has to do what institutions are not able to do alone, allowing citizens to unify towards a similar vision of European identity, through a bottom-up process. It is a mission that must be reached every day, in terms of communication activities as well as of experiences (Carola).

Conclusion

Our study suggests that interesting communication flows of European public debate are emerging among young people in contemporary supranational society. Mainly, the most educated young Europeans are relevant agents in networks that seem to adopt an approach that goes beyond the distinction bottom-up vs top-down, instead they appear multifaceted and articulated. The engagement logic in these networks suggests pragmatism and realism among young people who are then able to find expression through different kinds of opportunities: institutional, but also personal and informal; local and transnational connections; face-to-face relationships and those mediated by the social networks sites. In such experiences, the European institutions represent a sort of connecting point to bring young Europeans closer together, and sometimes they can work as “activators” of the participation. Nevertheless, the young activists easily go beyond the institutional container if they feel confident in own initiatives can reach their generation more effectively.

These EU-related networks are fostered by social media (Bossetta et. al. 2018) through which younger generations find “new ways to embody and express democratic values and principles” (Dahlgren 2009: 14). Social media are used with different functions: as organisational infrastructure (Castells 2015), as an environment they live and share with other young people, and as a tool they use with ease to express their European ideas and way of life.

The research was focused on the *together.eu* initiative, to investigate how Italian youth are stimulated by European institutions both in formal networks of participation and the organisation of autonomous initiatives. The results show interesting discursive dynamics concerning the way this project is managed to increase European involvement, based on the autonomous commitment of citizens to play a sort of role as EU ambassadors or micro-influencers. In particular, some trigger events appear to stimulate a feeling of community, for example the 2019 European elections encouraged citizens to join *#thistimeimvoting* initiative and then to stay turned to the platform *together.eu*.

At the same time, the findings highlight some barriers concerning the effectiveness of these institutionalised means of public participation. On the citizens' side, involvement in dialogue and participation is limited to the most educated young people with a propensity towards civic and political engagement and who are often already interested in European issues or public debate. On the European institutions side, *together.eu* and *#thistimeimvoting* are interesting attempts to go beyond the usual top-down approach, nevertheless a strong bureaucratic and centralised way to manage the initiative has emerged. We can assume this method slows down the capability of the local European Centre to react to the citizens. What we observed is an underpowered impact compared to the resources and funds European institutions have invested in communication strategies and actions to involve citizens locally. The institutional communication still lacks the effectiveness of reporting the complexity of the decision-making and guaranteeing a service at all levels that aims to coordinate the information and facilitates its use by policy-makers. These activities require dialogue, debate, and negotiation with the various stakeholders such as journalists who shape its form and content more subjectively, which fuels political polarisation (Parito 2016; Maresi, D'Ambrosi 2017; Trenz *et al.* 2021). However, the recent communication strategies are engaging proactively with civil society to contrast disinformation and promote awareness about the EU, by allowing citizens to make their voice heard and stimulating the sharing of EU values.

New flows of public debate and engagement are growing around Europe (Trenz *et al.* 2021). Our findings suggest these networks are managed by young university students according to spontaneous trajectories and outcomes that are often focused on current affairs which also intertwine universal values and social problems (such as human rights, peace, environment). A European way of thinking and a European way of living seems to emerge in these "transnational citizens" (Balibar 2009), which are characterised by practices and expressions of a self-actualizing citizenship (Bennett 2008). In these networks of debate, facilitated by social media, young students perceive the pro-EU involvement as an opportunity to promote but also to contrast and criticise EU policies (for example, the interviewees disagree with EU responses to the migration crisis or climate change). Working for a different idea of Europe, young generations construct and reconstruct their identities around contexts (Ross 2019) of the social and political environment that intersects their narratives and dynamics of everyday life.

Following this viewpoint, a different orientation of the process emerges: the institutions are not the main driver of the participation but a functional instrument to help the young to generate other nodes of communication flows around Europe.

Some limitations of the study should be noted. First, the number of the in-depth interviews carried out in this explorative research is quite small and limited to young Italians. Second, the individuals considered in this study have mostly a higher education level, with a specific academic background. In addition, the research takes into account the views of young people who are already involved in the dynamics of EU movement and activism. Further research should explore socio-demographic groups with different levels of education to provide additional understanding of the attitudes of young people towards Europe.

In conclusion, this paper makes a contribution to studies that concern the EU-related discourses and practices among the younger generation, suggesting original forms of engagement that need to be observed and conceptualised through new categories and interpretative tools.

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United we stand: narratives of Latvian leading politicians on unity and values of the European Union during Covid crisis (2020-2021)

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, which began in Latvia in March 2020 when the government declared the first state of emergency, provided political actors with numerous opportunities to work in order to overcome the crisis and strengthen their positions not only in a complex coalition and but also ahead of the forthcoming Saeima elections in 2022. The popularity ratings of the parties show that not all coalition forces managed to maintain their positions, moreover, the level of trust in the Latvian decision-making and executive authorities has significantly decreased recently. In a situation where society is angry and increasingly negative about the actions of the ruling politicians, it is important for political actors to provide supportive rhetoric. At the beginning of the 2020s, a number of issues highlighted the tendency of Latvian politicians to "lean against" the European Union, seeking not only opportunities to correct their mistakes, but also emphasizing themselves as part of a cohesive and goal-oriented community. It is important that if only about one in three trusts in the Saeima and the government in Latvia, the level of trust in "remote Brussels" is significantly higher (Eurobarometer 2021).

As the wave of general discontent also had spread beyond the "country's borders", giving new fuel to Eurosceptic narratives about the European Union's inability to combat the pandemic, for the government and the leading coalition in parliament in Latvia, this meant the need not only to deal with the health and economic crisis caused by the pandemic, but also to maintain confidence in the European Union while hoping for favorable decisions for Latvia, for example, regarding the supply of vaccines.

1. Political communication during Covid-19 pandemic

Political communication is seen in this article as "making sense of symbolic exchanges about the shared exercise of power" and "the presentation and interpretation of information, messages or signals with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power" (Jamieson, Kenski 2014: 3). This article examines the practice of political communication on the social networking site Facebook, which is the most popular social media in Latvia. It is used by more than 1.2 million inhabitants (NapoleonCat 2021). Social networking sites and other social media platforms have become not only

a permanent tool for political communication, but also a quick and reliable way to inform the public about crises and disasters or to help prevent their consequences. For example, in the US, various social media and smartphone apps are actively used to provide the most up-to-date information in real time during various emergency situations (Harvey 2014: 396). This means that governments which try to build their political communication, should choose their messages carefully in the process of exercising certain decisions and powers, especially when it comes to the crisis.

Although the majority seeks to find correlations, most data suggest that there is no strong evidence for a link between the style and ideology of national governments and the policies chosen to limit the effects of a pandemic (Lilleker, Coman, Gregor, Novelli 2021: 337). Initially, European countries may not have fully assessed the danger of the virus, but the next steps should have been precise and coordinated. Here, Latvia's approach stands out because, compared to other countries, including neighboring Estonia and Lithuania, in the autumn of 2020 the country chose a very small number of vaccines which led to political scandal and dismissal of the Minister of Health. Recordings of politicians' conversations obtained by journalists showed that the preparation to the following Covid-19 wave was executed poorly, and the chaos in vaccine orders came as a result of unsettled and sloppy political and executive leadership in the healthcare industry (Nekā Personīga 2021). Importantly, the correction of the error related to the initial failure to purchase the vaccines is directly related to the request for assistance from the European Commission.

2. Latvian political context and society

There are several factors worth mentioning that shaped the context of Latvia's political environment and most likely influenced the decisions of Latvia's leading officials. First, very low confidence in the government. Its fall marks a steady change in public attitudes, and this confidence was and remains one of the lowest in the European Union (LSM 2022). Secondly, the number of people willing to be vaccinated decreased during the first half of 2021, as a result of which in May 2021 officials were one of the first in the world to allow everyone over the age of 18 to be vaccinated (LSM 2022a). The non-prioritization of age groups was unique, but its impact (inability to identify risk groups, non-addressing and non-prioritization of seniors) can be seen in the data - in February 2022, only 81% of people over the age of 60 in Latvia were vaccinated (LSM 2022b). Third, the outcome of the 13th Saeima elections in 2018 created a clear climate of political tension, as the ruling coalition was formed only after four months of negotiations, with the government being "stunned" by five ideologically very different players. In the 2018 elections, seven parties were elected to the Latvian Parliament. After four months of negotiations, five of them formed a government: *New Unity, Who Owns the State?* (after disintegration in the summer of 2021 was excluded from the government), *the New Conservative Party, Development/For!, National Alliance*. Two more - *Harmony* and *Union of Greens and Farmers* - work in the parliamentary opposition. The fall of the Cabinet of Ministers headed by Krišjānis

Kariņš has been predicted by political experts since its approval, but the general composition of the Saeima and the "red lines" of the parties have created a situation in which there was no real alternative to the current government. Aware of this, there were both sharp political disputes within the coalition and attempts to preserve what was created. During this government, one political force was ousted from the government - the populist party *Who Owns the State?*, which won second place in the elections and became the largest faction among the coalition parties. However, it did not last long and, with its own disintegration, was ousted from the government. Also, several ministers changed in the government during this time due to various scandals. All of this led to the conclusion that Kariņš's government, despite very difficult circumstances, had become the longest-running Cabinet in the history of independent Latvia (LETA/TBT 2022).

