



Engaging people in a changing Europe



Editorial

Last spring the Assembly of European Regions published its first "Thematic Dossier" and devoted it to the central role that regions must play in developing sustainable tourism in Europe. In anticipation of the "Etats Généraux - General Meeting" of the European Regions in Poznan, Poland, on November 27-28, 2003, the present Dossier examines the even more profound relationship between regions and democracy in Europe.

Since our founding in 1985, AER and our member Regions have observed with trepidation declining voter turnout, membership in political organizations, and overall confidence in the political establishment. This state of participatory democracy in Europe is especially concerning to us, for it undermines the very basis on which we support regionalism. Regions are close to the people and are therefore in the best position to democratically meet their aspirations and solve their economic and social problems. This is therefore not the first time we address the issue of democracy in Europe, nor will it be the last, but it is an important reminder of work we must still accomplish. We hope it is well considered.

Yours Sincerely, <

Liese Prokop
AER President
Vice-Minister President of Lower-Austria (A)

ANNOUNCEMENT

THE "ETATS GÉNÉRAUX - GENERAL MEETING" OF THE EUROPEAN REGIONS & THE AER GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2003 WILL BE HELD IN POZNAŃ, POLAND, ON 27-28 NOVEMBER 2003. BASED ON THE CENTRAL THEME, "REGIONS ENGAGING PEOPLE IN A CHANGING EUROPE: THE IMPORTANCE OF DECENTRALIZATION FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION," THE GATHERING WILL PROVIDE A STRUCTURED FORUM FOR REGIONAL POLITICIANS TO DEBATE ISSUES AND DRAW CONCLUSIONS REGARDING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY.

Disoriented democracy

On June 4th 1989, 65 percent of Poland's eligible voters showed up to free and open elections for the first time in over 40 years. The very fact that the election took place was indeed historic and marks a turning point in the history of democracy. But just as remarkable as the election itself was its unanimous outcome, which spoke volumes about the actual meaning of democracy to Polish citizens. Solidarity, of course, represented political freedom and responsiveness, and for that it was rewarded in every parliamentary seat it contested. But the vote for Solidarity was more than support for a political party; it was the final affirmation of an entire social movement centered around notions of civic participation on a grand scale.

In the east...

Yet in 2001, just 12 years after Communism fell in Poland, not even a majority of Polish voters participated in parliamentary elections. And as in 1989, the outcome was even more extraordinary than the process: the ex-communist SLD-UP party came away leading a minority government, while the two parties that once made up Solidarity received not a single parliamentary mandate.

More than just voting tendencies have changed in Poland. The Center for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics has just ranked Poland's civil society - which once challenged traditional notions of political participation - the 26th least active out of 33 Western democracies.

Unfortunately, Poland's growing pains are not unique in Eastern Europe. In the Czech Republic, the Communist party is increasingly popular and boasts the largest membership of all Czech political parties. When Hungary elected to leave the Soviet Bloc in 1990, it did so with 75 percent of voters exercising their new right; when it elected to join Europe in 2003, it did so with just 46 percent.

And for the EU vote in Lithuania (and Poland), where it takes a 50 percent turn-out to legally pass referenda, the polls had to remain open an extra day to ensure sufficient participation. In fact, in almost all EU applicant countries, the ques-

tion over EU accession was not about whether enough citizens would say "yes", but rather whether enough people cared to vote.

...In the west

It would be wishful thinking, however, to attribute these tendencies solely to Europe's new democracies. While Eastern Europe was reviving the left, Western European voters have given new life to the right and sometimes the extreme right. Political judgments aside, this has by definition been a sweeping change.



Feeling ignored...

This is not to say, however, that much energy has been expended in the process. Election turnouts everywhere have fallen since the 80's, and civil participation is a waning part of life. Less than a quarter of English voters participated in the 1999 European Parliament elections, and only 30 percent made it to English local elections the year prior. Eurobarometer finds that across Europe only one in two people participate in associations or organizations of any sort. Those who do participate often choose to do through organizations outside of the establishment like Greenpeace, ATTAC, or through various mass movements rather than through political parties or government itself.

...And above

Lest citizens shoulder all the blame, communication also appears to be severed from above. Over 75 percent of Europeans feel uninformed

Photo: Richard Pelletier/Ville de Chaumont



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about their rights as European citizens, and only 26 percent have ever heard of the Committee of the Regions - an institution specifically created to bring the EU closer to the people.

