

# Towards a transnational democracy for Europe



# CIVIC DATA TRANSNATIONAL

European Alternatives is an independent civil society organisation devoted to exploring and promoting transnational politics and culture by means of campaigns, conferences, publications, artistic projects and the annual TRANSEUROPA festival.

We believe that democratic participation, social equality and cultural innovation are undermined by the political form of the nation-state, and that progress in each of these areas will be achieved through the fostering of transnational forms of collectivity.

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## Towards a transnational democracy for Europe

*Lorenzo Marsili, Niccolo Milanese*

Of what is Europe the name?

### **The nature of the crisis**

The financial and economic crisis, of which we have heard so much discussion since 2007-8, is only one aspect of a whole series of underlying political trends which have been apparent for much longer: a crisis of (in)equality and of increased precarity of the workforce, a human rights crisis, a demographic crisis, an ecological crisis, a crisis in civil liberties, and above all a crisis in democracy. The dominance of discussion of the economic and financial crisis over recent years over all these other political problems not only reflects the importance of economic prosperity in our way of life, but is also an expression of a world-view in which the economy is considered autonomously from many other parts of social life to which in reality it is intrinsically connected. The insistence of political leaders in maintaining a state of 'crisis' – a state of exception – for the economy, is also part of a strategy to maintain the

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cover of a separation between economic issues and wider social issues, which gives the crisis an appearance of technicality and delegitimises the expression of political passions and systemic alternatives, while at the same time 'legitimising' a whole series of stealth political and social reforms which go under the banner of 'austerity'.

The economic crisis in Europe has become rapidly a sovereign debt crisis due to the failure to coordinate a coherent political response at a European level. This otherwise highly lamentable situation has at least the advantage of making it abundantly clear that the crisis underlying the economic crisis is a political, and more specifically, a democratic crisis: there is no agreement about how costs should be distributed amongst the citizens of Europe, and no agreement either about the appropriate institutions in which such decisions should be taken so that they are just and regarded as legitimate by everyone concerned. For want of such an agreement, the 'solutions' proposed to the debt crisis in the form of austerity programs and debt financing are regarded either as acts of beneficence by 'creditor' countries for which the beneficiaries ('debtor' countries) should be grateful, or as acts of violence imposed by a foreign power which should be combated, but never by citizens as democratically agreed solutions to common problems. This process has led to a further fragmentation of the European space, with citizens of "core" and "peripheral"



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countries having increasingly divergent capacities to influence European decision-making through traditional mechanisms of national representative democracy. This is the transformation of a previous hierarchy in European decision making between 'old' and 'new' member states; just as the austerity-led response to the sovereign debt crisis in 'Western' Europe is the continuation of the same policies which were applied to the economic crisis in Hungary and Latvia slightly earlier. Now states are 'core' or 'peripheral' in function of their credit-worthiness as judged by the financial markets.

While Europe waits for the German elections to understand the possible make-up of European policies in the coming years, citizens of Southern and Eastern countries experience governments under relative tutelage with an economic roadmap devised for them by European treaties, the IMF and memorandums and not by elections and participation. In reality, the hierarchy between European countries is a projection which will shift based on the interests of those who hold financial and political power: it is therefore misleading to suppose that the divisions are not also within each European country, between powerful and disempowered. The divisions created between and within European societies fracture the perception of a common interest and disempower citizens from exercising real political agency over the future direction of the European space, leading to



further weakening of European-level intermediary bodies (transnational movements, trade unions, NGOs, parties, amongst others) as well as concerted European grassroots action.

With a divide-and-rule strategy, and in the absence of strongly advocated counter-proposals, this situation is being exploited by political and financial elites to advance a uni-directional reset of European politics whereby simultaneously the institutions charged with ensuring the common good of European citizens (the European Commission and Parliament) are undermined by the strongest countries in the European council and the European Central Bank, and unelected and unaccountable institutions are created at a European level to oversee spending at a national level. The approval of the Fiscal Pact, following the European Semester, the Europlus Pact, the Six Pack and the Two Pack, is just the latest European agreement focusing exclusively on the imposition of fiscal discipline and employing an inter-governmental model which limits substantially the power of citizens and parliaments, including the European parliament, to decide over key economic and political choices, further decreasing democratic decision-making.

We do not have the luxury of deciding whether we want or do not want a reform of the European institutional architecture: there is already a quasi-constitutional process happening at the European level in which the citizens are barely having any say because they are effectively divided in national constituencies, allowing the rule of the strongest at the European council to

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continue to dictate policy choices and changes in the rules in a highly unbalanced way. So far citizens across Europe are only offered two perspectives to partake in this process: on the one hand a deeper integration of the EU on the basis of competition, deregulation and liberalization without democracy and on the other the threat of disintegration of the European space. Unless this dichotomy is opposed with positive counter proposals on a transnational basis, it is very difficult to see how any member state or minority coalition of the Union can break this logic which has enlisted the financial markets as its firepower. We need to struggle for the construction of a Europe where citizens, social forces, movements and associations return to have a say over their collective future; a Europe based on real democratic and political processes, able to interrupt the hegemony of austerity and reformulate the way out of our multiple crises. This implies taking seriously the constitutional challenge initiated by governing elites, matching it with a powerful counter-process of a similar constituent character.