The population of Latvia evaluates the country's economic condition more negatively than in the EU on average, and this evaluation tends to worsen during crisis years. At the same time, Latvian residents rate the economic situation in the EU better than the average among EU member states. Significantly more often than the EU average, Latvian residents believe that the main challenges of the EU are social inequality (on average in the EU - 36%, in Latvia - 52%), overcoming global health challenges (on average in the EU - 15%, in Latvia - 23%) and insufficient economic growth (on average in the EU - 19%, in Latvia - 25%) (European Commission 2021: 5). In addition, the population of Latvia is significantly less interested in the issues put forward in the agenda of the EU's future goals, such as climate change (on average in the EU - 49%, in Latvia - 28%), considering health-related risks, forced migration and various types of conflicts as the main global challenges in the EU. The above-mentioned shows that, in the opinion of Latvian residents, the EU should basically work with issues that are essentially within the competence of each national state. Although the majority of the population of Latvia still believes that the country's membership in the EU is a good thing, the proportion of people who think so is lower than the average in the EU, and with a tendency to decrease.

More often than the average in the EU Latvians tend to think that one of the ways to get their opinion heard at the national level is to engage in discussions on the Internet through social media - this is what 16% of citizens think, which is the second most common answer after going to the elections. This confirms that political actors, if they want to reach the target audience, must also engage in communication in this environment.

The formation of messages and their perception are also affected by misinformation and poor media literacy. The lack of media literacy during Covid-19 has led to an increase in the spread of misinformation and false news on social media, proving the public's susceptibility to this type of content. According to the think tank's GLOBSEC report, Latvians are more likely than others in the Baltic States to believe in conspiracy theories related to the Covid-19 virus (GLOBSEC 2021: 9). According to the report, 32% of Latvians believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is a planned operation by the hidden forces or the elite to control the population, while 42% believe that offi-

cial and institutions are overestimating official data on the number of Covid-19 infected. The use of social media has significantly increased - in Latvia, a total of about 1.2 million people use them (Statista 2022). Social media like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, etc. - are used not only for personal communication, but also for obtaining information, moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, social media served as one of the central sources for obtaining information about the virus and related news (Latvijas Fakti 2020: 9).

High mistrust of official information is typical of the entire Central and Eastern European region. In this region political parties are also experiencing a crisis of mistrust, and Latvia is no exception. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, only a third of the deputies were re-elected, but in October 2021 only 17% trusted the government, only 16% - to the Saeima, which is the lowest indicator of this term (SKDS 2021:12). Also, 43% of the population believe that the Latvian government has too much power (the highest rate since 2012), confidence in the information provided by the media is falling (43% is the lowest rate since 2014), but the satisfaction of the Latvian population with the government's decisions to fight the coronavirus pandemic is the lowest in the European Union (21%; EU average is 43%) (Kaktiņš 2021). Mistrust represents potential problems with the effectiveness of the democratic system and the legitimacy of elected entities, as well as an unstable political future, which depends on party qualities such as the type of political actors, the level of electorate and experience they can use to implement prudent policies (Chromiec 2020: 2). Political communicators use rhetoric to reinforce, transform, or initiate citizens' beliefs, value orientations, or attitudes (Feldman & Zmerli 2019: 2).

The level of trust is particularly important in times of crisis. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in February 2021, Latvians are the least satisfied with their government's decisions to combat the coronavirus pandemic - only 2% are very satisfied, while 19% are almost satisfied (EU averages are 8% and 35% respectively). Complementing this with the declining turnout in various elections (56.84% in the 2018 Saeima elections, 33.53% in the 2019 European Parliament elections, 34% in the 2021 municipal elections), we can talk about a society that, for various reasons, does not want to get involved and influence the political process in the country.

During crises, the role of the media in providing political information increases significantly, but society is no longer coherent and communication opportunities have increased with the popularity of social media platforms (Blumler 2016). The pandemic also highlighted a number of challenges in the political communication process. The fragmentation of the media audience hinders and hinders the effective transfer of information. Politicians can also influence the information environment in the fight for voter votes with the help of social media.

3. Political messages and power

The difficult context and decision-making struggles is also a question of the ability of ministers and leading politicians to work together towards a common goal.

Therefore, referring to other institutions that the public trusts more can be useful for easier communication. For example, the European Union and the European Parliament. There is also a significant difference: Latvians are more likely to trust the European Union (61% vs. 49% EU average) than national government and parliament (Eurobarometer 2021).

During the campaign of European Parliament elections in 2019 a big part (43.9%) of political party messages was focused on comparing national and European dimensions, which means that European issues were adapted to Latvia's situation or national problems were promised to be addressed at European level (Pričins 2021: 158). It shows a high ability of political actors to harmonize their and the European Union's (EU) agenda.

Ten years after joining the EU in May 2004 it was concluded that Latvia had become "safer and more prosperous", but after another five years citizens acknowledged Latvia as even more safe and prosperous. In 2019, almost half of the population admitted that membership in the EU brings more benefits than losses to Latvia's security, moreover, only 12.1% of respondents thought otherwise (Austers, Auers, Šteinbuka, Ozoliņa 2019: 153). The assessment of Latvia's economic growth also became increasingly positive.

Political scientists have identified the ability to control the information flow as a function necessary to maintain national sovereignty and promote national security. On the other hand, from the perspective of political communication, the aspect of power is basically understood as a discursive power,, namely, the ability of actors in the political communication environment to offer, reinforce and sustain themes, frameworks and speakers in the ongoing political discourse. (Jungherr, Posegga, An 2019: 416). Other aspects of policy that have no direct bearing on the acquisition and retention of power, such as the transfer of citizens' interests and demands, the symbolic legitimacy of power, and the identification of alternatives in policy-making, also depend on communication. Thus, discursive power refers to the ability to control the flow of information.

The functioning of modern political communication is characterized by two parallel activities: the traditional logic of mass communication, as well as the decentralized, participatory logic of Internet communication. The use of new technologies focused on political communication does not provide large-scale communication between large groups of people, but tends to create closed, small communities (Hermes 2006: 274). There is a paradox: on the one hand, the Internet increases the chances of confusion and requires citizens to have much more skills to distinguish between real and fake content.

[...] On the other hand, the reorganization of public conversation, the change of the format of communication, undermines the order of power (Del Olmo 2018: 274). Power requires communication to flow in only one direction, from top to bottom. Today, however, with the advent of social media and the crisis of representation, people are no longer just passive recipients and consumers of information.

4. Methodology

The object of the research is Latvia's leading politicians who have profiles on the most popular social media in Latvia - Facebook. Data collection was performed using the Facebook analysis tool *CrowdTangle*. The keywords 'European Union', 'European Parliament', 'European Commission' and their acronyms in English and Latvian were used to select the data. Between November 1 2020 and June 30, 2021, *CrowdTangle* identified posts made by 26 leading national politicians. The profiles of members of the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia, the factions of the Saeima and the heads of commissions were used for the analysis¹. After manual analysis, 241 records were selected from 23 politicians, followed by narrative analysis of the records. The categories of the narrative analysis were created based on the results of the Eurobarometer survey on the most important issues/topics for Latvian residents (see Chapter 2).

The following research questions are raised in the work:

- Whether and how is the public's opinion about the work to be done by the EU reflected in the public communication of Latvia's leading politicians?
- What kind of topics or events encourage politicians to communicate about the EU?
- Which themes and values dominated in politician communication about the EU during Covid-19 pandemic?