Then again, maybe citizens simply do not want to know what is happening. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2003, nearly 50 percent of Europeans

respond that corruption "very significantly" affects both business and politics in their lives, and nearly one-third say it very significantly impacts the culture and values of society. Another report finds that the citizens in every single EU country would eliminate corruption from political parties before any other area of society.

But perhaps the most important statistic of all is that, according to Eurobarometer, more citizens

are dissatisfied with democracy in the European Union than are satisfied. This suggests that while falling voter participation and shifting political orientations are changing the foundations of European democracy, they are also the product of democracies in need of change. One must interpret the disturbing trends in civil society not as citizens failing democracy - but as democracy failing citizens. <

Where did democracy get lost?

EUROPEAN CITIZENS FEEL ALIENATED FROM THEIR POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, SO TO FIX DEMOCRACY'S SPIRAL, IT IS FIRST NECESSARY TO UNDERSTAND WHY.



Photo: AER

...citizens turn their back to politics

Left turns and right turns

The first reason behind this alienation has simply to do with the failure of the current political establishment to solve specific policy concerns over the economy, welfare, and immigration. This is evidenced by the present shift in the European political spectrum - both to the left and right - where the popularity of extreme parties symbolize a revolt against the old order as opposed to wholehearted endorsement of a new one.

Eastern Europeans are not expressing a desire to return to Communism when they vote for the Communists. Rather, when the Czechs say that the Communist Party is the best guarantor of citizens' security and the second best guarantor of human rights (after the Catholics) - as they did in a recent Public Opinion Research Institute study - they are, according to Czech analyst Jan Culik, simply voting for the only party not to have been "tainted by any of the privatization scandals of the past ten years and that bear no responsibility for the current sorry state of the Czech economy".

And almost the same may be said of the right's popularity in Western Europe. Clearly most citizens disagree with the racist immigration policies of the extreme right, but what they support

is the effort to deal with insecurities ranging from rising crime and unemployment to unsustainable welfare programs. The citizens are saying that they would rather try something outside the establishment than continue to do nothing within it.

Just along for the ride

But there is also a more profound reason that citizens feel alienated from their government. Citizens feel that government policy has failed exactly because it did not listen to what they wanted in the first place.

In many instances, it is the consultation process that is flawed. Bob Rae, former Premier of Ontario, Canada, argues that in Europe and North America "the overabundance of promises and subsequent failure to keep them leads to enormous disenchantment on the part of the public". And even when governments do try to keep their promises, it is often to the detriment of innovative solutions. When one party's agenda seems indistinguishable from its opposition's, or when a government blindly follows its campaign agenda in spite of changing circumstances, citizens blame unresponsive political dialogue.

Rae recalls an exemplary piece of political advice he once received: "the cardinal rule for opposition parties is never to ask a question for which you do not already know the answer". One must first consider here that when politicians display such aversion to new ideas, it is little wonder that citizens refrain from telling them by voting or joining political organizations.

But it is also worth noting the role that political parties can play in fostering disillusionment. Parties, especially in European parliamentary democracies, hold tremendous influence over their MPs and often trump - not convey - citizens' desires. The extensive debate in Great Britain

over the Iraq war is an illuminating case study on this. Furthermore, because a small minority of the population often funds these parties, they provide distorted political access to those wealthy or well positioned enough to contribute.

A popular maxim holds that "voters deserve who they elect." The adage does not withstand scrutiny, however, when the only candidates standing for election are the products of party politics beholden to special interest funding. In this case, government becomes impenetrable even to active voters, and influence must be sought outside of the establishment.

→ Disillusioned European voters cite other, deeper systemic problems. Most significantly, institutions of international government like the European Union and the World Trade Organization - flying under the banner of globalization - simultaneously create new concerns for Europeans while limiting their options to seek redress. On the one hand, the free flow of goods, people, and information fuels insecurities over economic interests as well as the erosion of traditional society and culture.

But worst of all, citizens feel that in addition to creating such problems, this new form of governance has produced a "democratic deficit" that reduces their ability to effectively respond. Every EU institution besides parliament meets and debates behind closed doors, leaving citizens little knowledge of their government and little power to influence it; the government, for its part, is perceived to have little knowledge of its citizens. Feeling excluded and lacking powers of recourse, Europeans have little incentive to proactively participate in politics. They do, however, have an incentive to cynically abstain from involvement or to support anti-EU and anti-globalization organizations that at least promise to listen.

