Education and Participation: the Pillars of Democracy
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Introduction to the Issue

The issue we have identified is connected to inclusion and identity among EU citizens. There is a lack of awareness and information about the tools that are available for citizens of the Union to participate in the complex transnational democracy that is the EU, which in turn undermines the transparency and legitimacy of the European democracy and its institutions. In addition, this impedes the creation of a European identity, as people are less inclined to identify with a system they do not understand or have access to. Our aim is to address this problem by focusing on increasing the access of information and participation for all EU citizens.

The lack of access to information is especially problematic in peripheral areas and for demographic groups who lack access to digital sources of information. The reliance on websites and social media, and the excessive use of technocratic language, makes it difficult for a significant proportion of the EU population to access this information, let alone understand it. This is a problem that the EU needs to address in order to be able to reach its citizens.

A report from the PEW Research Centre (2019) shows that 62% of all Europeans believe that the leadership in Brussels does not understand the needs of its citizens, which exemplifies the issue of trust and alignment within the EU population. This disconnection is visible in a report from the EU (2018) which shows that 35% of the EU citizens identifies themselves by their nationality only, 55% of them define themselves first by their own nationality and then by their European citizenship, only 6% define themselves first as European citizen and then by their own nationality, and only 2% would solely define themselves as European citizen.

Our experience from Sweden is that the European Union is seen as one of many multinational organisations, which is purely political, rather than an identity or something that the citizens themselves are participators of. This can be seen within the Swedish education system and in mainstream media debates, which are prone to have a focus on national-, bilateral-, or global issues. It is amplified by the perceived distance between the citizens and the discussions that take place within the EU Parliament.

We believe that it is important to address these problems of information, transparency, and inclusion by providing information that is accessible to all EU citizens. By improving the general understanding of the Union and the tools that are available for participation, we aim to increase the overall engagement, strengthen the EU-consciousness, and improve the European democratic system and its community as a whole. It is our goal to support the trend that shows that younger generations feel more attached to the European Union (European Union, 2018) because we understand that creating a cohesive community takes time. Therefore, we believe that it is important to invest in the future by providing the current and future generations with the necessary information and tools to navigate through the EU democratic system and address contemporary issues, which will increase the legitimacy of the EU and its institutions.

Solving this Issue

We believe in the notion that the simplest solution is almost always the best, and we have therefore strived to come up with simple but effective solutions to our problem – which in part is caused by the complexity of the EU system. We have hence identified two solutions that would increase the access to information and participation in the European Union's institutions.

Solution 1: Writing a Children's Book

Our first solution is directed to the future generations and comes in the form of a children's book. This book is meant to inform and prepare European youths to get involved with its democratic values from an early age. Membership in the European society is not something a person is born with; it is something you gain by participating in said society. A child's identity is determined by its interactions with others and the cultural values it engages with, which is learned through a symbolic system of codes and metaphors (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 148-157). These codes determine the feeling of belonging, awareness, and identity. Thus, the question becomes: How can we expose the next generation to comprehensible information and enable them to explore and understand their role in the   European democracy and society? How do we provide them with the opportunity to engage and develop an identity as a European?

Several studies have shown that books have an important role in the development of children's early literacy and personality. As children read, they acquire a tremendous amount of topical knowledge, they learn how to create imaginary worlds beyond the boundaries of space and time, and they discover the power of the written language (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Durkin, 1966; Wells, 1985). Therefore, we think that a children's book focused on the values and conceptual tools associated with democracy can be an asset in encouraging greater participation in future generations of Europeans. This book would include data that represents both the centre and periphery of the Union, providing easy access to information that will embed the basic idea of the EU democracy in the consciousness of both children and their parents.

How

The context of the book will be determined first, from the data gathered across the EU on the needs of the citizens and second on the scientific literature on how to create a future generation rooted in the basic idea of democracy. We suggest that chapters should be concerned with topics such as: culture and values, history, the rule of law, institutions, and what the EU does for its citizens. The writing will be done through the cooperation of authors from all over the Union in order to provide a broader perspective and representativeness.

