

## „We are the origin of the European Union“

Alexia Duten has won the third place in the IP essay contest

“Don’t ask what Europe can do for you – ask what you can do for Europe!” “What can I do for you, love?” The employee’s question woke me up from my daydreaming. What could she do for me? I mean, what could she really do for me? Help me choose a pair of jeans? Everyone who has once been dragged along in the mission of buying a pair of denims knows that nobody can realistically help a woman in search of a pair of decent, well fitted, slimmer-looking, for-everyday-activity suitable pair of jeans. If she can’t really help me, what is the employee’s role in this shop? I guess her role is mainly to give me the impression that she could help me. She would if I asked her to. Or at least she would do her best. If I let her. Maybe that’s the point: in order to be satisfied I need to know she’s there to help me if I need her.

In a similar way, maybe Europe is counting on her citizens to help her in case of emergency. Has Europe reached emergency yet? Is the uncertain future of the Lisbon Treaty enough to justify the participation of us individuals? In our eyes, two main points seem to determine our intervention: Europe has to “deserve” it and Europe has to “let us”.

First, Europe has to deserve us. We still aren’t so sure what Europe has done for us. It has been providing peace in a geographical region that has been shaken with confrontations,

cross-boarder encounters, harrowing civil conflicts, ethnic clashes, and religious wars. This peace is being built little by little and often we don’t understand its huge significance at our micro-level. It is resting on trade agreements between six founding countries that set up a supranational economic council. Peu a peu Europe has been developing symbols: a hymn, a flag, a currency. Today it stands for much more than it was. The cynic would add: it stands for much more than it actually is.

Indeed, many of us don’t see what Europe has been doing for us. That nearly 80 percent of our national legislation has its origin in Brussels is a fact that slowly begins to make its way to our minds but retains a mostly negative connotation. Brussels is far away. Brussels is full of bureaucrats that earn too much, work too little, and are disconnected from our world. Do they know what a pair of denims cost??? It’s a tenth of my salary! They sure wouldn’t see it as a critical point while making the ends meet.

Above all, Europe has made headlines with economic policies: free trade here, competition law there. The Maastricht criteria and their regular override by some EU members. The cry for a social Europe remains mostly unheard. Europeans want more! We want the same social benefits we enjoy in our home country. We probably want even better welfare systems than

those we know of. We demand transparency and responsibility. We are eager for European rights. Didn't I read about a Human Rights Charter some years ago? So, do I have more rights now?

OK, so the EU has been evolving. In reality it has been progressing a lot in the past few years. It managed an enlargement of twice its size within just over a decade. It has been refining its treaties on a regular basis. It submitted a draft constitution to clarify its status. It has empowered the democratically elected Parliament first as a budget holder to finally make it an unavoidable legislative body.

Parliament means citizen representation. I myself can put someone in charge of representing my ideas and convictions. What a chance! What a pity really that the EU, or more likely its member states, haven't yet found a way to make this election appear "sexy". Every four years it's like Groundhog Day: the European Parliament Elections do not enjoy the media attention they should. Apparently the promoters of the EP elections aren't the most efficient. Maybe national governments are afraid of loosing ground. Maybe it simply is too tedious to enlighten European citizens about these elections. Maybe it is easier to use them for national political disputes: for the parties in power to evaluate their support; for the opposition to weaken and combat the governing parties wherever they can.

So, considering that the EU is sometimes doing something for me, but on the other hand often wasting its energy in bureaucracy, its credibility with demagoguery, and our money on civil servants, do I have a civic duty?

The prime civic duty remains the individual vote. In order to build the Europe we want, we need to elect those representatives that are nearest to our ideals. To ignore the elections of the European Parliament leads to a legitimacy deficit resting on our disinterest as well as to a Parliament whose members are not convinced of its own role; more and more MEPs stand for national, not European, ideals.

"Go Vote!" is easily said, less easily done. It lies in our hands to carry out all necessary steps to be allowed and invited to vote, but also to proceed to an informed vote. We should be proud to be able to elect the European Parliament. What a symbolic weight this election bears! An Italian can vote in Germany, a Swede in Portugal. Regardless of your traditional affiliation, you can choose someone that will

work with his or her European counterparts. A French socialist might be closer to a Polish green than he thinks and get together in order to support a specific amendment. The power of the EU lies in the progress its institutions are making in becoming more effective. With our vote, the Parliament at least can represent Europe's citizens and embed European democratic understanding in its tradition and customs. At the same time it strengthens the check and balances system within EU's institutional structure and gives stability to a project that started just over 50 years ago.

Second, Europe has to let us: let us participate, let us take on responsibilities and let us be part of her expansion. In one of the Commission's many

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white papers (On Governance), the EU institution mentions the increased role civil society should play within the EU structure. Other initiatives and declarations underline similar intentions. In fact, a real hype was constructed around the participation of civil society in EU policy. Much money is spent yearly on programmes such as Europe for Citizens allocating grants to projects involving civil society initiatives. These are manifold and can be projects initiated by sport or cultural association, town twinning, or structural support for civil society organisations. Under this definition one can find interest groups, lobbies, foundations, associations, and think tanks. Unfortunately, this kind of participation isn't benefiting the larger public.

In comparison to other endeavours such as matters of competition policy, Europe for citizens' budget is (relatively) modest: for the 2007-2013

period, 215 Millions Euros are to be allocated. However, finances are not a good enough snapshot

of our disposition to work with the EU. More likely to reveal a better picture is our civic engagement in a variety of fields, be it voluntary work in community building activities, sport clubs, or neighbourhood help. Sometimes we might even be constructing Europe without our knowledge when we participate in CSR activities at work. As a matter of fact, the EU has been encouraging CSR-activities since 2000. Just imagine if Europe would let us. What would we do next? Mmmh? Well, I don't seem to be flooded by your ideas and input, fellow-

citizens! What are you looking at me for? What do I do in matters of civic engagement? Uh... Many good "bottom-up" projects have luckily been carried out, if not from me, from many others. And no, it has nothing to do with our behinds; it just means that we the citizens are at the origin of initiatives supporting the European idea. Despite her apparent non acceptance of help, Europe needs us in her enterprise. We are Europe. We bear our hopes and dreams and project them whether we want it or not onto our socio-political environment. We strike when we are deceived. We sanction corrupt politicians at the next elections. Yet, we need to understand that it is still possible to knead the clay that is the European project. By getting involved, by going to vote, by staying informed, we contribute to modelling our and our children's future. It sure is our responsibility and our duty to take control.

What about the jeans-issue? I bought a pair. Way too expensive. But most likely to become my favourite pair. And anyway: practice makes perfect.

By getting involved, by voting, by staying informed, we contribute to modelling our future



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