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## **The nation-state is not a solution, but part of the problem**

A structural counter-proposal for the reinvention of the European space can no longer be developed and carried out at national level, nor can we find in a return to an already evaporated national sovereignty the answer. This is because:

- The democratic crisis at a European level is only a counterpart to the democratic crisis at a national level: national political institutions no longer have the sovereignty to deal with economic issues they are presented with, both because they have willingly given up some sovereignty in European integration, and also because the globalising world means that they no longer have the agency to affect global trends acting on their own. Political control over the transnational financial markets and the power of capital can most effectively be implemented at a European level, which already has community institutions which could legitimately have their power extended to do this, if there was a corresponding development and extension of democratic control over them.
- Any retreat to an imagined democratic autarky of independent nation-states – thereby undoing the process of European integration – will be hugely costly economically, would most likely fuel resurgent nationalism and xenophobia with corresponding losses of rights for many residents, and would consign European nations and their citizens to a minor role in world affairs and therefore mark a reduction in their political agency.





## The reaction of social movements

Numerous observers have noticed three features of the reaction of social movements to the financial and economic crisis.

Firstly, the protest movements in response to the financial crisis were slow to emerge. There is nothing unusual about that – throughout the history of crises in capitalism social movements have taken some time to react and mobilise – but it does perhaps indicate that economic concerns were distinct in the minds of many from a series of other social, political and environmental concerns which had provoked social mobilisations in the years running up to the economic crisis.

Secondly, the most effective protest movements that have emerged, including the indignados and the Occupy movement, have taken democracy and inequalities as central themes of the mobilisations, and are quite distinct in their functioning from previous social movements, at once reclaiming and practicing



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new spaces and methods of democratic participation.

Thirdly, despite some notable successes in changing media debate, the protest movements since 2008 have had overtones of despondency and regret rather than forceful proposition, and have not yet constituted the emergence of a counter-movement with a strategy to durably and decisively change the political direction of our societies.

If despondency is a characteristic of the social movements mobilising after the financial crisis, it is surely in significant part because of a perception of loss of political agency. This loss of political agency is exacerbated by a reinforcement of the association between income and political and social influence in contemporary society, whereby those who fear a loss in job prospects also fear a loss in political power to influence their world (whether it be through traditional political means or through the 'design' of their world in modern technologies). But especially, it is the direct result of the redefinition of a European space increasingly dominated by inter-governmental processes, political and financial elites, and decision-making structures excluding citizenship and bypassing public debate over key policy choices. Faced with an attempt of elites to conduct a quasi-constitutional codification of new antidemocratic structures of European governance, the critique of existing policies and institutions is no longer enough, and must be accompanied by a positive program for building democratic institutions which will durably restore political agency for European citizens

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and residents. For as long as the institutional infrastructures of our democracies are dysfunctional and do not effectively oblige diverse interests to arrive at a common agreement, protest movements will remain ineffectual and sporadic, and the decision-making structures in our societies will always run the risk of being hijacked or subverted, whether by the strongest actors, or by 'freeriders' and financial elites.

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## Reclaiming Europe by the Citizens

### **A participative constitutional process**

Social movements reacting to the economic crisis lack a developed proposal for a democratic institutional infrastructure in Europe: a democratic infrastructure which guarantees the common interest of Europeans at a continental scale, reinforces political agency of Europeans by empowering them to take part in European politics, and which restores democratic political control and oversight over financial markets and capital. Without such a developed proposal the social movements and citizens in general are likely to remain victims of a thus-far successful strategy of divide-and-rule and remain locked out of the spaces where decisions are taken, as well as to lack a long-term perspective for citizens to be sure they have control over their own destinies and history.

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Such a proposal for a democratic institutional infrastructure cannot be developed by a small number of experts or technocrats, but must be a broad and collaborative constitutional process involving the maximum of citizens. Only if the institutional structure is broadly understood by the citizens, if citizens understand how they can influence and change decisions made through it, and if there is a genuine space of political debate and dialogue within and outside the institutions will the structure be robust enough to guarantee the common interest of Europeans. Most importantly, such a process will allow Europeans to fully assume their citizenship and take part in an inspiring project of creating democracy at a continental scale.