5. Main results

5.1. Speaking according to the duties

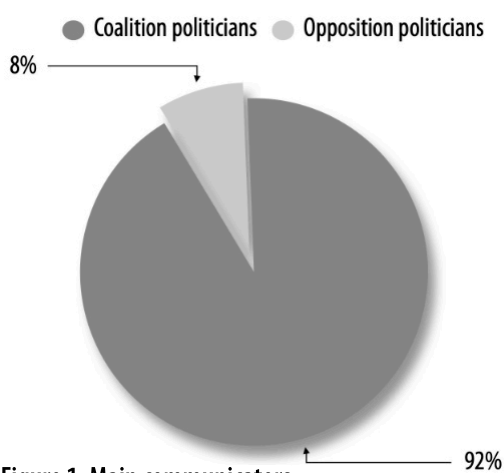


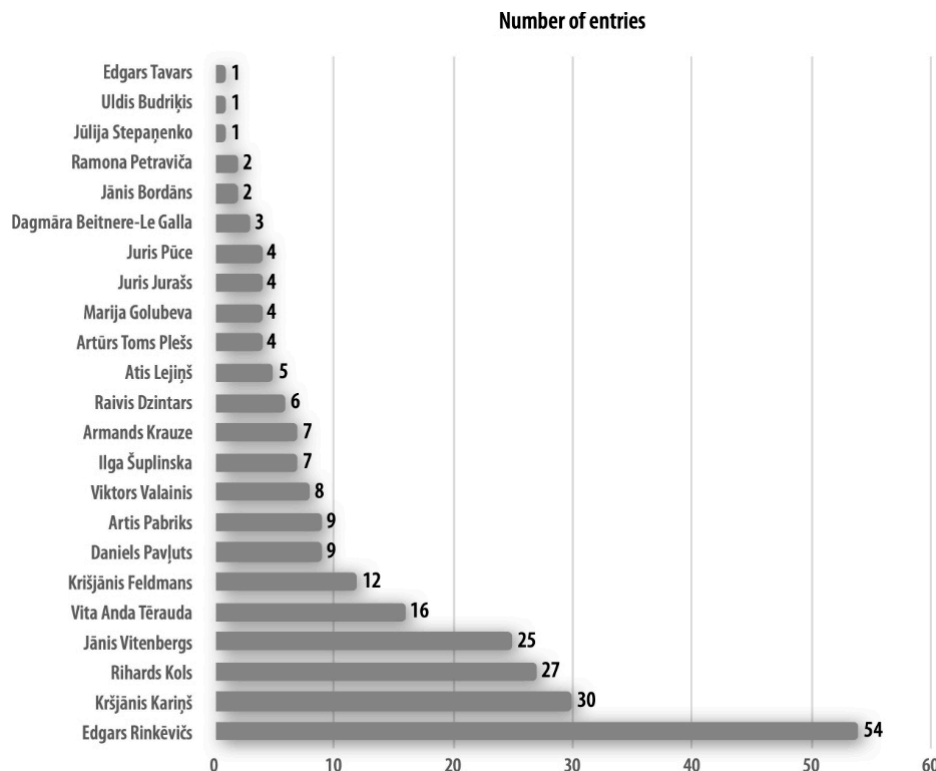
Figure 1. Main communicators

Analysis included online-communication of 23 officials, 19 of whom represented the ruling parties, so the amount of provided information pieces splits accordingly – 92% of posts were made by politicians of the parties forming the current parliamentary coalition, but 8% belonged to opposition politicians. Thus, the research basically looks at the communication of and between the representatives of government and also on the interpretation of the decisions of the institutions related to the European Union.

⁴ Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs, Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks, Minister of Economic Affairs Jānis Vitenbergs, Minister of Health Daniels Pavļuts, Minister of the Interior Marija Golubeva, Minister of Education and Science Ilga Šuplinska, Minister of Welfare Ramona Petraviča, Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns, Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development Artūrs Toms Plešs, Members of the Saeima Juri Pūce, Vita Anda Tērauda, Juris Jurašs, Krišjānis Feldmans, Raivis Dzintars, Atis Lejiņš, Uldis Budriķis, Dagmāra Beitnere-Le Galla. It should be noted that the profiles of the Minister of Finance Jānis Reirs and the Minister of Agriculture Kaspars Gerhards cannot be found on *Facebook*, while Minister of Culture Nauris Puntulis, Minister of Transport Tālis Linkaits, former Minister of Health Ilze Viņķele and others have an active private profile, but *CrowdTangle* software allows to cover only public access pages, groups and verified profiles. content analysis and narrative analysis of records.

During the period under review, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs communicated most actively (22,4% of all posts). His communication was prevalent about the institutions and issues related to the European Union, while his involvement in the communication about EU-related issues is clearly underpinned by his position. He communicates about issues that are either directly or intermittently related to the EU key issues. The emphasis on unity is important in his communication – joint action and position in the face of geopolitical challenges, while also drawing a strict distinction between supportable and non-supportable political actors. Political actors, mentioned in minister's posts, are evaluated not according to their position, but according to their ideological and world-vision orientation. For example, sympathy is shown towards western-oriented opposition of Russia and Belarus, while expressions of dictatorship that are inconsistent with democracy are criticized. Significant distinction is made while explaining the differences between arrested politicians in non-democratic and democratic states – the aim of this clarification is to draw a line for the local audience between local arrested oligarchs who publicly claim to be arrested for their political views and actual political prisoners like Alexey Navalny. While explaining the differences, the minister refers to the ECHR and common EU values that are binding on Latvia. EU also is used in the argumentation about the distinction of Western world and countries under Russia's influence – support for deeper Eurointegration of Ukraine traits the necessary shift towards democratization resisting the hopes of sovietization held by Russia. Opposing the narrative of EU fragmentation and collapse the theme of future relations between Great Britain and the EU is also looked through the prism of universal EU values.

Figure 2. Number of posts by politician



The second most active communicator was Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš (12,4%). His posts were devoted to issues related to the country's foreign policy, as well as internal and inter-level issues, such as ensuring a unified supply of vaccines to the Baltic States. Like Rinkēvičs, Kariņš's posts are united by the emphasis on united action and solidarity, which in times of crisis has allowed not only to succeed, but also to correct own mistakes. This was particularly important at a time when Latvia had not purchased enough Covid-19 vaccines due to its own failure. Kariņš also emphasizes the common position and the resulting strength in the position of the EU and NATO member states against the activities of Belarus and Russia.

The Minister of Economics Jānis Vitenbergs (10,3%), also communicated quite actively and mainly wrote about the various funds of the European Union, as well as the available funds of the Recovery Mechanism and what can be achieved with them for Latvia's economic development. Relying on EU funding allowed the minister to make promises and build a positive image of himself and his work. The argumentation shows the goal of ensuring the connection between Latvia's well-being, development and Latvia's membership in the EU, thus achieving the projection of the indivisibility of Latvia and the EU for the future successful existence of the country.

Two politicians from the Greens and Farmers Union, who during the previous convocation of parliament was a member of coalition, used EU related topics and issues to back up political quarrels and power struggles. The EU issues and opportunities were used either as a point of reference for assessing the status quo or as desirability, which was hampered or hindered by the ruling power. The EU is also used as a reference point to accentuate the quality of proposed ideas, asserting that the implementation of such kind of opposition's proposals could allow Latvia to "keep up with other EU countries".

Answering the *2nd research question*, four main themes related to the EU were identified in the online communication on Facebook: Europe's universal values (27.9%), EU action on Covid-19 (25.7%), EU foreign policy (29.4%), economy and energy (17%). Each of the topics will be discussed further in the text.

5.2. Defending Europe's universal values

In this topic, issues of mutual relations between the EU countries and Latvia's interests in the European Union were identified. Latvia is among those countries, where a higher than average proportion of respondents indicate identifying with being European (63% in Latvia) (Eurobarometer 2021).

The prism of EU values allows political actors to evaluate political partners both domestically and abroad. This also helps political communicators by using rhetoric to reinforce, transform, or initiate citizens' beliefs, value orientations, or attitudes (Feldman, Zmerli 2019: 2).

Assessing Latvia's interests in the EU narrative, in some situations the EU is opposed to the United States, especially when it comes to former US President Donald Trump. Latvian politicians emphasize the EU values that the US leader acted contrary

to, thus cutting the potential benefits for Latvia, as the EU is not only a guarantor of "peace but also security", which has allowed Latvia to spend 2% of GDP on state security. Germany's position, for example, on the issue of implementing Nord Stream-2, which would involve cooperation with Russia, is also assessed more negatively in the communication of political actors, emphasizing that Germany would also need to think about the common interests of the bloc.

The importance of joint action in overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic while expecting fair and transparent conditions is emphasized. A critical case of non-compliance with these values was the unavailability of vaccines. The EU as a value-based block was used by the officials to emphasize reliance on the interests of all countries. Krišjānis Kariņš, emphasizing Latvia's desire to get involved in the provision of vaccines, also emphasized the obligation of vaccine manufacturers to comply with the agreements and contracts reached. It is important that the messages of politicians show differences in Latvia's capabilities during the Covid-19 crisis - if Kariņš emphasizes, among other things, the country's ability to become involved in vaccine production in the future, the Foreign Minister tells the EU that a right decision has been made by providing vaccines to those countries "most in need" (including Latvia). In Rinkēvičs' opinion, this is an indicator of support and true solidarity, which, according to Kariņš, has been achieved by the joint efforts of the EU member states. Given the low trust ratings in local politicians, invoking the EU helps to provide an additional layer of information, reinforcing or obscuring the problems caused by local decisions or lack thereof.

Recognizing the importance of the EU in Latvia's development, politicians want a greater return from Latvia's membership in the EU, which requires clear goals and plans. This indicates Latvia's unchanged position in maintaining its membership in the EU.

