

Our beautiful country Croatia is the youngest EU Member State. With that said, there are many problems Croatia is facing every day that are still very much new and without proper solutions. Anyhow, as such a small country with many internal problems, we are doing the best we can to face everyday challenges that come with being part of such an important community. During these couple of months, we tried to identify the biggest problems of Croatian/European democracy and we, to the best of our knowledge and abilities, tried to find solutions to them.

We identified three main problems:

1. inadequate formal education on politics
2. distance between EU institutions and European citizens
3. small election attendance

Firstly, inadequate formal education on politics refers to young people not learning in school what active citizenship means and what their obligations towards their countries are. That leads to uninformedness and therefore lack of motivation to become active European citizens, vote at elections, take part in EU programmes etc. Secondly, the distance between EU institutions and European citizens stems also from citizens' uninformedness and indifference towards what the EU does. Because of that, people are not making use of the benefits the EU offers and developing a sense of common belonging. The third point, small election attendance, relates to citizens' lack of hope for any kind of societal change and progress as well as inability to see how one individual can make a difference in something they feel so disconnected from.

In the following text, we made an effort to find solutions to the aforementioned problems as well as to describe why we think those solutions may work and how they can improve our everyday lives as European citizens.

1. Inadequate formal education on politics

In many European countries, Croatia included, a large number of people do not possess adequate knowledge on politics - which is indispensable to one's active participation in society and one's contribution to the betterment of society. Without adequate knowledge on politics, one's role in society is a rather passive one, where one is indifferent towards any societal issues that, by definition, also concern one. Consequently, one is often trapped in a vicious circle of dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in society and incapability to change them.

In order to empower European citizens to become actively involved in society and contribute to its advancement, they should be provided with knowledge on how to achieve these goals. In other words, they should be taught, on the one hand, what active citizenship means, what their roles, rights and duties as citizens are, how politics and political institutions function and how they can take part in policy-making processes, and on the other hand they should be encouraged to make use of this power, i.e. this knowledge. Education is the key.

We strongly believe that the provision of adequate education on politics shall equip one with the necessary tools for active participation in society and contribution to the creation of policies which will also be in one's favour. The directions we propose in which adequate education on politics shall be provided are threefold:

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a) *reform of formal education on politics*

The programmes of school subjects dealing with politics should be re-designed or modified (depending on the current state of those subject in each Member State respectively) so as to ensure that school students in every Member State are provided with fundamental knowledge on the European Union as well as tools for becoming active citizens. This reform would take place thanks to a directive every Member State would follow, and it would comprise the following necessary elements:

- adopting a textbook on the European Union for secondary schools financed by the European Union and constructed by experts on the European Union; the textbook would outline the history, purpose and mission of the European Union, thematise the function and work of the EU institutions and promote European values
- celebrating Europe Day on May 9th by organising workshops and mandatory projects on the European Union with students and for students, both in primary and in secondary schools
- teaching about active citizenship at every level of education

The reform would not entirely change the existing subjects on politics, but would add the aforementioned elements to their programmes.

b) *projects on the European Union*

In order to provide education on the European Union, politics and active citizenship not only to students but also to the groups of European citizens who do not fall under this category, we believe that projects on the aforementioned topics should be organised and run by different organisations. To that end, we propose establishing a special action with the name *EU-ducate* under one of the key actions of Erasmus+ which would be dedicated solely to projects on the European Union and the promotion of active citizenships. As previously stated, the projects would target at different age groups and also at different social groups, they would be funded and promoted by the European Union, and the main product of the projects would be the creation of European citizens who would now have sound knowledge on the European Union, its institutions and their work, mission and function, bridging the divide between ordinary people and the EU institutions.

c) *mobility programmes*

Periods spent abroad as part of mobility programmes give one the opportunity to gain insight into other cultures, broaden one's horizons and, most importantly for this context, they give one the chance to fully understand what European values are and foster the sense of belonging to one big family called the European Union where people are *united in diversity*. Therefore, we assert that mobility opportunities should be more accessible to young people and that young people should be more encouraged to go on mobility.

