

The European Democracy Project

The crisis of Europe, caused by the so-called 'euro-crisis', has shown that Europe is standing at the crossroads. European integration has reached a point where its economic impacts are heavily influencing the daily life and – even more important – the lifetime plans of the European citizens. The reasons for this are manifold, it becomes more and more obvious that Europe is actually suffering from an institutional crisis than an economic one. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that the solution for this crisis cannot be defined and dictated by a small group of national political leaders. The problem is so complex that you need a European decision making process with a strong feedback of the citizens to find the solution. The European citizens have to connect and share their ideas and feelings in order to contribute to the solution finding process. The European institutional framework has to give the people the opportunity to bring in their ideas. Due to its special history, AEGEE could play a key role in the struggle for a more democratic and participatory Europe.

1. AEGEE and the Crisis of Europe

Since its foundation in the year 1985 AEGEE is promoting its vision of an open, integrated Europe based on a sense of common identity, shared values and diversity. AEGEE's goal is it to create a diverse network of young people based on trust and mutual understanding. This is why AEGEE was successfully lobbying for the creation of the Erasmus Exchange program in 1987, the biggest program to connect European citizens that Europe has ever seen. AEGEE wants to connect young European citizens in order to overcome national barriers, the organizational structure of AEGEE doesn't know any national levels. AEGEE is therefore the only pure European students organisation. However, AEGEE also emphasizes the ever-active role of the citizens in Europe. This is why 25 years after our biggest success, it is time for the next visionary project.

2. Is Change Possible?

Powerlessness is the dominant feeling that many Europeans, especially in south Europe, have since the outbreak of Europe's economic and institutional crisis. Many people have the feeling that the crisis is too complex to understand it and that it is nearly impossible to influence the decision making process. As a consequence many disappointed citizens tend to vote for populist parties to express their protest. It is time to ask: is change really impossible? An example from overseas shows that change is possible and how it can be achieved.

In the 1980/90s the American political scientist Robert D. Putnam (from Harvard University) invented the concept of social capital after having done research in Italy for 10 years. In his work he could show that local institutions in northern Italy work much better because northern Italian regions have much more 'social capital', that means – in brief – because people there engage much more in politics. When he went back to the US he found out that social capital in the United States was continuously decreasing in the 1990s and described this in his famous book 'Bowling alone' (2000). However, he found out that the social capital began to rise again after 2001. The reason for this was 9/11: for the young American generation it was the first politically molding event that seared into their political consciousness. The question 'how can people do this to us?' made the young generation more interested not only in global or national politics but also in local politics. They started to engage themselves more in politics. However, the ruling Bush administration did not really give them the feeling to be able to participate and influence national decision-making. One of Putnam's students did listen very well to this: Barak Obama. His 'Yes you can'-Movement was based on this theoretical framework and its main conclusion: give the young people

again the feeling that they can change something. They just had to support Obama's Internet election campaign in 2008.

We are convinced that in a certain sense the euro crisis is for many young European people in the southern countries the 'first politically molding event that seared into their political consciousness'. They realize that European integration, as it is practised right now, is influencing, or even destroying their lives (by being unemployed, poor, without good education ect...) but they have the feeling that they cannot influence this process at all. So what we actually need is a kind of 'Yes you can'-Movement to give this people the feeling that they can influence the decision making process on the European level.

AEGEE, with its special history and pure European structure, can play a very important role in this process. This is why we want to launch 'The European Democracy Project'.

3. What can we do?

With the European Democracy Project AEGEE could try to create a forum that gives young Europeans the feeling that they can influence the European decision making process. A more democratic Europe is often rejected because some scholars and politicians claim that there is no 'European Public Sphere' and a 'European Democracy' is therefore not possible. However, AEGEE with its pure European structure could, by using the few democratic instruments that the EU has, demonstrate that a democratic European decision making process is possible. European people can connect to fight together for their rights. By doing this we could try to create a story that is interesting for all: politicians, journalists and scientific scholars.

The European Citizens Initiative and the European Parliament

At the moment the European Parliament and the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) are the only two channels by which European Citizens can influence the European decision making process. However, both of them still suffer from server democratic deficits. The competences of the Parliament are very limited, the ECI is rather a vague recommendation for the Commission and not binding. However, the ECI is at the moment the only instrument to prove that a 'European Democracy' is possible. It is an instrument that connects European citizens for a common political goal. AEGEE, as the only pure European student organization should use the ECI – despite all discussed weaknesses of this instrument – to show in a visionary campaign that European Democracy is possible. A successful ECI, promoted by AEGEE, could show that the involvement of European citizens should be a corrective to adjust wrong decision taken by a small group of national leaders.