Opposition politicians use the common framework of EU rules to highlight omissions and mistakes compared to other EU member states. For example, politician Armands Krauze, praising the Czech experience in supporting local producers, emphasizes that in Latvia the representatives of this sector only continue to wait for the actions of Latvia's ruling politicians, who will not only blindly obey EU orders, but also work in accordance with local producers. The Minister of Economics Vitenbergs has the opposite opinion, believing that a number of sectors of the Latvian economy have managed to show relatively high indicators even during the Covid-19 crisis. Both politicians use the EU as a reference point, but the interpretation and direction of such a reference point differ due to different political interests and objectives.

In the context of EU-NATO cooperation, government politicians have consistently expressed their position for NATO as a cohesive, united and strong organization. NATO membership is also seen as a long-term plan.

Cooperation and unity within the EU are viewed by politicians not only from the perspective of the common block, but also from the perspective of bilateral relations, where each transnational link ensures closer links and mutual integrity within the EU. Such unity is seen as a key element in effective and timely decision-making in a vari-

ety of areas, including geopolitical ones. At the same time, the idea of unity and solidarity is skewed in moments when it comes to certain human rights issues in individual EU Member States. The views of national conservative and liberal politicians on the issue of sexual minorities in Hungary, for example, showed a deep gap in this bloc of values. A similar situation can be seen in politicians' assessment of Poland's intention to reform the judiciary. The chairwoman of the Saeima's European Affairs Committee, Vita Anda Tērauda, emphasized that the division of values in the united EU as a whole has created a unique situation when the state turns against the state in the EU Court. It is essential that respect for common values is 'motivated' by strict rules, including financial consequences for countries. At the same time, these sharp differences of opinion on human rights on both fronts are based on the principle that the EU is based on the values of democracy and human rights.

5.3. EU action on Covid-19

Issues such as social protection and health, EU capacity for action and crisis communication were identified under this theme. The communicators explained the decisions taken in the procurement of vaccines, the need for restrictions and the EU's vision for crisis management.

On December 10, 2020, the Prime Minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš pointed out that "the way out of a pandemic is vaccination, which requires coordinated action at both the national and European levels". However, delays and problems with the procurement of *AstraZeneca* vaccines plunged the government, necessitating the help of other countries to provide the vaccines. Problems with the procurement of vaccines opened up opportunities for the parliamentary opposition to sharply criticize the ruling parties' inability to deal with the crisis. In conditions of low trust in the government, as well as in times of crisis, such criticism has a greater potential to reach the target audience. Opposition repeatedly criticized the government for failing to deliver a small supply of vaccines with emotional epithets and metaphors ("it's an open, cynical mockery of our seniors in these challenging circumstances"), demanding an assessment of the health minister's responsibility and disagreeing with the restrictions.

Before 2021, several ministers and Prime minister emphasized words such as 'united', 'together', 'responsibility' and so on. However, disagreements also emerged within government officials. The crisis and the problems in solving it made it possible to open the field of political struggle also within the coalition, taking into account its complex structure. The global healthcare crisis has been used to highlight the failure of coalition partners to deal with it, in an apparent attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility for earlier decisions in government.

At the beginning of January 2021, Prime Minister Kariņš briefly announced the purchase of additional vaccines, which would promote faster public immunization and the possibility to waive restrictions sooner. Explaining the vaccine procurement process, Kariņš emphasized the Baltic Prime Minister's 'coordinated Covid response and cooperation'. But then the public, the media and the opposition began to criticize

the document on the creation of priority groups for vaccination, which, for example, favored 'critical officials'. Despite the initial plan to start vaccination with medical personnel, clients of medical institutions and care centers, and then people with chronic diseases and people over the age of 60, the opportunity to vaccinate anyone over the age of 18 appeared in April, which was a unique situation in the world. The widespread availability of vaccination actually followed in response to widespread public discontent, which was actively expressed on social media, effectively forcing officials to reconsider their vaccination strategy, preventing unnecessary fluctuations in society during the already socially stressful times. At that time, the term 'Twitter government' was coined by social media users and journalists to describe the government of Latvia, thus describing the situation where ministers make decisions based on what is happening on Twitter.

Due to the situation with the procurement of vaccines, the value of solidarity came to the fore. For example, in April 2021, the Minister of Health Daniels Pavļuts informed about the reached EU solidarity agreement, obtaining more than 400,000 vaccines for Latvia. It was explained that "it is not possible to defeat a pandemic in one country, but only in all Member States together" and the need to address inequalities in the availability of vaccines at EU level was emphasized. This shows a tendency to characterize one's failures as a wider problem, where the solution should be sought at the international rather than the national level.

In June 2021, the Minister of Health announced the addition of the digital Covid certificate to the unified European certificate system. The topic of the certificate also sparked debate among government parties. The *National Alliance* emphasized the need to avoid inequality, discrimination and violations of fundamental rights, while welcoming its implementation.

Covid-19 crisis allowed a number of issues not directly related to the problems of the health sector to remain under one roof. One of the central health sub-themes was restraints and education.

Raivis Dzintars, a member of the *National Alliance*, repeatedly called on the Cabinet of Ministers, the parliamentary education commission and other institutions to listen to education and health experts about restrictions in schools, while expressing concerns about children's ability to follow epidemiologists' instructions. Street protests that took in Latvia at the end of 2020 and were organized by populists were used by coalition politicians to speak about the danger of misinformation and the need to stay united, pointing out that Latvia 'even in times of crisis is a democratic state' and that freedom imposes a responsibility to be aware of the consequences.

Politicians based their arguments on their decision based on the experience of other EU countries. But this approach also depended on the actor's point of view – those who opposed strict restrictions referenced the countries with softer restrictions, while others strengthened their reasoning with the practice of other countries, especially emphasizing that in other places the restrictions are even more severe and the government has tried to implement the most optimal solutions. Such a dual approach can be observed in issues related to education, business, and movement.

5.4. EU foreign policy

The most active communicators in the field of foreign policy were the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament Rihards Kols, the Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš and the Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks – political actors, whose job duties are directly related to the actualization of such topics. The topics identified were security, EU-NATO cooperation, strengthening Latvia's and the EU's co-operation with the Eastern Partnership countries, Europe's role in the crisis in Belarus, sanctions and co-operation with other countries.

In several posts, Rinkēvičs congratulated the Eastern Partnership countries on the inauguration of the new foreign ministers, emphasizing the strengthening of their relations with Latvia and the European Union. As Latvia is a supporter of active dialogue with the Eastern Partnership countries, highlighting the values of the European Union and the West through events in Belarus is also an important part of the message. Rinkēvičs has repeatedly condemned the violence against demonstrators in Belarus, calling on the EU to impose sanctions on the perpetrators of the violence. Over time, the minister strengthened the message of the 'rogue Lukashenko regime in Minsk' by supporting broad and effective individual and sectoral sanctions against him, calling for the release of political prisoners and holding free and fair elections in Belarus, expressing full support for Belarusian civil society. The core values expressed in the posts are liberty, democracy and human rights.

Similar values were emphasized in the case of Alexei Navalny, a political prisoner. In their messages, Rinkēvičs, Kols and Kariņš expressed strong support for EU sanctions against Russia. They also raised the issue of the visit of the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, to Moscow, criticizing his inability to take a sufficiently strong position in negotiations with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In general, Latvian government officials have repeatedly expressed support for their Eastern Partnership countries. For example, when announcing the meeting with the Ambassador of Ukraine to Latvia, the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament Dagmāra Beitnere-Le Galla emphasized the support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, wishing to maintain the European course.

Rinkēvičs also reported on his activities at the EU Foreign Affairs Council or the Munich Security Conference. Solidarity and support for France and Austria in relation to terrorist acts were expressed, cooperation between the United States and the EU within NATO was emphasized, as well as the impact of the EU-Great Britain agreement on future relations and their compliance with Latvia's interests. The Minister of Economics Jānis Vitenbergs also highlighted Latvia's benefits in trade in goods from this agreement. Rinkēvičs emphasized the issue of human rights violations in relation to the situation in Hong Kong, calling on the EU to pursue a strict and principled policy.

On December 10, 2020, the Prime Minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš pointed out that "the way out of a pandemic is vaccination, which requires coordinated action at both the national and European levels". This emphasized the necessity of joint action, where countries alone are unable to combat the pandemic, thus stressing out the need

for cooperation regardless of other problematic issues that might in other situations create disagreements between countries.

On the subject of Russia and Navalny, the Prime Minister emphasized the need to "stop the systemic repression against Russian civil society" and to ensure that Russia meets international obligations. Taking in consideration different positions towards Russia among the countries of the EU, Latvian politicians tried to push the message about Russia which does not comply with common values of the EU thereby moving the rhetoric from the issues of economic cooperation towards the respect of the EU values.

