CHAPTER 1

Objectives of This Volume

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1.1. From a Representative Democracy to a Participative Democracy: Practices and Evaluation

Participative democracy – challenging representative democracy – is certainly not a new concept. On the other hand, we did not fully field-tested yet and analysed the implication of its implementation. Where do we put the limits to it? Can that replace fully representative democracy? With which methods should it cooperate with the elected representatives? Politicians, understood as decision makers, are considered to be the counterpart of the action of “participative” citizens that would try to influence them towards better decision for the community. However, we also have the understanding that not all the elements of the questions are clear and transparent. The examples of movements which are outside the usual political representation lines – as it appears in many European countries and as it will certainly be for the election of the European Parliament in 2014 – show that a different role for citizens’ participation is possible. Even if at this stage we do not know exactly how it will look like.

It is indeed time to shape a new form of decision-making. Europe could play a peculiar role as political laboratory as it has been several times since the beginning of a more united Europe. The old forms of politics, attributing a cheque en blanc to the political and “skilled” élite is no more possible. In the first months of 2014, we find ourselves right in the middle of this crisis. Citizens do not feel they have enough preserved rights and means to address the challenges, even though they might have all necessary information. The world is infinitely small and instruments like blogs and on line consultations are already replacing some of the old mechanisms of consultations and representation.

During these months, the different facets of a global crisis in Europe showed its impact. It affects economy and institutions and it demands

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1 All the chapters of this publication for which no author is indicated, have been written by Antonella Valmorbida.
a response at the national and European level. It is not a short-term process. Europeans need an answer to the actions that put many of them under pressure for their present and future. What is the answer Europe gives to it? It is time for a vision, which is probably not enough following the usual line of bureaucracy and day to day politically correct business. We need decisions – some of them might not please everyone and every state. This is an exercise of society visioning citizens in Europe could contribute to.

1.2. What is the Added Value of the Citizen Participation Practices Put in Place in the Last Years?

In the last ten years at least, new forms of consultations and engagement of citizens interacting with decision makers have been put in place. It goes from consultative bodies to more binding partnerships with individuals and their associations. In many fields and for many topics, instruments have been used to reach citizens that usually could not be included, through citizens’ panels for instance (as further described). Furthermore and in particular at the local level, committees of citizens are interacting on several issues with the elected representatives and mobilise themselves to influence the decision making process.

The practice of citizens’ participation in Europe has been praised and valued. In today’s complex and fast society that is extremely globalised, being able to have inputs from the interested parties increase the possibility to reach a better result in decisions and following action. Indeed, the value of citizens’ participation should be proved when the decisions made with this modality creates more benefit that those taken using representative methods only. This is the added value that we would like to give evidence for. The purpose of this publication is also to keep a critical view on the implementation and the practices, in order to give us the opportunity to better plan the future.

1.3. At the End of the 2007-2013 Programmes, What Did We Learn from the Programme Supported by Europe for Citizens?

The Europe for Citizens (EfC) programme, supported by the European Commission, offered many opportunities to support active European citizens. It comes now at the end of a seven years programme and an extensive evaluation of it has already been done. The programme gives the possibility to associations, NGOs, and local authorities (following the paths

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already established with the twinning between municipalities) to build a European identity together. It fosters debates, consultations, interactions with the European Union institutions and decision makers. It helps to fill up the gap between citizens and European Union, that is often perceived as a bureaucracy, distant from the citizens. This programme, even if it is not big with regards to its budget, is a great resource for citizens and local authorities because it is relatively accessible (with the principle of small but many grants) and engages civil society in many ways. The programme – in which ALDA has been a real key player – comes to an end of its actual programming period. This volume will help us to understand methodologies that were supported by the programme EfC with concrete examples. We will also go through added value and difficulties. It is here to mention that the programme EfC recently involved the Western Balkans (covering all the countries) giving all of us a great opportunity to work on the topics of European identity also outside of the European Union. It will also include a wider concept of Remembrance – which is one of the four pillars of the EfC programme – also including the last conflicts in the Balkans.

2013 was the European Year of Citizens. This priority came at the right time. On one hand, many Europeans suffer from difficulties (the standards of living are decreasing and some countries are heavily affected by high unemployment rate). On the other hand, in Europe we are living a period of peace and stability which confirmed that for a large majority of people social protection, welfare and living conditions are better in our continent than anywhere else in the world. In Europe, human rights and justice are – in comparison with all the other continents – of a very high standard. Unfortunately, all these *acquis* are given for granted, while they are great achievements, which could, unfortunately, be put in question at any time. The European Year of Citizens was an opportunity to raise the attention of Europeans towards these achievements, to focus on a new form of citizenship in addition to the national form, and to make our common belonging to Europe more concrete.

The Association of the Local Democracy Agencies is a very active player in promoting citizen participation. It implemented hundreds of projects with the Local Democracy Agencies (based outside the EU) and with our members and partners. It gives the chance to be among those who “work” on democracy and not only talk about it. This is why this publication would like to focus on its experiences and learn from them, from a critical point of view. Its methodology includes the participation of citizens and local authorities in the decision making process.

This publication wishes to contribute to a better understanding of the added value of citizens’ participation in Europe and its neighbouring

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3 www.alda-europe.eu.
countries. A special focus will be given to the exercises and cases implemented at the local level and through the action of the Association of the Local Democracy Agencies, the LDAs, their partners and different stakeholders (institutional and not). It will elaborate conclusions and inputs for the future, in order to take the most of what citizens could bring while being active and engaged.