Most generally, citizens feel alienated from politics because they lack an intimate, horizontal relationship with their government. So to rebuild European democracy, it is first necessary to rediscover that relationship. <

Charting a new course

FROM THE UNITED NATIONS TO THE WORLD BANK TO THE ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD), DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE IS CONSIDERED BEST PRACTICE. FORTUNATELY, IT ALSO PROVIDES A ROADMAP FOR RENEWING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENT.



Photo: Győr-Ménfőcsanak Region

Cooperating to integrate: the AER General Assembly in Sopron (Nov. 2001)

Co-responsibility

Decentralized government, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), is defined as *"the restructuring of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels according to the principle of subsidiarity"*.

Two important issues are raised by this definition: The first is the concept of "co-responsibility," which attempts to combat the flawed notion of strictly defined competencies between levels of government. When decision-making is arranged hierarchically like this, each level makes policy independently of the others. But since policies that are supported by one level of government are not necessarily supported by another - consider, for example, the issue of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) with respect to EU and national and local governments - this is an imperfect way of solving problems.

With co-responsibility, however, all levels of government cooperate and hold each other accountable to produce the best result, and democracy is enhanced in two main ways. First, it ensures

that more of citizens' concerns are addressed. For example, when setting industrial regulations, national governments are responsible for maintaining economic growth and employment, whereas local governments must deal with environmental consequences. If the final decisions are made according to co-responsibility and not strictly defined competencies, citizens are assured that one government's agenda does not crowd out the other's.

Second, co-responsibility creates more opportunities for citizens to influence the system. When local or regional votes provide access to Brussels, there is less need to turn to mass movements or anti-EU parties.

→ But while regions fight for greater representation in Europe, they must also remember that greater citizen representation is the ultimate goal. Therefore, regions would do well to apply co-responsibility more generally and to assess whether their own systems are horizontally constructed

and accessible to more than just political parties and their contributors. If not, it is unlikely that decentralization on the European level will ever provide an effective remedy for citizens' disillusionment.

Providing more access to NGOs and other civil organizations is one way to ensure that all sectors of society have a stake in regional politics; decreasing thresholds for parliamentary representation and reexamining campaign and transparency laws are others. E-government will obviously play a significant role in the future of democracy, so steps must be taken develop online communication and to ensure widespread public access. Direct democracy too can be an important way for citizens to voice opinions on key issues like the European Constitution. But the most important point is that everyone affected by the system - not just different levels of government - has a responsibility to develop good policy.

Subsidiarity

But policies must also be implemented, and the concept of subsidiarity, according to the EU,

dictates that *"decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen"*. Subsidiarity recognizes that different groups of people have different needs, so it allows governments to tailor their services accordingly. For example, instead of one national development program, several regional programs are better positioned to address the specific needs of particular territories. By thus personalizing services, the establishment is less likely to miss citizens' desires.

In order for the system to be credible and effective, however, regions and localities must first build efficient and customer-friendly public services. E-Government is central to increasing efficiency and must be part of the process. Interregional cooperation is necessary to establish best-practices and effective solutions to common problems. Corruption of all colors, of course, only leads to waste and inefficiency; unnecessary government programs too divert funds from better uses.

→ Blossoming membership in mass movements clearly suggests that citizens are not politically apathetic. But if the ultimate goal is to involve citizens more closely in government politics, the challenge is to establish creative new forums within the establishment to channel these energies. Therefore, it must be considered that some policies are best devolved beyond government all the way to civil society. This places citizens directly in charge of the programs that affect them and thus ensures that their needs are addressed.

Regions and localities are uniquely positioned to accomplish this aspect of subsidiarity because they have intimate knowledge of what services can finally be devolved to the people. They must therefore constantly reassess how they manage issues ranging from culture to the environment to tourism and decide if an NGO or a self-administering body would better serve citizens' interests.

This does not, of course, necessarily imply a wholesale renunciation of government oversight. Under co-responsibility, all levels would cooperate in decision-making, and regions and localities would ultimately control budgets, permits, and regulations. But by further devolving the actual implementation of services, governments are more flexible and citizens are better served.

