



European
Commission

REACHING OUT TO EU CITIZENS — SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

*Report by Luc Van den Brande,
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IN SUMMARY

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The EU has recently gone through a major identity crisis, marked by significant economic and social challenges, mounting Euroscepticism and extremism and unprecedented signs of popular mistrust in the European project since the turn of the decade. Taking this into account, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has made rebuilding bridges in Europe after the crisis a key task for his mandate, in order to restore European citizens' confidence. To do so, he proposed two main actions: focusing EU policies on the key challenges and strengthening democratic legitimacy.

In this context, President Juncker appointed Luc Van den Brande, former Minister-President of Flanders and former President of the European Committee of the Regions, as his Special Adviser on outreach to citizens. The mandate included the preparation of a report on how to strengthen ties between the EU and its citizens.

The Van den Brande Report takes stock of the Commission's communication outreach; it is an independent document that does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Commission. It looks at synergies with other European and national actors in promoting dialogue with the public. It sets out a framework for a more citizen-focused Europe and explains how new forms of partnerships with local and regional authorities/institutions and communication technologies can contribute to building new bridges with citizens. It also highlights the importance of engaging Europe's youth as key partners. It concludes with a concrete set of communication guidelines and recommendations. The report is available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/reaching-out-eu-citizens-new-opportunity_en

TOWARDS A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND ITS CITIZENS

Both the political and economic situations are, however, evolving positively. The European economy is definitively exiting the crisis. Trust in European institutions has recovered; according to the Standard Eurobarometer 87 conducted in May 2017, 68 % of the respondents feel that they are citizens of the EU and 56 % are optimistic about its future. The challenge is now for the European Commission and the other EU institutions to seize this momentum and re-engage with the general public with a new approach — a new **attitude**.

Within this framework, President Juncker referred, during his State of the Union Address 2017, to catching the wind in the EU's sails. He also committed to implementing a positive agenda — a Europe that protects, empowers and defends — and to continuing the debate on the future of Europe up until the June 2019 European elections.

The report considers that it is more important than ever that the European Union place citizens at the centre of its political action. To recapture the trust of the public, urgent action based on four complementary axes is proposed:

- Set up policies that respond to the concerns of citizens. People do not only expect **facts**; they also want to be involved in making **choices** that they can discuss and subsequently act upon.
- Implement real, meaningful participatory democracy, providing citizens with the possibility to become protagonists of political action within the Union. This participation, which could be achieved through new forms of partnership agreements, particularly at local and regional levels, would increase the sense of ownership by citizens of the project as a whole. The EU also needs to fully recognise and exploit the know-how of civil society representatives who often define new solutions.
- Fully exploit new communication tools as a means to enable citizens to better access and create content, including on EU matters that directly concern their daily lives. New technologies, and especially social media, empower citizens to express themselves directly and give a voice to people all over Europe.
- Define a new approach to young people as a priority target audience, by developing a values-based narrative to attract the interest of younger generations and provide them with the tools to become the new leaders of the European project. With more than 40 % of Europeans under the age of 35, young people remain, more than ever, key communication and dialogue partners.

MAIN PROPOSALS

The report contains a wide range of proposals. The first group concerns the implementation of participatory democracy within the EU institutions. The author considers that the Treaty and already existing instruments offer a wide range of possibilities to be explored as the promotion of dialogue between citizens at European level is very welcome. This is all the more relevant given that young people prefer politics that are more activity and issue related. The dialogue between citizens and institutions has to be reinforced and opened up as widely as possible to include input from the general public. Agenda-setting needs to be clearly bottom-up, letting citizens co-decide in a reformed model that builds consensus from below.

The report recommends the establishment of a new generation of communication partnership agreements between the institutions and the Member States, to share the responsibility for informing citizens on EU affairs. In this respect, setting up new partnerships with regional and local authorities appears to be the best way to connect with citizens because their proximity makes contact with citizens easier. It also highlights the need to promote the European dimension in education and to better prepare youngsters from different backgrounds and of varying talents to live together **in dialogue**. The social role of education should be fully addressed in the current discussion on the future of Europe. The report also underlines the importance of entitling citizens to fully participate at any level in the common democracy of the Union: local, regional and national.

The proposals also refer to the current activities being implemented by the Commission. For instance, the regular **citizens' dialogues** it is organising throughout the EU help the EU connect with its citizens: between January 2015 and September 2017, 333 citizens' dialogues took place in 145 towns and cities. The more than 500 **Europe Direct Centres**, which play an essential role as partners for interacting with citizens and connecting them with the EU, should become more central as focal points for providing information.

The report includes 15 guidelines for improved communication activities, ranging from better coordination between EU institutions and Member States when communicating on European matters, to launching a new generation of citizens' dialogues, involving cultural, artistic and sporting personalities.

The report concludes with 15 further general recommendations ranging from encouraging bottom-up decentralised 'citizens' assemblies' to reflect and debate on the future of Europe to — based on the Erasmus + experience — promoting new schemes to facilitate exchanges and networks for, among others, local politicians.

The CV of Mr Van den Brande can be found at https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/cv-luc-van-den-brande_en