Specifically, since Erasmus+ is a mobility programme that has achieved considerable success and recognition, we suggest that special emphasis be put on this mobility programme and to bring it on an even higher level of quality, by increasing the grant over time even more so that mobility experience would not be reserved to a small portion of students who can actually afford it. Moreover, we believe that it is imperative to make Erasmus+ more attractive by also working

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more on the recognition of mobility experience both in terms of the skills acquired and of the university courses taken at a host institution. In addition, making Erasmus a mandatory part of university studies would enable an incredibly large number of young people to benefit from mobility periods spent abroad and ensure that all of them get immersed into the *European culture* and acquire the European values. Hence, as our last point in this section we propose that the European Union puts forward the suggestion of making mobility an essential component of university studies to its Member States and their universities.

Enhancing the quality of the education on politics throughout the whole European Union is vital for solving the other two issues of European democracy thematised in this document, namely *distance between EU institutions and European citizens* and *small election attendance*, as it shall provide the European citizens with knowledge on the European institutions, the European Union and politics in general and on the ways one can play an active role in issues concerning the European Union and politics in general, one way being precisely election attendance. The provision of adequate education on politics shall inevitably lead to the creation of active European citizens fit for the challenges of both today and tomorrow who will, through knowledge, have the power to shape their own lives and co-design society they live in rather than passively observing others determining their present and their future.

2. Distance between EU institutions and European citizens

To understand our solutions to this problem, we must take a better look at what makes European citizens so distant from EU institutions. What we lack the most is a sense of belonging to the European community which stems from the lack of understanding of the EU, its institutions and processes. 62% of European citizens believe that their voice does not count in the EU and only about half of EU citizens are optimistic about the future of the EU¹. In order for citizens to feel closer to the European Union, they first must understand how it functions on different levels and how citizens themselves can have an active role in shaping European politics and contribute to policy making. To tackle the aspect of the lack of understanding of the EU and the lack of engagement we propose the creation of an interactive EU Internet platform and Citizens' Agoras.

a) *EUnion – a new interactive internet platform*

We feel as though there is a lot of information on the EU on the Internet that seems to be scattered around. For this reason, we propose a simple, yet elegant solution that is in a way innovative, but also very relevant – an easily accessible and user-friendly Internet platform that would collect all knowledge and information on the EU in one place. We propose the name *EUnion* for this platform. We see it as a platform where one (no matter the age) could make legitimate research for one's own purposes (no matter what those are, for example – a university paper, a journalist article etc.).

This platform should have three large sections containing everything there is to know about the EU, its institutions and its Member States.

The first section would be dedicated to general information on the EU. It should deal with the history of the EU, questions like what the EU is, what the roles of its institutions are, who its

¹ <https://ecas.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Towards-a-crowdsourcing-pilot-at-the-EU-level-1.pdf>, accessed April 13th 2021

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representatives are and what their roles are, and it should also tackle the basics of the voting system.

The second section would be dedicated to the ongoing work of EU institutions. The agenda of the different institutions should be brought closer to Europeans. It should contain information on new projects and conferences that are coming up, explanations of political and economic trades going on at the moment with different countries, but also about regulations and legislatives that are expected to be implemented. We also believe it is important to highlight events like the Conference on the Future of Europe on this platform. This kind of events can have a great impact on civic participation - they show how citizens' voices can be heard, which is why we propose the idea of the Conference taking place annually.

The third section of this platform would be dedicated to news around the EU. It should contain a day-to-day follow-up on the primarily political and economic situation in the EU Member States, but should also have a bit of a cultural background as well, promoting the countries' welfare.