Subsidiarity and co-responsibility are obviously complementary: when more policies can be implemented, it is easier to involve more interests in decision-making. As the following cases demonstrate, many regions have found creative ways to exploit this relationship. <

Reoriented democracies

E-Government opens vast new possibilities for improving the relationship between society and government, and innovative regions do much more than simply provide access to information.

Jun, a municipality in Andalusia, considers internet access to be a universal right, and the local government has teamed with Granada University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to provide free computers and internet training to every household in the city. In a perfect demonstration of how the principle of subsidiarity can enhance civil participation, Granada students receive university credit for implementing the government-sponsored program.

The government of Catalonia, Spain, has redefined intergovernmental relations by pledging to remove the need for citizens to supply documen-

ment's web site because it opens debate to the public and provides information tailored to citizens' demands.

→ But e-Government can only be part of the solution, for the "digital divide" can appear just as distant and bewildering as the democratic deficit. So truly innovative regions are also rebuilding their human institutions of democracy.

Lancashire, Great Britain, has been particularly successful in this respect and was recently named by AER "The Most Youth-Friendly European Region 2003" for instilling virtues of co-responsibility and civil participation in its younger generations. The program is based around 12 elected District Youth Councils and a regional Lancashire Youth Council executive, all of which consult with public authorities on issues ranging from recycling facilities to public transportation to discrimination.

According to two Youth Council members, youth participants meet regularly with local and regional County Councilors who "genuinely do listen to us and support the work we are doing" and who successfully "integrate young people into decision making and democratic structures".

Importantly, the County Council recognizes that "not all young people will come forward to make their views known through such formal structures, particularly those that may be regarded as socially excluded". The region thus

actively consults young people with disabilities and those under public care in order to build an establishment that responds to all of its citizens' unique needs.

But perhaps even more important than these formal consultation mechanisms are the underlying values that Lancashire inspires. Through formal education, exchange programs, art, music, drama, and information technology, the region teaches the merits of multiculturalism and active citizenship; through generous program grants and support for the voluntary sector, the region provides youths ample opportunities to actually pursue these notions in civil society.

For example, the Lancashire Youth Council recently led a progressive campaign "to overturn Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which we feel discriminates against gay and lesbian young people". Another enlightened initiative is a forthcoming 100 page "What Now" information and advice book, which provides practical information to incoming high school freshmen on issues

like alcohol, money, and harassment. The Burnley District in Lancashire sent a disadvantaged group of youths to South Africa last year to "share their learning with other young people facing the same barriers to participation".

These and Lancashire's many other youth projects go well beyond simply increasing communication between citizen and government; more fundamentally, they challenge and empower youths to proactively take charge of the programs and policies that influence their lives. This is the intimate relationship between society and government towards which a renewed European Democracy must strive.

→ Of course, this list of innovative and forward-looking regions is not intended to be comprehensive in any way; rather, it deliberately stops short in order to transfer the onus of further discussion to those reading this Dossier: hopefully, citizens and policy-makers. An EU Commission website is listed below that presents many other current innovative programs, and the expectation is that it sparks further ideas and collaboration among governments. But since unique populations require unique services, the final solutions for a better democracy must come directly from the citizens they affect.* <

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*The opinions expressed in this Dossier do not necessarily reflect those of the Assembly of European Regions.

All readers are encouraged to view the AER website (<http://www.a-e-r.org>) for current information on all matters affecting European regions.

The European Commission's e-Government website (http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/egovconf/index_en.htm) is recommended reading for anyone interested in the future of e-Government. The "e-Government 2003 Exhibition Guide" warrants particular attention.



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From left to right, Kate Denham, Emma McGurrin and Arron Taylor celebrate Lancashire becoming the Most Youth-Friendly European Region.

tation (i.e. birth certificates, etc.) that already exists within any level of government or any other official body. The promise involves copious agreements between local and regional administrations to share information over their network, which in turn promotes co-responsibility for improving overall government services.

DenmarksDebatten in Denmark fosters co-responsibility between citizen representatives, public administrators, and politicians at all levels of government by providing access to moderated debates, political polls and statistics, political analyses and opinions, and customized emails on forthcoming events. In the future, it should allow all citizens and politicians to communicate directly.

The Zabalik Project undertaken by the Basque Country Parliament is another attempt to promote co-responsibility, which allows citizens to watch archived debates online, contribute their own opinions, and receive customized emails about current parliamentary motions and meetings. Zabalik has doubled the number of citizens using the parlia-