In his posts on foreign policy, Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks both brought Latvia's interests to the fore and pointed to the need to strengthen the security of Latvia, Europe and NATO member states. The Minister of Defense emphasized the competitiveness of Latvian companies in meeting the needs of the Latvian army, the need to react to external threats together, emphasizing that there is no place for competition or jealousy. Speaking of external threats, Pabriks highlighted the authoritarian regimes in NATO and the EU's neighborhood that are "actively seeking to undermine Western democratic systems." Taking into account the history of Latvia and years of Russia's position as a possible aggressor state in the rhetoric of part of Latvian society and politicians, emphasizing the joint action on the security of the region shows the attempt to influence the view of other countries about the vector of security policy development.

The chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Rihards Kols (*The National Alliance*), had twice to explain his involvement in various scandals involving Russia. The first case was participation in a conference organized directly or indirectly by the Russian business tycoon Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was close to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Although the conference was entitled "Strategic Dialogue in the Baltic Sea Region" and the Latvian MP was invited by a German Bundestag colleague from the *Free Democratic Party*, it was only after the event and the media interest that Kols concluded that such events were part of a 'network of influence'. The second was 'Leonid Volkov', a spokesman for the Russian opposition Alexei Navalny, who turned out to be a fake person. False Volkov managed to mislead not only the deputies of the Saeima, but also the Latvian public television and the British parliament. Both cases point to an increase in the impact of disinformation in the European political and media environment, which Kols himself called for.

Kols also focused on the priorities of the EU's problems - not on the domestic debate on the 'Lohnes monster' (strategic autonomy of the European Union), but on the EU's joint strategy towards Russia, China and NATO. He also emphasized his cooperation with Lithuanian colleagues on the Nord Stream 2 project, which could be used as a mechanism to put pressure on its neighbors, pointing out that the project runs counter to the EU's energy security goals, European values and principles. Some messages from coalition parties differed from other records. For example, MP Uldis Budriķis informed about the meeting with the Dalai Lama, pointing to the need to stand up for religious freedom, human rights and independence, thus trying to cre-

ate a political similarity with Latvia. Dagmāra Beitnere-Le Galla, on the other hand, does not always name values, but creates symbolic similarities with other countries. Juris Jurašs, Member of the *New Conservative Party*, explains the legal framework proposed by the party-led Ministry of Justice through a European Union directive ensuring a common approach to combating non-cash means of payment fraud. These differences from the rest of the topics indicate the efforts of politicians to advance their political agenda at the individual level.

5.5. Economy and energy

The sub-themes identified while analyzing the general theme “economy and energy” were the distribution of EU funds, the protection of the EU's financial interests, the involvement of the European Recovery Fund, the digital transformation, energy and the Green Course.

According to the Eurobarometer data described in the theory section of the paper, people in Latvia think that economic issues are one of the most important problems to deal with also with the help of the EU.

The most significant discussion in the Latvian media environment was related to the EU multi-annual budget and the Recovery Fund established by the European Commission. The program aims to support reforms and investments related to the transition to a green and digital economy in addition to the EU's multi-annual budget for the 2021-2027 programming period. On December 11, 2020, Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš informed that the fund will contribute more than 10 billion euros (equivalent to the budget of Latvia in 2020 (Ministry of Finance of Republic of Latvia 2020) to the Latvian economy. The large sums contributed to the need for politicians to report more frequently on the fund. For example, the Prime Minister informed about the meetings at which the support of the Recovery Fund was discussed, but the Minister of Economics Jānis Vitenbergs emphasized that the fund's money will help to promote the connection of local entrepreneurs with science, as well as climate policy and reduce inequalities. It will also contribute to economic transformation, productivity, digitalization, accessibility and energy efficiency.

There was also criticism of the government on this topic. Opposition politicians has repeatedly spoken out against various government ministers, for example, criticizing the statements of the then-elected Minister of Welfare, Gatis Eglītis (*New Conservative Party*), whose public statement led to think that the money of state budget and EU funds will be taken care of primarily by coalition politicians. This raised concerns about the impact of the statements on the EU funds available to Latvia and opposition called on the Latvian Prime Minister to take action.

The Minister of Economics Vitenbergs, who is expected to comment on economic issues the most, repeatedly informed about the possibilities of obtaining various grants from the European Commission, support mechanisms for entrepreneurs and support for various social groups. For example, the then Minister of Education and Science Ilga Šuplinska drew attention to the solution of social and educational issues

and the involvement of the population in decision-making, arguing that the population is dependent on receiving social benefits as the only guarantor of survival.

This theme also contains individual messages that appeared rarely and were directed by specific politicians, taking into account their political agenda. In the field of digital transformation, the main messages were related to the need to work remotely as often as possible. Coalition deputy Juris Pūce emphasized Latvia's 5th place among the EU countries in the use of public digital services and expressed confidence that in the future it will only improve, not to mention the quality of services. It also describes attending conferences organized by the European institutions and discussing digital issues, or the introduction of ambitious digital goals to enable EU citizens to "make more and better use of digital services", and provides information on the introduction of 5G technologies.

Development/For! member Vita Anna Tērauda emphasized the need for a regulator to oversee social networks and the information space. The entry does not elaborate on the implementation plan, but highlights the emergence of information bubbles and the spread of misinformation faced by European countries, stressing that Vera Jourova, EC Vice-President for Values and Transparency, also agreed. In one post, the Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns (*New Conservative Party*) emphasized the protection of the EU's financial interests in the fight against money laundering, corruption and cross-border VAT fraud.

Energy and renewable resources are one of the less identifiable topics. The political association *Development/For!*, whose representatives at that time Juris Pūce, the Minister of Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Latvia, and Artūrs Toms Plešs, the head of the Climate Subcommittee, replaced Pūce as the Minister of the MEPRD most often spoke about this topic. The Chairman of the Riga City Council Mārtiņš Staķis repeatedly emphasized the progress of Latvia and the EU towards climate neutrality, reduction of emissions, increase of energy efficiency in buildings, transition of public transport to a more environmentally friendly mode.

The economy is closely linked to energy. The messages highlight both the benefits of bioenergy policy (reducing energy poverty, more cost-effective) and the need for a shared vision in the region, as it emphasizes cooperation and supply-side support from colleagues in Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. By achieving Europe's common goals of climate neutrality, Vitenbergs justifies setting a minimum for the use of wood in the construction of public buildings, while Plešs supports supporting the green economy and creating new jobs.

Conclusions

The analysis of the Facebook posts posted by key Latvian politicians shows that politicians from Latvian government parties and certain members of the opposition are active disseminators and defenders of European values.

Answering the *1st research question*, the study shows that in public communication Latvian politicians at least partially take over the citizens' expectations from the

EU, including them both in the explanation of their own actions and mistakes. Referring to the EU has often helped politicians, trying to reduce the weight of their incompetence in overcoming the Covid-19 crisis and its consequences, actively spreading the opinion that one country cannot cope with it at all. Politicians also like to connect the solution of economic problems with the EU, which is important because, as shown by the Eurobarometer data, people expect the EU to take active action in increasing the well-being of the population.

Answering the *3rd research question*, in the communication of Latvian politicians it is possible to identify all the values on which the European Union is based: human dignity, freedom, democracy, Equality, Rule of law and human rights. These values permeate a wide range of issues, highlighting the importance of unity and mutual cooperation in the implementation of successful policies. In communicating on issues directly or indirectly related to the EU, politicians also include the goals of the EU's existence. Politicians do not try to broaden the scope of values and goals, but it is possible to observe different interpretations of the breadth of values, adapting it to their position and political goal.

Latvia's leading politicians rarely initiate issues related to the EU and its institutions. Exceptions are foreign policy issues related to security and human rights issues in the neighboring countries, as well as the protection of certain Latvian interests in cases of equal distribution of vaccines to EU member states and information during meetings or diplomatic meetings. But it is important to note, that "louder" and more critical messages are sent "merging" with other actors such as two other Baltic states, thus increasing the visibility and "weight" of the messages.

Given, for example, the misinformation created by Russia about the division and weakening of the EU, as well as the Eurosceptic movements within the EU, it is important for political actors to convey messages that allow them to maintain an impression about strong and united EU that can meet the challenges in a constructive way.

In foreign policy, for example, this is particularly the case with the Eastern Partnership countries, NATO and the strengthening of security. It is also reflected in the defense of international human rights in Russia and Belarus. This indicates a high level of integration in policy planning and implementation, linking its agenda to that of the European Union. At the same time, it raises the legitimate question of whether, without Europe, environmental protection programs and other activities, which may not be as relevant to society, could be thought of or implemented.

Politicians of the parties representing the Latvian government can successfully defend European values and inform about events related to the matter, but the ability to link the EU issues with Latvia's context is often lacking. This happens either briefly and informatively, as the Prime Minister or Foreign Minister often does, or in very long and lyrical memoirs (Lejiņš and Beitnere-Le Galla). Given the low level of interest in European affairs among Latvians, as evidenced by the record low turnout in the 2019 European elections (33.5%), political communicators should be more diligent in informing local people about the validity of events, such as the Minister of

Economics Vitenbergs, informing about specific support opportunities for entrepreneurs and other social groups. The connotation of Europe, the European Union, in the rhetoric of politicians depends on the ideological and political position, and one and the same aspect can be used to substantiate and overthrow the position.

