



the european convention

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Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

“Could more information on EU policies tackle the democratic deficit?”

1. The subject of today’s Conference – Understanding Europe : the EU citizen’s right to know – is very central to the work of the European Convention. When European leaders chose the method of the Convention to prepare the Union for its future tasks, it was because they wanted an open, transparent and understandable process and no secret negotiations in smoke-filled closed rooms. Also, when they laid down the Convention’s mandate in the Laeken declaration, they included the specific need to simplify the functioning of the Union and to make it understandable to citizens. It should be said that the Convention, from its start more than a year ago, has made a unprecedented effort - both at EU and national levels - to inform citizens about what issues it discusses, why these issues matter and what changes it proposes for the future.
2. I was asked to address the question “Could more information on EU policies tackle the democratic deficit?” It is an interesting question because there are two possible answers : yes and no.
3. Let me start with the 'no' answer. The availability of information is not the same as democracy, nor can it replace it. Democracy is about power in decision making and effective control mechanisms. Information is about knowledge, not power. Seen from this perspective, increasing

information *tout court* will not improve democracy. If you know everything without having any influence, there is no democracy. Most of you will prefer smoke-filled democracy to transparent dictatorship.

4. Many say that there is a democratic deficit in the EU. Others have tried to argue that the democratic deficit is exaggerated. Andrew Moravcsik, from Harvard University, in his recent work went as far as saying that the democratic deficit is a myth. Here is not the place to enter into this debate. What is important is that if the EU suffers from a democratic deficit, there is only one basic thing to do : to increase the power of the elected representatives of the citizens. The elected representatives of the European citizens are located in the European Parliament and in the national Parliaments. (I should also add that many countries have elected representative bodies at the regional level. Often, these also take decisions that are directly relevant to the daily life of Europeans.)
5. In this respect, it is interesting to see that among the many reforms that the Convention will eventually recommend, the most consensual ones concern the strengthening of the roles of the European Parliament and the national Parliaments. With respect to the European Parliament, there is wide support to give more power to the European Parliament by making more legislation subject to co-decision. In addition, members of the Convention have called for making the President of the Commission and individual members of the Commission more accountable to the European Parliament. Many would favour direct election of the President of the Commission by the European Parliament.

6. With respect to the national Parliaments, there is agreement within the Convention to enhance the role of national Parliaments in monitoring the application of the principle of subsidiarity. This principle of subsidiarity stipulates that decisions should be taken as close as possible to the citizen. The subsidiarity mechanism would give national Parliaments a direct say in deciding whether legislation is best made at the European or at the national level. Another recommendation is to enhance the conditions that allow national Parliaments to effectively scrutinise their national governments when these act at the European level in the Council.
7. This double democratic legitimacy of the EU – based on the European Parliament and on member States whose governments are controlled by democratically elected Parliaments – is recognised and further strengthened by the Convention.
8. Earlier, I said that there was also a positive answer to the question “Could more information on EU policies tackle the democratic deficit?”. Why? Because of the existing link between the two : you can have information without democracy but you cannot have democracy without information. In other words, the availability of information is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an effective functioning democracy. Information can never be a substitute for nor fill a gap in democracy.

9. So why is information important? For elected representatives, as well as for the citizens who elect them, it is crucial to have access to information about policy making and policy implementation, both at the national and European level. Indeed, informed representatives will scrutinise more effectively their governments and other executive institutions. Likewise, informed citizens are more likely to elect representatives that really represent them, or vote them away if they fail to do that adequately. Only information can strengthen the bond between the citizens and their elected representatives, which is at the heart of any representative democracy.
10. There is one 'but' to all this : the availability of information does not automatically entail a higher degree of interest. And this is precisely one of the main problems in Europe. The average citizen's lack of interest in European affairs is measured by low participation rates at European elections and the absence of EU issues in national election campaigns. This is a problem that needs to be addressed at national and EU level.
11. From both there must be an effort to join up the debate: at the national level, there must be less resort to the temptation to take credit, at home, for successes, and blame Europe for failures. The EU must not be used as a scapegoat. And at the EU level, there must be much greater effort to communicate with the citizen: the Brussels institutions must not become ivory towers, where insiders conduct impassioned debate in terms which are wholly unintelligible in the outside world.

12. To conclude : the availability of information is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a well functioning democratic system. It may help to tackle the democratic deficit, but it can certainly not solve it on its own. To do this we need to strengthen our democratic institutions, as the Convention is in the process of proposing.

13. What is lacking is not information as such. All the information is already available to the interested citizen (one visit to the bookshop or internet will satisfy the most curious among us). The challenge is to enhance the citizen's interest in the EU. Personally, I doubt that general information campaigns alone can trigger this interest. I believe that interest will come with time, as a natural result of the integration process. The younger generations, who learn about the EU at school, will be more familiar with, understand better and thus be more interested in the EU.

14. If, in the Convention, we succeed to make the EU, its Treaty and its texts, its procedures and its processes, more "understandable", we will have helped to remove a major obstacle that stand in the way of achieving informed interest and involvement of citizens with EU affairs.
