

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION, CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND CITIZENS: AN INCOMMUNICATIVE TRIPTYCH

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ABSTRACT

The perception of the actions promoting European construction appears to be particularly flawed. This failure is perceptible because of the numerous elements of misinformation that never seem to have been taken seriously. This article seeks to shed light on the responsibility of the actors of the relatively old organized civil society in this context.

Keywords: citizenship, inclusion, disinformation, democratization

From the very first studies on the development of the construction of the European Union, the leading role of civil society organizations (CSOs) as legal entities (Non-governmental organizations, think tanks, political parties, trade unions) can be noted. They appear in parallel with the work of the neo-functionalist movement in the 1950s 1970s, which is devoted to these interest groups (Saurugger, 2010). The neo-functionalist approach is one of the best-known theories of European integration. Associated with Ernst B. Haas, who developed it in the late 1950s as part of his doctoral research, building on the work of the functionalists, neo-functionalism was later expanded and theorized by Leon Lindberg and Stuart Scheingold in the 1960s 1970s.

The latter was to push European integration towards a new formulation of national sectoral policies. As a result, the actors of the communitarian fad (Haas, 2004; Lancien, 2013) and its “spill-over” are mostly sector-specific rather than state-specific. The “spillover” can be defined as “the expansive logic of sectoral integration” according to “the process by which policy cooperation carried out in a specific way leads to the formulation of new objectives to enable the implementation of the original aims.” Indeed, CSOs then transferred their expectations from the national to the European level. Moreover, the extension of the EU’s fields of intervention over the decades has multiplied the number of CSOs. This makes the picture even more complex to visualize, and, as a result, communicating the virtuous effects of the EU today becomes a daunting task.

Some citizens may feel neglected or threatened by European integration, even though it is supposed to promote inclusion and progress for all. This opinion is expressed in a Eurosceptic discourse according to which the Union has been designed solely by and for its market and, therefore, exclusively for the multinationals, or even the United States, which is particularly detrimental to low-income workers and small businesses. Thus, the CSOs promoting the construction of Europe would have as their sole aim to promote these dominant economic actors, with subsidies decided to align political actions with their sole interests. Consequently, the lack of communication about the European institutions opens up space for misinformation and erroneous conflation, which may explain the rejection of European construction as a whole (Bernard & Kolozova, 2022). The debates on the adoption by referendum of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TECE), which was rejected in France and the Netherlands in 2005, are particularly illustrative in this respect.

If the multiplication of factual or legal checking actions as a response is a first step or a necessary riposte, it is, unfortunately, to be feared that these actions are - still - only addressed to a circle of insiders. The lack of inclusiveness of the EU can be

explained by a persistent confusion between democratization and inclusion, as well as by a biased perception of EU action on inclusion.

The confusion between democratization and inclusion

In 2005, the so-called ‘liberal’ dimension of the CETA was particularly decried. The mistake made by European specialists and institutional representatives at the time was to limit themselves to being annoyed by this assessment from an economic perspective alone – and to ignore what would be called *fake news* ten years later. Obsessed with what they consider to be “rich institutional and democratic advances” (Chopin & Bertoncini, 2005), they forget to be inclusive. The misinformation about the regression of women’s rights at the time is a significant sign of this. The Europe of the wealthy appears to be established, and the proposals resulting from the ASCOs, such as the “most favored European citizen clause” of the former MEP and candidate for the European elections, Giséle Halimi, are not perceptible, to cite just one example. The European Commission becomes a convenient scapegoat for those who want to protect themselves from their political ambitions.

However, some State representatives prefer a Europe of nations, in other words, a Union of decisions taken between the Member States in the (European or EU) Council and as far as possible by unanimity. The promoters of this model, such as the Hungarian political party of Fidesz, insist on the aforementioned shortcomings of inclusion to legitimize their vision which is rooted rather in the interests of their nations’ people, what some call populism (Godin, 2012).