Considering the low levels of trust in the Latvian government and parliament, communication about topics and problems of interest to local residents in close connection with references to the EU can promote greater credibility of what politicians say, because Latvian residents trust the EU more than local government institutions. However, in order to draw firm conclusions about the impact of using the EU "roof" in communication about problems on the audience and possible higher trust in messages formulated in this way, it would be necessary to conduct additional research.

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Note

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Book Reviews



Giorgia Serughetti (2021), *Il vento conservatore. La destra populista all'attacco della democrazia*. Bari-Roma, Laterza, 184 pp.

Paola Schellenbaum

Nel panorama di studi e ricerche segnato dalla pandemia, che ha investito su scala planetaria la popolazione mondiale, spicca per originalità un libro di recente pubblicazione che è al tempo stesso inedito e necessario. Serughetti inizia la sua riflessione chiedendosi quali sono i rischi cui vanno incontro le democrazie in Europa, colpite da un vento conservatore che è fonte di minaccia per le istituzioni e per diversi soggetti, in particolare per le minoranze. C'è un vento conservatore che soffia in Europa, con particolare riferimento a Polonia e Ungheria, ma che investe anche l'Italia e gli altri Paesi europei, e ne travalica i confini. Seppur con differenze regionali significative, sembra riguardare tutto il mondo: la debolezza dell'inversione di rotta sui cambiamenti climatici e sulle campagne di vaccinazione rende il pianeta ancor più vulnerabile e dal futuro incerto.

La parte *destruens* del libro si sviluppa in diversi capitoli: nel primo, si analizza il fenomeno del populismo e dell'ossessione identitaria che crea nuove disuguaglianze e mina alla base una politica democratica e di costruzione di nuova cittadinanza, soprattutto in riferimento agli immigrati in Europa; nel secondo, si affronta la questione dell'individualismo autoritario, dell'eclissi dello spazio pubblico e dell'avversione per il politicamente corretto, presentato nelle sue sfaccettature che riguardano anche il linguaggio, attraverso ad esempio la etnicizzazione delle categorie di interazione che è solo in modo ingannevole una risposta all'isolamento perché ne inficia la pluralità su basi di eguaglianza; nel terzo, si tratta l'inganno sovranista, soprattutto in Italia, che si alimenta di costrutti presentati come astorici e naturali, quali il motto "Dio, patria e famiglia" inteso come un nuovo ordine sovranista – interno ed esterno – che è avverso ai processi di integrazione europea e che vive come minaccia le istanze di apertura e di giustizia sociale, spesso strumentalizzando i simboli religiosi; nel quarto, si esplora la trasformazione sociale attraversata dalle nuove consapevolezze dei diritti di genere, all'interno di una cittadinanza sessuata, che ridefinisce i confini e dunque scatena reazioni sessiste e 'pro-life' tra i maschi, segnati da paura, rabbia e risentimento, specie negli strati della popolazione che si sono impoveriti, non solo dal punto di vista economico ma anche sociale e culturale.

La parte *costruens* si condensa in un interessante capitolo finale, in cui Serughetti si interroga sul futuro delle democrazie europee e su quanto tutto ciò rappresenti una serie minaccia per la vita di donne e uomini impegnati nella società civile, per la loro

partecipazione alla costruzione della convivenza democratica, che nel post-pandemia consentirà di porre le basi per una fiducia reciproca senza la quale non esiste la coesistenza pacifica delle diversità. La richiesta di un riconoscimento delle differenze, che non risulti divisivo, pervade questo capitolo che si interroga anche sulle pratiche comunicative in diversi ambiti sociali. Il libro dischiude una prospettiva, quella della cura e del prendersi cura delle persone, delle democrazie e delle città, nel mondo, tenendo cioè presenti i fenomeni transnazionali che tanta parte assumono nella contemporaneità, per evitare un ulteriore deterioramento della cultura dei diritti.

Il libro offre uno sguardo fortemente interdisciplinare, come si conviene da alcuni decenni nei *women's and gender studies* senza peraltro preoccuparsi troppo dei confini disciplinari ma tentando la pazienza del dialogo tra linguaggi differenti, con la preminenza della filosofia politica. Colpisce fin dalle prime pagine la chiarezza espositiva e l'audacia del ragionamento che propone la tesi secondo cui esiste un'affinità nascosta – e dunque da far emergere in tutte le sue sfaccettature – tra neoliberalismo e conservatorismo morale in quanto “entrambi sviliscono i valori dell'uguaglianza, della partecipazione sociale, della libertà politica e dello Stato di diritto, e l'uno finisce per rinforzare l'altro” (Premessa, p. XI). In questa visione che riguarda soprattutto la destra radicale, ma che interessa anche le società europee, il populismo non è da considerarsi solo come una reazione alle dinamiche distorte del mercato ma piuttosto come un “Giano bifronte” (p. 33) che si alimenta della precarietà causata dal neoliberalismo, scatenando forze disgregatrici che spingono sull'ineguaglianza e sulle divisioni. Il contraccolpo culturale che ne consegue indebolisce il tessuto connettivo della solidarietà multiculturale, che è tra le mire di una guerra culturale, presentando il rischio di dimenticare che il motto dell'Unione europea (2000) è *In varietate concordia* (inglese: *united in diversity*).



De Castro Ruano, José Luis (2020). *La integración de la seguridad y la defensa en la Unión Europea. Un nuevo instrumento de actuación internacional para un actor global en el siglo XXI*. Madrid: Editorial Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, 87 pp.

Juan M. de Lara Vázquez

Il tema della sicurezza dell'Unione Europea è, assieme a quello economico e politico, una delle più annose preoccupazioni dei principali paesi membri. Inoltre, negli ultimi dieci anni è stata oggetto di numerosi studi che hanno sottolineato l'importanza che i diversi governi hanno attribuito ad essa sotto molteplici prospettive. Il professor de Castro Ruano, in questo originale studio, sia nella sostanza che nella forma (è stato stampato da un lato in lingua spagnola e dall'altro in lingua inglese), approccia dal punto di vista analitico la Politica Comune di Sicurezza e Difesa, scaturita dal Trattato di Lisbona, che ha comportato un significativo passo in avanti per il progetto di difesa comune concepito durante l'ultima decade del secolo scorso con il Trattato di Maastricht. L'autore spiega come la spesa militare europea sia la seconda maggiore al mondo dopo quella degli Stati Uniti. Riscontra altresì l'inefficacia della stessa per via di diversi fattori quali la duplicità dei costi, la mancanza di raccordo fra gli Stati membri e i divari tecnologici: "Como muestra de estas duplicidades, y según datos facilitados por la propia Comisión, señalar que en Eurozona se construyen 17 tipos distintos de vehículos acorazados o tanques, frente a uno solo en EE.UU.; 20 modelos de avión de combate, frente a 6 en EE.UU.; 178 sistemas de armas distintos en Europa, por 30 en EE.UU.; 29 modelos de destructores y fragatas por únicamente cuatro en EE.UU." (p. 47).

La sicurezza e la difesa non furono introdotte nei trattati costitutivi durante il secondo dopoguerra, e si è dovuto attendere fino alla riforma dell'Atto unico europeo per considerarle, seppur minimamente, negli accordi. In dieci capitoli l'autore sviluppa la tesi per cui le continue crisi che ha vissuto l'Unione Europea, e che continua a soffrire, starebbero favorendo il processo d'integrazione in diversi ambiti; come, ad esempio, dimostra l'uscita dall'Unione del Regno Unito, che fino a pochi anni fa aveva frenato e ostacolato qualsiasi tentativo in tal senso.

Il Trattato di Lisbona, secondo de Castro Ruano, mise a disposizione degli Stati dell'eurozona importanti strumenti per poter agire in maniera più incisiva a livello internazionale. Il nuovo ordinamento sostituì la Politica estera e di sicurezza comune (PESC) del Trattato di Maastricht con la nuova Politica di sicurezza e di difesa comune (PSDC). Quest'ultima, secondo l'autore, rappresenta il passaggio più importante del

Trattato di Lisbona, cioè la volontà di affermare il protagonismo dell'Unione come attore militare promotore di multilateralismo e di difesa (p. 12). Il trattato esclude la formazione di un esercito europeo, al contempo che rispetta la volontà degli Stati neutrali e di quelli che preferiscono affidarsi alla NATO. Un obiettivo chiave di questa nuova conformazione è quello di rafforzare le capacità militari migliorando il coordinamento e la gestione della spesa del settore. A tal fine si pone come strumento l'Agenzia Europea di Difesa. Paradossalmente, dall'entrata in vigore del Trattato, si è assistito a un congelamento. De Castro Ruano afferma che una delle principali debolezze della PSDC in questo periodo è stata la scarsa coesione tra i membri comunitari, ai quali è mancata la volontà politica di sviluppare una vera e propria linea di sicurezza e difesa che portasse a una visione strategica congiunta. A ciò si aggiunge la necessità di migliorare il sistema di finanziamento della PSDC, dato che allo stato attuale vige il principio secondo il quale ogni partecipante deve costeggiarla in proprio. L'autore suggerisce che dovrebbero esserci dei fondi comunitari destinati a queste missioni, così come accade in ambito civile. Lo studioso asserisce che parallelamente alla PSDC si deve sviluppare una comune politica estera: "Hay que dar pasos para una mayor coherencia entre la política exterior de la UE y la PCSD; esta debe concebirse como un instrumento al servicio del papel internacional de la UE y de sus propios objetivos de política exterior [...] El objetivo estratégico de la UE no es trabajar por la paz y la seguridad internacional definidas en abstracto y declarativamente. Pensar así es tener una visión reduccionista y alejada de la realidad y de la naturaleza de las cosas" (pp. 24-25).