We believe that this kind of a platform could become a very useful and lasting source of information that could help Europeans better understand the processes in the EU. We also feel this could motivate them in joining what we, in our second solution, call Citizens' Agoras.

b) *Citizens' Agoras*

Citizens' Agoras would be institutionalised, political bodies independent from national governments, meaning they would be directly under the EU supervision. They would have to be mandatory for all Member States. The point of the agoras would be to involve citizens in policy-making processes. Listening to them and what they have to say about the EU, but also teaching them about how the community can benefit from the EU, so that later on they could become the teacher in their own communities. Agoras should include people from different educational, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds². The mandate we propose for each member should be from two to two and a half years as we believe this is just the right amount of time for agendas to be implemented. Of course, this would feel more attractive to people if they received a symbolic payment for their duties as active citizens. We imagine this as a body where the EU can listen to its members about what problems bother them at the national level, but can be also seen at the EU level, which would also include discussing the potential ideas and solutions that could be implemented in local communities. We also imagine this as a body that can offer its members education and workshops on the EU, so that once they are done with their training they can go into their communities and start implementing ideas they discussed. This body should have a budget that would finance different workshops and campaigns to bring the picture of the EU closer to its citizens. Members of the agora would work as "teachers" in their local communities and would hold different workshops and campaigns in collaboration with universities, NGOs and local volunteering organisations. With the right platform and the right agora, we feel this would spark a lot of talk about the EU and a lot of interest in involvement to become active citizens who fulfil their duties to their communities.

3. Small election attendance

The European voter turnout average is still low and many voters decide to abstain from the election process. In Croatia there is also a trend of small election attendance. The percentage of

² It should give a voice to every group – students, workers, the unemployed, pensioners, those from rural and those from urban areas, those with university degrees and PhDs etc.

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the voters who participate in parliamentary elections, presidential elections, local elections and European Parliament elections is low. In fact, Croatia had the smallest voter turnout at the 2019 European Parliament elections³ in comparison to other Member States. The EU has been addressing these issues by considering e.g. the option of remote voting⁴, hence we wanted to focus on other proposals. In order to change the aforementioned trend of small attendance to elections, we propose the following:

a) *setting up a European Voters' Day*

European Voters' Day would promote the importance of election attendance, information on the European Parliament elections as well as a sense of active citizenship common to European citizens. We propose all Member States celebrate European Voters' Day every year in May (taking into consideration that Europe Day and the European Parliament elections take place in May, we think it would be appropriate to propose that every Member State celebrates European Voters' Days every year in May as well) on a date commonly agreed upon.

b) *European promotional campaign to increase election attendance (held in May, from Europe Day to European Voters' Day)*

We suggest setting up a designated period of time every year in May to release a media and online promotional campaign that would help increase citizens' knowledge on and participation in the election process. We feel as though a promotional campaign, including different groups of citizens as well as a lot of public faces encouraging citizens to vote over social media, would make a great impact especially on younger generations. The emphasis of this event would be on the importance of voting and the power that is being given through it to citizens. We believe that, with time, this could turn into an important event which would include conferences and workshops that would gather all citizens and encourage them to take on their roles as active members of society.

To conclude, our main goal in the context of this project was to identify problems related to European democracy which European citizens encounter in their everyday lives and for which plausible solution should be found in order for an advancement of European democracy to take place. The problems we singled out demand a fresh perspective and innovative solutions, which we believe to have produced, and we also focused on solutions that closely address the identified problems and are feasible, i.e. possible to bring about actual change. We are convinced that an effective European citizens' involvement in politics and policy making is attainable, however this cannot be achieved without nurturing a sense of common belonging, citizens' engagement and investing in a common educational programme. As with knowledge one has the power to make changes happen and enhance one's own life quality and that of the people around one as well as advancing society as a whole, all of our solutions have the gaining of knowledge at their core. We are optimistic that precisely through gaining knowledge and understanding of the European Union and active citizenship we will see in the near future positive changes concerning European democracy coming about, and we hope our solutions will contribute for those changes to take place.

³ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>, accessed April 14th 2021

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/remote_voting_exec_summary_en.pdf, accessed April 14th 2021