The process must focus on three questions:

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*How to ensure a democratic decision making at a European level in which the interests of people throughout the continent, and the consequences of European decisions for other people affected, are taken into account and the common interest is guaranteed through a just, accountable and transparent process?*

*How to ensure the maximum possibilities for direct citizen involvement in political decision making, as an expression of European citizenship and the best guarantee of common interest?*

*Which economical, political, and social issues are best approached at European level and what legislative competences should democratic transnational institutions have in these areas?*



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Therefore we propose that there should be:

- A process of coordinated debate and discussion of a new institutional structure for Europe through all social movements.
- The enlargement of such debate and discussion to the maximum of citizens through a cycle of meetings, discussions and debates organised in town-halls, schools, universities, cultural spaces and other local venues throughout Europe, with coordination and exchange between these different cities and citizens.
- A multilingual space of online debate and discussion of a new institutional structure for Europe to allow for the participation of the maximum of citizens, also employing the latest online participatory techniques.
- A roadmap developed by a plurality of actors from across Europe representing different social movements, general interest organisations, NGOs and others to agree on a process whereby the citizens' proposals for democratic infrastructure can be agreed upon and a strategy for implementation devised.

This process could run in parallel to 'official' processes at a European level, but would be more effective if it could fully infiltrate and initiate the formal processes and possibly lead to the participatory drafting of a Citizens' Pact or Democratic Pact to be approved by European citizens by transnational referendum. Beyond just a drafting of a new constitutional proposal, such process would itself be an experiment in transnational participation and a testament of the possibility of understanding and practicing European democracy on new bases.

Indeed, the European Parliament and European Commission, as the institutions charged with guaranteeing the common interest of Europeans, should in principle find it fully in their interest to support and participate in such a process. And it is by no means clear in advance that a wide and well organised citizens

movement for democratic reform in Europe would not receive support from all those social groups and institutions currently on the losing end of existing decision-making structures of the European Union. These groups include first and foremost the majority of citizens, civil society organisations, social movements and local authorities of cities and regions, who suffer the effects of decisions made without their participation; trade unions, who are left to fight at national level against increasingly binding supranational recommendations; political parties, who find a narrowing of the political space in member states reducing the possibility of alternative policies; and the European Parliament, which lacks many of the substantial legislative and financial

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powers of control it should have as a democratically elected institution. These groups should group together around the request of a radical reinvention of democratic process in Europe. The recent process of participatory constitutional redrafting in Iceland is an important precedent in the developing of empowering processes where citizens commonly decide their rules for living together. We should not be

so afraid by the scale of the task we face in Europe that we do not dare to start.

Many of the changes proposed by such a participative process may require treaty change of the European Union, and therefore unanimity of the member states. We do not think that



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treaty requirements should prevent European citizens from initiating processes of change and then adopting various strategies for enacting those changes: the important first step would be to establish transnational movements of citizens for a democratic infrastructure for Europe, and then as a second step to adopt strategies depending on legal procedures for forcing the institutional change to be adopted. Leaving all initiative for treaty change to member states, or, worse, just some powerful member-states, is no longer an acceptable option, and reinforces the impression that the only options available are either to submit to the authority of the leaders of the most powerful member states or to abandon all European integration: we think a third alternative is available whereby citizens themselves propose a genuine European democracy.

Democracy is one of the most celebrated European values and institutions, and rightly so. It is deeply engrained in our societies, and all attempts to abrogate it rightly come up against strong resistance from citizens. Democracy and democratic institutions have come under sustained attack by a variety of actors over recent years. We should not be afraid to acknowledge that one of the reasons for this is that the institutional forms democracy takes in Europe have not much progressed since the development of national parliamentary democracy. Part of the reason for the attack on democracy in Europe is our collective inability to imagine and implement new forms of political and democratic participation.

**A positive program for the triumph of politics in Europe rests on our collective capacity to redesign institutions of democracy which can effectively act on our common concerns, projects and problems.**

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We should not be afraid to attempt to develop new forms of democracy which go beyond the national parliamentary forms with which we are familiar, especially at the moment when those national forms are manifestly insufficient and no longer have an effective power of decision or influence. A positive program for the triumph of politics in Europe rests on our collective capacity to redesign institutions of democracy which can effectively act on our common concerns, projects and problems. Those institutions must be built at a European level, where a vacuum left by the citizens is currently being exploited by other forces. The opportunity is to be taken now.



## European Alternatives

With offices in several European countries and a network of members across the continent and beyond, European Alternatives is a uniquely transnational organisation both generating ideas and proposals for transnational politics and culture and in campaigning and organising to bring those ideas into reality.

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European Alternatives is a membership organisation promoting democracy, equality and culture beyond the nation-state.

The current political crisis in Europe presents an opportunity for social movements to take the initiative in promoting new forms of democracy and a new institutional architecture for Europe which guarantee the common interests of all Europeans. We believe social movements, NGOs and citizens themselves must grasp this opportunity before decisions concerning their collective future are taken further out of their hands.

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