Mission

The mission of the book is to reach standards that can place it within the primary education system of the Member States. By having shared information and values across all the countries, a more unified consciousness will be achieved.

Vision

Our vision is that in the future, more series of books with the same mission will be generated and spread across the EU in order to make citizens more aware and homogenize periphery with the centre.
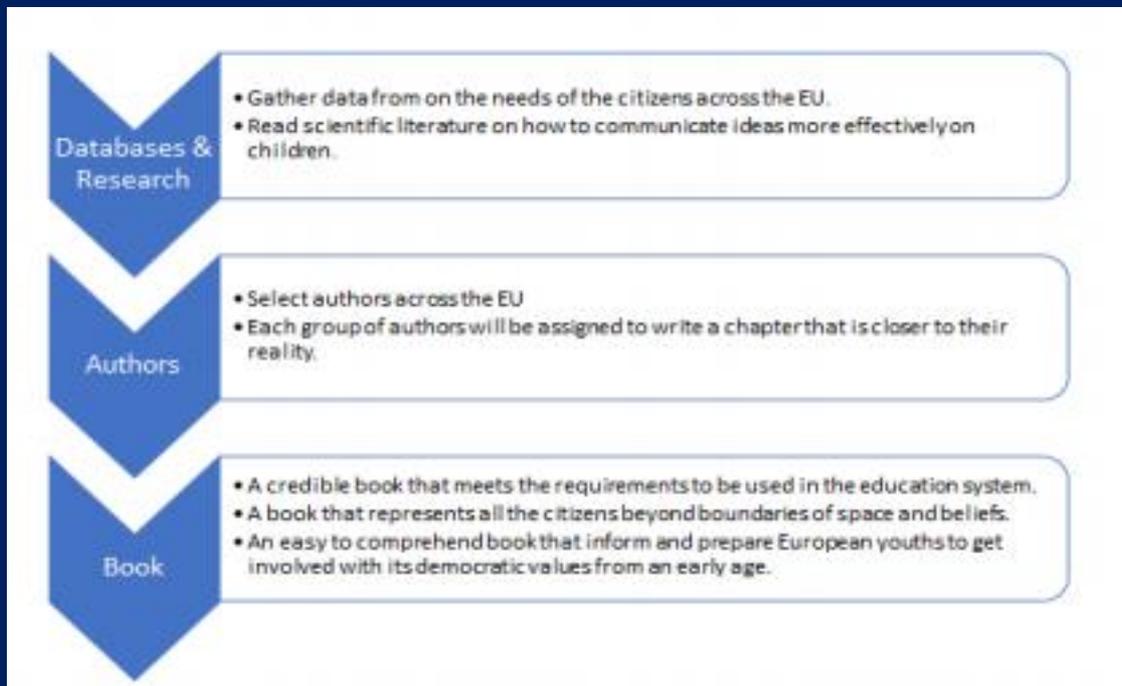
Identifying the Solution

There were two factors that helped us to identify this solution. First, the diversity of nationalities within our group enabled us to notice how different our conceptions of the EU and its democratic system is. These core differences are embedded in us through our participation in the educational system and our social interactions in our countries. We also realised how different the distance to the Union is perceived depending on where you live in Sweden. The second factor is that one member of our team works at a Swedish elementary school, where he has noticed that the awareness of the EU and the notion of belonging to the European Community is almost absent. By combining the first and the second factor, we concluded that there is a significant difference in how EU values and democracy are taught across Europe. Increasing the awareness throughout the Union could create a greater alignment within the EU.

Relevance

We believe that increased awareness and understanding of the EU is key in order to create a greater sense of belonging among its citizens. This will in turn increases the interest to

participate in the European democracy.

Innovativeness

While there is nothing innovative in a book per se, a couple of words in the right order can produce the greatest innovation in history. The innovativeness is in the book's context, which aims to tackle the lack of awareness in the EU by emphasizing the impact of active participation in its institutions. By writing an easy-to-read, modern book based on data gathered on the needs of people, you enable the formation of the next generation of citizens that identify as Europeans.