Durante l'entrata in vigore del Trattato di Lisbona, la crisi economica mise in ginocchio gli Stati dell'UE e le risorse e le energie istituzionali si orientarono verso la risoluzione della situazione, a questa crisi seguì quella sociale che generò diverse ondate di euroscetticismo e l'avvento di movimenti populistici e partiti "eurofobici". Ma l'autore sostiene che il processo di integrazione, davanti a questi fenomeni, si sta rafforzando sempre di più. Eventi come le negoziazioni della *Brexit* hanno prodotto maggiore coesione tra i paesi rimanenti.

De Castro Ruano disegna tre scenari possibili per il 2025: un primo caso di cooperazione in sicurezza e difesa dove l'UE proseguirà nello sviluppo di missioni operative civili e militari di piccola portata come ha fatto sino ad ora; un secondo caso dove la difesa e la sicurezza saranno condivise dagli Stati aumentano il livello di solidarietà, aumentando in questo modo l'importanza della cybersicurezza, il controllo delle frontiere, il contrasto del terrorismo e un miglioramento delle modalità e la velocità di gestione delle crisi; il terzo e ultimo caso vedrebbe una difesa e una sicurezza comuni, scenario ancor più ambizioso, dove si assisterebbe alla creazione di un'Unione sulla falsariga dell'art.42 del Trattato. L'autore afferma che nel periodo 2018-2019 sono state adoperate misure che si collocherebbero nel secondo scenario.

Il 30 novembre del 2016 è stato pubblicato l'European Defence Action Plan (EDAP), per poi essere approvato il 15 dicembre dello stesso anno. Questo comporta la creazione di un Fondo Europeo di Difesa per portare avanti una ricerca congiunta di apparecchiature e tecnologie di difesa. Lo studioso valuta positivamente, dal punto di vista della *comunitarizzazione* dell'Europa di Difesa, quest'irruzione della Com-

missione europea in uno spazio fino a quel momento esclusivo degli Stati membri (p. 51). Sin dall'inizio queste manovre destarono la sfiducia e le reticenze della NATO, che era stata l'unica protagonista della sicurezza di una parte del continente europeo. Secondo de Castro Ruano le due organizzazioni devono complementarsi per ragioni di ordine politico, visto che in alcune regioni del globo è preferito un intervento dell'UE piuttosto che uno della Nato, e per altre di natura militare, visti i limiti economici europei. Molto interessante è l'opinione dell'autore in merito al dibattito scaturito dalle dichiarazioni del presidente statunitense Donald Trump che sollecitava i membri del patto atlantico ad aumentare il finanziamento dell'organizzazione: "No podemos olvidar el papel motor del presupuesto militar estadounidense en tanto que factor de crecimiento económico por sus pedidos a la industria nacional propia, dado que EE.UU. apenas compra en el extranjero, contrariamente a lo que todavía hoy hacen los europeos" (p. 61).

Il passaggio più importante è stato l'adozione della Cooperazione Strutturata Permanente (PESCO, Permanent Structured Cooperation) l'11 dicembre del 2017. Il professore sottolinea che l'uscita del Regno Unito paradossalmente ha accelerato il processo di unità in materia di sicurezza. Da un lato non vi era più un membro che sistematicamente poneva il veto ad ogni tentativo di sviluppo della PCSD, dall'altro, lo stesso membro, chiedeva che si mantenessero i rapporti in materia di difesa: "El Reino Unido se ve obligado a transitar desde una clásica posición de "dentro pero fuera" de los marcos comunitarios de seguridad y defensa a otra de "fuera pero dentro" de los mismos, demandando un marco privilegiado de cooperación aún como país tercero" (p. 82).

L'autore conclude il volume sostenendo che un attore geopolitico globale come l'UE si deve rendere indipendente in materia di difesa. Data la situazione dei confini europei, questo diventa un obbligo e una necessità se si vuole assicurare la tenuta dei valori e interessi dell'Unione. Non si tratta quindi di trasformare la natura della stessa trasformandola in un attore militare, bensì si deve garantire il modello di società propugnato, senza che sia vulnerabile né condizionata da pressioni di natura militare o da parte di altri attori internazionali.

A causa della conformazione bilingue il testo non possiede una bibliografia finale né un indice dei nomi, le numerose fonti utilizzate sono ritrovabili a piè di pagina e forniscono al lettore una corposa architettura della ricerca. In tal senso, gli studi adoperati, assieme alla documentazione ufficiale, sostengono questo breve ma ambizioso lavoro rendendolo un libro efficace al fine di inquadrare lo stato della questione e gli scenari possibili nei prossimi anni. Uno di questi è il ruolo maggiormente determinante ed autonomo, a livello internazionale, che avrà l'Unione nella gestione delle crisi di maggiori dimensioni ed entità.

Book Recommendations



Alberto Quadrio Curzio, Marco Fortis (2021). *Pandemia, competenza e ricostruzione. Una svolta necessaria per l'Euro-Italia*. Firenze, Bologna, il Mulino

Europa e Italia si erano progressivamente riprese dopo la doppia recessione del 2009 (innescata dalla crisi dei mutui sub-prime) e del 2011-13 (innescata dalla crisi dei debiti sovrani). Nel 2019, tuttavia, l'economia mondiale aveva già cominciato a mostrare segni di peggioramento a causa della Brexit, delle tensioni commerciali tra USA e Cina con effetti sull'Europa e della crisi dell'auto in Germania. Poi, nel 2020, lo scenario è addirittura precipitato in modo imprevisto e drammatico. Il Covid-19 si è abbattuto sui sistemi sanitari nazionali e sull'economia di tutto il pianeta col suo spaventoso bilancio di contagi e di morti, con il lockdown e la conseguente frenata della produzione di beni e servizi, tra cui in particolare trasporti e turismo. L'Europa ha reagito bene e prontamente al contagio del coronavirus, diversamente da quanto accaduto nel 2011, affiancando agli interventi di liquidità della Bce, misure e finanziamenti senza precedenti per il sostegno e il rilancio dell'economia e dell'occupazione. Sure, Mes e Next Generation EU costituiscono un'opportunità non solo per riportare in positivo il ciclo economico ma soprattutto per una ricostruzione dell'Europa guidata da competenza e innovazione lungo le direttrici degli investimenti in reti, digitalizzazione e tecnoscienze, scuola e formazione, green economy ed efficienza energetica. L'Italia, in particolare, deve cogliere la straordinaria opportunità offerta dal sostegno europeo per ammodernare definitivamente il suo sistema-Paese e la sua pubblica amministrazione, appuntamenti troppo a lungo rinviati in passato. Il treno del Recovery Fund non passerà una seconda volta e quindi non può essere perduto.

Abstracts and Keywords



News media in European democracies and beyond: stable structural conditions but notorious deficits

Tales Tomaz, Josef Trappel

The research and monitoring project “Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) 2021” concluded its third round of investigation by publishing its findings in an edited volume in 2022. This article informs about the theoretical concept, the methodology and approach, the main findings, but also about the unconventional research process itself. Core findings include that leading news media remain core institutions in the diverse types of contemporary democracies, despite the ever-growing recognition and use of digital news formats. However, notorious weaknesses remain over time, such as high degrees of commercialisation, ownership concentration and gender imbalances and inequalities. Leading news media in Europe differ from those in other parts of the world regarding their internal governance and editorial independence. Member states of the European Union score slightly better in the MDM 2021 than others.

Keywords: media democracy; editorial independence; media monitoring, news digitalization; news gender balance; journalism harassment.

