DAAD Alumni Event "Setting Out for the Future – How Can we Drive Europe Forward?"

Policy Brief "Democracy in the EU and a Joint Reform Process"

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Outline

In this workshop, we discussed how democratic processes within the EU can be improved in order to increase citizens' involvement and how they can be protected against antidemocratic forces from both inside and outside the EU. We focussed on the following topics:

1. Governmental and electoral reforms.
2. The role of public service media.
3. Improving the communication of the EU with its citizens.
4. Democratic implementation of the European identity.

1. Governmental and electoral reforms

The panel agreed that the regional dimension is currently underrepresented within EU institutions. Although there is a European Committee of Regions, we recommend integrating the regional level into the electoral structure of the European Parliament. What is more, the parliamentary elections should not only cover the regional and the current national levels, but also include transnational (pan-European) lists. **European citizens will thus have the opportunity to elect MEPs at the regional, national and transnational level.**

Taking into consideration these reforms, we believe that transnational lists would also enhance the appeal of the current *Spitzenkandidat* system for the election of the President of the European Commission, as it would make the candidate electable across the EU, and not just in her or his home country. We also encourage the EU to expand this model by allowing the *Spitzenkandidaten* **to present their presidential teams with possible cabinet members** during the election campaign.

The core concern guiding these recommendations on governmental and electoral reforms is to raise the sense of accountability on the part of the EU legislature and executive, which can be expected to positively impact citizens' feelings of involvement in EU affairs.

2. Media

The panel strongly believes that **the EU should create and fund a high-quality public broadcasting service**, with the contribution of the national public service media of its member states. This should be a journalistic platform in the modern sense, with a strong internet presence alongside traditional television and radio broadcasts. In order to truly become an authoritative and widely respected platform, its focus should be on quality journalism with investigative reports and a worldwide network of correspondents. The BBC may serve as an inspirational example in this respect – and, to some extent, ARTE as well. The aim should be to create a truly European public sphere and thus to foster debate on European issues and to hold European politicians and institutions better accountable. This will help strengthen the

European identity (see point 4) and bring Europe and the EU closer to its citizens. The recently established European Newsroom of press agencies and the so-called European Journalism Observatory may serve as positive models, albeit of a more limited scope. The European public service channel should therefore ideally be available in all national languages of the EU, which need not be a problem given the large number of interpreters in Brussels.

As a stepping stone towards realising this project, **the EU could support both existing and new transnational media projects in Europe**, also those involving only a few of the member states.

We furthermore think it would be wise to combat disinformation by strengthening the existing EU policies in this field. Particular attention should be paid to social media, where – we believe – a lot remains to be done. Policies in this field should, moreover, always keep an eye on the fine line between combatting disinformation and propaganda from outside the EU on the one hand and censoring opinions and legitimate concerns inside the EU on the other. Censorship is, of course, to be avoided at all costs.

3. EU communication with its citizens

The panel recognises and lauds the fact that the EU already provides a lot of its legislation, explanations of its structure and policymaking and other relevant materials on its website. However, we feel that improvements can be made as far as direct communication with citizens and national parliaments is concerned. We therefore plead for an increase in *functional* transparency – that is, no transparency for transparency's sake, but one that seeks to address citizens and national/regional policymakers more directly. One concrete proposal we encourage the EU to implement is to **regularly dispatch the President of the European Commission and the commissioners to national parliaments in order to explain their policies and take questions from national MPs**. These transgovernmental 'Prime Minister's Questions' should, of course, be covered by the European public service media (see point 2).

We think that EU-wide referenda will *not* increase the involvement of the citizens in EU affairs, as such initiatives tend to reduce complex issues to a simple for/against answer, which will do the public debate more harm than good. Instead, we strongly encourage the EU to further roll out the current initiative of citizen assemblies. The EU should aim to include as diverse as possible a group of people in these assemblies.

4. European identity

We believe that the European identity hinges on the principles of *liberal* and *social* democracy. This means that the EU should do everything to uphold and protect the main principles of liberal democracy, such as media freedom and the rule of law. At the same time, the welfare state and social security systems are vital elements in the fabric of European societal coherence. As a result, **the EU should also actively understand, foster and promote itself as an ensemble of social democracies**.

We are convinced that if the EU carries out the democratic and media reforms proposed in this policy brief and if it improves on its communication with its citizens, a stronger European identity will crown these achievements.