European institutional law, although oriented towards the defense of the democratic rule of law, is not accessible. The resulting lack of communication about the expected results leads to an inglorious description: wealthy people who fund bodies that are not legitimate to act (Vassalos, 2017). What is, in part, the reality is becoming systematic in what can be described as Eurosceptic discourse. Witness the 2018 legislative campaign in Hungary and its public posters - unsigned but attributed to the government - depicting the President of the European Commission, Luxembourg’s Jean Claude Juncker, and the American billionaire of Judeo-Magyar origin, George Soros (Gessem, 2018), accompanied by the slogan “You too have the right to know what is going on in Brussels”. Undoubtedly, the Eurosceptic Prime Minister and President of Fidesz, Viktor Orbán, is addressing all those who feel excluded and is taking advantage of the opportunity to rile people up and make them forget the meaninglessness of such posters. This gives him the advantage of being able to hide behind sulphureous arguments and not to advance what he is pursuing: the annihilation of the challenges to his mode of government in place

since 2010. By presenting themselves as the representatives of citizens who feel ‘excluded from Europe,’ the representatives of the Eurosceptic Fidesz movement can influence decision-making processes at a European level and block any progress when their legislation, which is contrary to the European rule of law, is criticized (Gnesotto, 2022). Thus, while some MEPs are inclined to trigger Article 7 of the EU Treaty (European Parliament, 2020) in order to protect the democratic rule of law, it should not be forgotten that too few citizens know what the envisaged sanction is, which may explain the lack of political will to see this procedure initiated.

The missed opportunity for social inclusion in Europe

While interest groups have always gravitated towards European institutions, consultation with associations active in the field of social initiatives began to take on a certain importance when these issues became a priority on the EU agenda. Rather late, in 1993, after the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the Commission and its Directorate General for Social Policy decided to intervene more decisively in the field of youth, social exclusion, racism and gender equality (European Union, 1993; 1994). A European structural policy is therefore supposed to be developed that would promote inclusion. The objective at this point is for the Commission to support inclusive initiatives through broad consultations with CSOs by strengthening the Community interest vis-à-vis state interests. The Commission would thus have been strengthened within the European institutional triangle: Commission, Parliament and Council of Ministers of the European Union. It is here that EU legislation is drafted, debated and amended by a certain legitimacy provided by the presence of CSOs vis-à-vis the EU Council Ministers.

Unfortunately, events turned out differently. At the request of the United Kingdom, the European Court of Justice annulled the Commission’s decision to fund nearly 80 European projects against social exclusion (European Court, 1998). Prior to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty at the end of 2009, which renamed the Union’s judicial body the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) because of the recognition of the single Union as a legal entity, the term “Court of Justice of the European Communities” (ECJ) was used, which at the time were the ECSC, EURATOM, and the EEC.

While legal doctrine in the 1990s focused mainly on the fact that the annulment may have led to the reimbursement of funds received by the structures (Simon, 1998), it must be admitted that the political message – without going back on the court decision – was to brand social policy actions. States seem to have only the new World Trade Organization (WTO) in mind, which took over from the General

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1995. In this respect, the European Commission has been confronted with the hostility of member states to its intervention in these areas to promote social inclusion, leading to the cruel conclusion that CSOs are shaped by institutional interests (Sminsmans, 2003). This translates in the perceptions of citizens into a very relative interest by the EU institutions in the issue of social inclusion and, worse, into a systematic instrumentalization.

If, since 2019 and the new legislature, efforts have been made to communicate, for example on the leading role of the European Fund for the most deprived in the financing of the association *Les Restos du cœur*, it must be noted that it does not, or hardly, elicit any reaction (*Le Point*, 2019 ; *Les Restos du cœur*, 2019). While we discover that a quarter of the sums received by the organization founded by Coluche come from the EU, the European financial commitment to the fight against exclusion seems invisible. The media prefer to accuse the European Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli – and her ill-fated attempts to promote inclusion – of wanting to destroy the European Christian fundamentals in the guide (*Famille Chrétienne*, 2021), published by her Directorate General in 2021, *Commission Guide to Inclusive Communication* (European Commission, 2021). Such is the outcry that it finds itself having to justify itself: “In no way were our recommendations binding or imposing any way of thinking, acting or speaking about European citizens” (Kovacs & Rován, 2021).

It is a cruel fact that the EU’s communication on inclusion for the purposes of being “woke” (aware of and actively attentive to facts and issues but in a negative way as provoking useless drama) and disruption of our fundamentals appears to be far more effective than the EU’s support for action on the ground to combat social exclusion. Far from simply regretting or denouncing this, funders should probably demand more careful communication from grant recipients about EU support for their social inclusion actions in order to clarify what each is doing.

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