EU participatory democracy and EU news media - between complementary policies and sectoral needs. A reality check

Luciano Morganti, Cătălina Dumbrăveanu, Giordano Zambelli

Supporting a resilient democracy and a healthier media sector are at the heart of the political debate regarding the future of Europe. At the end of 2020, the European Commission launched two interrelated action plans – the European Democracy Action Plan and the European Media and Audiovisual Action Plan – which aim to address democracy and media holistically, for supporting a pluralist public sphere, in which empowered and informed citizens are an essential part. In the academic literature, the role of meaningful political participation in a functioning democracy is widely researched and acknowledged. The same goes for the importance of free, independent, and sustainable media for informing citizens, keeping the accountability of policymakers, and fostering public debate. In the context of the European Union, a plethora of studies addresses the impact of media on political participation. However, few focus on the EU's distinct participatory model and the media's role in it.

This article 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 related to media, and their specific sectoral needs. Based on literature review, policy document analysis and survey inquiry, this contribution questions whether the EU approach to linking the strengthening of the European news media sector to the participatory democratic process in the EU is responding to sectoral needs. The article 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 in the Stars4Media Programme, 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.

Keywords: European participatory democracy; European news media; political participation; media policy; European public sphere

Reacting to disinformation. The multilevel EU fact-checking approach

Marinella Belluati, Alice Fubini

The main objective of this article is to investigate the multilevel approach promoted and adopted by the European Union as a response to the fake news phenomenon. On the one hand, the multilevel approach rests on the integration of different territorial levels (local, national and international). On the other hand, it adopts a multi-actor strategy aiming at the hybridisation of competences and increasingly consolidated network strategies, thus trying to overcome the main limitations and inefficiencies of fact-checking and debunking practices.

This article, besides reconstructing from a longitudinal perspective the main stages of development and actions linked to the multilevel strategy, analyses its concrete operationalization within the fact-checking network of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), a certified community of actors created in 2021, which counts 94 debunking projects spread across the various countries of the Union. Each project was analyzed with respect to 12 variables, which can be traced back to three dimensions, respectively: multi-territorial, multi-actor, and fact-checking practices.

From the analysis, the following results emerge: regarding the multi-territoriality dimension, the EDMO network includes and integrates different territorial levels, but remains predominantly focused on the national dimension. Considering the multi-actor dimension, the research highlights that at the macro level the nature of the projects belonging to the network is varied, with an imbalance towards the private sector. Looking at the level of the individual actors (the micro level) involved, there is a low integration of professionalism and still a residual involvement of civil society. Finally, concerning the fact-checking practices the analysis reveals an excessive lack of homogeneity at the methodological level, highlighting the need to develop a common methodology at the European level.

Keywords: Disinformation, Fact-checking, Debunking, European Union, Multilevel approach, EDMO

Le piattaforme per la partecipazione digitale dei cittadini. Un'analisi basata sul modello di UE e Italia

Maria Cristina Antonucci, Andrea Volterrani

Il testo si propone di considerare e confrontare le esperienze europee e italiane di produzione, gestione, valutazione di piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione dei cittadini alle politiche pubbliche. Diversi obiettivi, modelli di costruzione, scelta delle finalità caratterizzano i due sistemi, europeo e italiano: il primo volto a sollecitare una partecipazione ideale verso il modello di Europa del futuro; il secondo è concretamente orientato all'esperienza di partecipazione, con participatory budget e allocazione di risorse per politiche pubbliche localizzate e con obiettivi tangibili (es. riqualificazione delle città). Dal confronto e dalla sintesi di queste due esperienze si possono trarre utili elementi teorici ed empirici per un ulteriore sviluppo delle piattaforme digitali per la partecipazione dei cittadini, in un contesto di crescente domanda partecipativa attraverso formati e strumenti non convenzionali.

Parole chiave: piattaforme partecipative, UE, Italia, partecipazione digitale, partecipazione dei cittadini

The paper aims to consider the UE and Italian experiences of production, management, evaluation of digital platforms for citizens' participation in public policies. Comparing tools and formats of the two models of developing civic participation through ICT platforms, the emerging analysis presents differences in objectives, in the construction models, in the choice of purposes. In the EU case, the system aims at soliciting an ideal civic participation towards the model of Europe of the future, progressively encompassing more and more citizens, while the Italian outline gears towards more concrete and localized experiences of participation, especially in city-level participatory budgets with tangible objectives of urban transformation. From the comparison and synthesis of these two experiences, some theoretical and empirical elements can be drawn, in order to sketch a further development of digital platforms for citizen participation, in a context of growing participatory demand through unconventional formats and tools.

Keywords: participatory platforms, EU, Italy, digital participation, citizens' participation

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

Rossana Sampugnaro

L'Iniziativa dei Cittadini Europei [ICE] è un istituto che fornisce ai cittadini europei la possibilità di un'interlocuzione diretta e senza mediazioni con la Commissione Europea e tramite quest'ultima con il Parlamento Europeo e con il Consiglio. Prevista nei Trattati dell'Unione, la ICE è diventata una concreta opportunità per gli europei solo nel 2012, rimanendo tuttavia poco conosciuta dalla popolazione e poco utilizzata. Attraverso l'analisi dell'insieme delle proposte presentate nei primi 10 della sua implementazione, lo studio si pone l'obiettivo di capirne la natura e l'evoluzione nella prima fase di applicazione. Dai dati emerge che l'interesse per l'iniziativa cittadina europea non sia stato omogeneo nei 28 stati e che vi sia stato invece un coinvolgimento minore negli paesi di più recente ingresso nell'Ue. Il complesso delle policies promosse dai cittadini europei mostra una preponderanza di istanze post-materialistiche, orientate a difendere l'ambiente e i diritti civili e sociali ma anche le peculiarità nazionali. L'esplorazione delle iniziative disegna un'Europa nella quale accanto alle priorità politiche dell'Unione, se ne affiancano altre diverse, ritenute urgenti o solo desiderabili dai suoi abitanti.

Parole chiave: Iniziativa dei Cittadini Europei, Partecipazione politica, Sfera Pubblica Europea

The European Citizens' Initiative [ICE] is an institution that provides European citizens with the possibility of direct - disintermediated - dialogue with the European Commission and through the European Commission with the European Parliament and the Council. Provided for in the EU Treaties, the ICE became a real opportunity for Europeans only in 2012, however remaining little known by the population and little used. Through the analysis of the entire set of proposals presented in the first 10 of its implementation, the study aims to understand its nature and evolution in the first phase of application. The data shows that interest in the European citizen initiative has not been homogeneous in the 28 states and that there has been less involvement in those that have recently joined the EU. The set of policies promoted by European citizens shows a preponderance of post-materialistic instances, aimed at defending the environment and civil and social rights but also national peculiarities. The analysis of the initiatives picture a Europe in which alongside the political priorities of the Union, there are other different ones, deemed urgent or only desirable by its inhabitants.

Keywords: European Citizens' Initiative, Political Participation, European Public Sphere

Involvement of Young Citizens in Transnational Communications flows: Together for Europe

Lucia D'Ambrosi, Mariaeugenia Parito

The article aims at analysing emerging communication flows of transnational public debate supported and promoted by European institutions. Innovative practices that involve youngsters are the main focus. The article presents a qualitative study conducted through the analysis of the together.eu initiative, a pan-European community promoted by the European Parliament after the 2019 elections. The research was supported by semi-structured in-depth interviews with some young Italian volunteers of the community and co-founders of independent organisations.

The results show the ability of young people to play a sort of ambassadors or micro-influencers roles. In such experiences, European institutions work like a connecting point to bring young Europeans closer to each other and sometimes they operate as "activators" of participation. Nevertheless, young activists easily go beyond the institutional framework if they feel confident their own initiatives can reach their peers more effectively. An important caveat emerges in relation to these networks of communication: the young people involved appear to be those already interested in public debates on European issues.

Keywords: European identity, European institutions, youth, social media, public sector communication, higher education students

United we stand: narratives of Latvian leading politicians on unity and values of the European Union during Covid crisis (2020-2021)

Mārtiņš Pričins, Anastasija Tetarenko-Supe

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged the ability of governments to communicate their decisions. The problems encountered highlighted country-specific and long-unresolved issues. The object of the research is Latvia's leading politicians who have profiles on the most popular social media in Latvia - Facebook. The aim of this paper is to analyze narratives of those members of the Government and the Saeima who held positions related to the areas affected by the pandemic and find out how they communicated about the problems of the European Union (EU) and related topics during the Covid-19 crisis. The research case is relevant because Latvians have one of the lowest trust rates in the national parties, the parliament and the government. Also, in the first half of 2021, Latvia faced one of the lowest vaccination rate in the EU. That has influenced the communication of politicians, as decision-making can happen taking into account the mood and perceptions of the population.

The core values of the EU can be identified in the communication of Latvian politicians, permeating a wide range of issues, highlighting the importance of unity and mutual cooperation in the implementation of successful policies. Politicians don't try to broaden the scope of values and goals, but it is possible to observe different interpretations of the breadth of values, adapting it to the position and political goal. Politicians also refer to the EU to cover own faults.

The results are useful for comparing examples of political communication practices during Covid-19 crisis and the reference to European values in National political discourses.

Keywords: Political communication, Narratives, Covid-19 pandemic, European Union, Latvia



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