Feasibility

Practically writing and publishing a book is not difficult. Since the issue we are tackling is at every level, from national to local, the advantage of the book is that it can reach everyone in the Union due to the lack of technological barriers. This makes the solution fully inclusive and easy to implement. In addition, one could consider developing more interactive and technological versions of the book for citizens with such preference or disabilities impacting their ability to read, such as: audio books or electronic books.

Solution 2: The Citizens' Lobby

We propose the creation of a website customised to cross-platform interaction with a mobile application, through which all EU citizens over the age of eighteen can participate in what we have decided to call the "***Citizens' Lobby***". The idea is grounded in a frustration of the strong influence lobbyism has on the decision making in the EU and is an attempt to amplify the voices of the citizens to increase their participation, which would ultimately strengthen the European democracy. Our team would argue that the current website for petitions is lacking in two regards – its user-friendliness and its distance to the decision-making process.

Citizens over the age of 18 would be able to create a private account (connected to their social security number and form of identity confirmation to prevent fake accounts) where they can post ideas that they would like the European Parliament to bring up for discussion. The ideas will be monitored by moderators to screen if they are eligible according to formal requirements. Once approved, these ideas would then be open for other citizens to sign on to, which would work as a petition that is automatically sent to the Parliament after they have reached the number of signatures needed. Municipalities should provide public computers and technological support for citizens who require access and assistance (such as the elderly and people who are inexperienced with technology). The system would have a cutting-edge search engine and allow users to stream the plenaries in good quality. Making it cross-platform would allow people to use the media they prefer. It would also entail a more direct influence on the European democracy, as the petitions that gather enough support would form the agenda of a special monthly plenary at the European Parliament, rather than going through the Petitions Committee. The aim here is to engage EU citizens to take a more active part in our democracy by removing existing barriers between citizens and the

Parliament.

The Citizens' Lobby will be a pilot project that has the potential to replace the current Petitions system in the long run. Indeed, we believe that with this new instrument it is easier to create, find, and share ideas and therefore we agree that it is more efficient than the one in place. However, this change would need an inevitable transition period for the education of the moderators and the creation of an effective procedure respectful of the EU regulations. During this period, these two systems would coexist by empowering the citizens even more, by giving them the possibility to be part of the Union's decision-making process throughout different tools.

Identifying the Solution

The diversity of nationalities in our team means that we have grown up with different views and relationships to the EU. In our early discussions on what issues the European democracy faces, a discussion was brought up regarding the vote in the European Parliament for whether vegetarian food should be able to be referred to by its shape – burgers, sausages et cetera. This sparked a debate between us, where those who have grown up with a stronger EU-identity understood the reasoning behind bringing it up in the parliament while the more critical side saw it as a good argument for why the European democracy is broken, due to the strong influence of lobbying groups. This led us to the realisation that, regardless of what side you are on, the legitimacy of the EU democracy is harmed if parts of its population do not have faith in the system. This, in turn, led us to a discussion on how this perception could be changed, how we could strengthen the legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of its sceptics – which led us to the creation of the Citizens' Lobby.

Relevance

Legitimacy is a crucial part of a democratic system, and we believe that it is possible to strengthen the belief in the European democracy by increasing the involvement of its citizens. Further, this would decrease the distance between the people and the decision-making process, which could enhance their sense of belonging to the Union and its values, principles, and ideas. All in all, we claim that making the citizens feel like a fundamental cog in the EU machine would enhance the efficiency of the entire system.

Innovativeness

The innovativeness of this solution is the tech behind the system, which would replace the current website that we find to be complicated and time-consuming to use, making it an inefficient tool. We believe that the possibility to express our preferences through an application is a fast and intuitive instrument that produces immediate outcomes.

Feasibility

The feasibility of this solution lies in that it enables a higher participation of the EU citizens by implementing a system that already exists. The goal is to adapt to the changing world,

integrating with an app which is available to smartphones, making the engagement in petitions as simple as scrolling through social media. This solution would involve three steps:

Creating the app and website

Educating the moderators

Establishing a monthly citizens' plenary

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Accessed on: 2021-04-18

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