Democratise Europe Now

Towards a Europe of the Commons

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In May, hundreds of millions of Europeans will vote for a new European Parliament. The incoming Members of the European Parliament will move to Brussels during a crucial moment in EU-history. That is why we, a coalition of organisations that work towards a more democratic society, are making ourselves heard.

Democracy in Europe is in crisis. There is growing mistrust towards politicians and political parties, decreasing citizen participation in civic life and a shrinking civic space. Voter turnout is steadily declining. Even though 'the economy' seems to grow every year, real-wage growth has stifled. People in nine EU-countries earn less now than they did in 2010.

The current economic system has not only worsened the financialisation of our cities, deepened the divide in the distribution of wealth and accelerated the fast-approaching climate collapse, but it has also made it almost impossible to deal with these challenges through democratic means. By way of contrast, we see a rising tide of autocratic movements, fuelled by racism, sexism, ethno-nationalism and xenophobic populism. As they ascend to power all over Europe, they erode democracy and quash universal values like human rights, plurality and diversity.

In order to stop this crisis from deepening, it seems urgent to democratise our societies. However, democratising Europe is much more than just innovating the way we make decisions or how we involve citizens in politics. It goes further than just improving the way we practice democracy. Democratising Europe also means democratising our economies and re-configuring social power structures.

Throughout Europe, we see hopeful examples of initiatives to co-create policies and municipal budgets and to help citizens weigh in on the re-design of public spaces. These are the pioneers of new forms of participation and collaborative decision making. European institutions have a role to play in working with civil society to scale up these initiatives and in working with the pioneers to promote these new strategies horizontally, from city to city.

These projects offer a way forward for the growing movement to innovate the way we use democracy, from a vertical and representative model towards a more horizontal and deliberative model. But if all else stays the same, there is a risk that this democratisation of governance will not help us much. More and more people feel that we need economic democracy, social justice and intersectional emancipation in order to truly democratise Europe.

The democractic and collaborative essence of the commons-approach is helpful. The commons empower citizens through shared ownership and management of crucial resources, putting communities and their socio-economic wellbeing first. Whether it's a group of active citizens re-claiming the park in their city or an international movement to re-think copyright rules, commoners look beyond the market or the state to empower their community. Commoning is about creating value that is not monetary, it's about collaboration rather than competition, regenerative practices rather than extraction.

Bolstering the commons also means taking back control, based on an inclusive new politics of belonging. Embracing the commons gives us a chance to build an empowering narrative for Europe, based on respect for all members of the society and their intrinsic value for the community, for Europe as not just a market with consumers and producers, but as a society with citizens.

This vision can help us democratise our economies and inspire new business models, like cooperatives with worker-owners instead of corporations with hedgefund-powered shareholders. It can empower local institutions

to take the initiative, like the fearless remunicipalisation of community energy resources. The commons approach can inspire the next generation internet technologies to be open, fair and distributed. It can rekindle a belief in subsidiarity and decentralisation of political power and it can re-invigorate the European antitrust regime to increase consumer power over global corporate oligarchy.

Let's Democratise Europe! This moment in Europe's history offers many challenges, but it also gives us a chance to make a real difference. That is why we are launching this manifesto for a truly democratic Europe. Based on the vision laid out here, we will formulate a set of calls for European leaders. In the next few weeks, we will update this list below. Preliminary calls:

*Recognize the commons as an important part of society and the economy and as political vision for Europe. This means moving away from a 'market first' system, moving towards a more equitable economy and a 'society first' system.

*Thoroughly improve the EU's existing democratic structures so that more citizens and experts can engage. This means for example the introduction of pan-European lists and the granting of legislative power to propose laws to the European Parliament.

*Heavily increase EU support for local democratising practices, both towards efforts to scale up these practices, as in their horizontal proliferation. This means experimenting with sortition, participatory budgetting, but also funding municipalist efforts to aggregate succesful local practices to other cities and regions.

*Develop a more citizen-and society-centred vision on Europe's digital information ecosystem. One that prioritises public values and human rights over technological or economic interests. Citizens' interests should be at the centre of a programme for a digital Europe.

*Reserve at least 20% of research and innovation budget on public citizens driven research, involving citizens science, co-creation, design research and transformative social innovation.

Signed by Commons Network, Democracy International, Waag, Netwerk Democratie, European Democracy Lab, European Cultural Foundation, European Alternatives and many others.

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