Some wrong decisions taken by the politicians show that this feedback is needed. The austerity policy was for example based on a wrong economic model that growth decreases strongly with a debt ratio of more than 90%. The IMF admitted that it had underestimated the impact of the austerity program on Greece.

How does an ECI work exactly?

Launching an ECI is not very difficult actually. All you need is seven people from seven different countries (that should not be a problem for AEGEE...) and a description of your ECI of no more than 500 words.

However, the description of this ECI is the most important part. On the one hand we need a very 'sexy' topic that attracts a lot of European citizens, on the other hand an ECI can just

contain proposals to create or change a legal act of the Commission. Below you can read what this could mean for our project.

The most difficult part is of course to collect 1 million signatures in at least 7 European countries. However, the Commission provides you with a tool that you can implement in your own homepage and this way allows you to collect signatures online. We do therefore not need to collect signatures on the street if we have a 'sexy' topic and a good pr-campaign/ media support.

What shall we campaign for with an ECI?

The main question will be of course how to define one or more ECIs that AEGEE could campaign for. The exact definition will be the first task of our Working Group and has to take into consideration how we can reach the maximum of people's attention and which requirements there are. As already mentioned, the main restriction of the ECI is that you can just make proposals to create or change a legal act of the Commission. The challenge we are facing is therefore...

.. to identify an economic and/or social problem, that is symbolic for the democratic injustice of the euro zone and that could be, at least in part, be improved by a simple legal act of the Commission who, however, was facing too much national opposition from single governments and their national interests to release this legal act.

To be able to find this problem you need a group of people with very different backgrounds:

- Young people from south Europe who are suffering from the crisis (-> What impact does the crisis have on individuals?)
- Students with Economic knowledge who understand the mechanisms of the euro crisis
- Students political and social science who understand the institutional framework of the European Union
- Students who are studying for the bar to verify if our ECI is in line with the requirements of the Commission
- Students of Marketing/ Psychology/ Journalism to create a good PR-Campaign

As a pure European and interdisciplinary student organization campaigning for European integration, AEGEE is the perfect forum to find this solution. However, it will remain a big task and should be the topic of our first meeting. Here are already some examples for the discussion:

- 1) European Democracy ECI: This ECI would ask for Institutional reforms in order to get European citizens more involved in European decision making processes (-> how to combine with a 'legal act' of the Commission? Not really 'sexy' enough)
- 2) European Youth Working Program ECI: This Initiative could ask for a European Program to fight Youth unemployment in Europe; Youth unemployment is one of the most dramatic consequences of the European crisis. The youth should not pay for the European crisis. However, we should think about new, innovative ideas to propose and how we can combine it with a 'legal act' of the Commission.
- 3) OpenFacebook Initiative: Social Networks will be the most crucial instrument to connect people throughout a democratic European polity. They will play an important

role in the opinion formation process of European citizens. However, at the moment the social network is dominated by facebook, which dictates us how we should use social networks by its policies. It can do this because facebook is using a so-called vendor-lock-in: You have to be a member of facebook in order to be able to communicate with other facebook users. You are not able to choose your social network provider (that for example fits your privacy preferences) freely. Furthermore, Europe needs much more competition in the social network industry to create new solutions of social networking to connect Europeans between different nations and create an adequate opinion formation process. Therefore facebook should open its social network and allow facebook users to share contents with users of other social media, just as you are able to send e-mails from one e-mail provider to another. This ECI asks therefore the European Commission to launch a antitrust procedure against facebook (similar to the Microsoft case) in order to open social networks.

The advantages of this ECI would be that you can reach easily a lot of people. It is not as complicated as the issues about European economy and democracy. A lot of people got once upset about facebook and its policies when they introduce the timeline act. When facebook is doing this in the future it will be easy to catch a lot of people to support our ECI on our online homepage. This way you can give people the feeling that they can change something on the European level and we can draw their attention to our other ECIs. Furthermore, the topic would also be very interesting for the media, once we start to get successful.

- 4) Freedom to Protest ECI: Since the outbreak of the global economic crisis Europe has seen all different kind of protests and governments actions to surpress this protests. The reason for these demonstration are that people do not have the feeling to influence the political decision-making process. Politicians refer to the 'unchangeable' conditions of a globalized world (economy) to claim that there policy is without any alternatives. There are many examples: civil unrests in Istanbul at the Taksim square, in Athenes and Rome against the economic adjustment programs, in Stockholm, Paris and London. But also in Stuttgart against the train station project and in Hungary against the new constitution. Also protest movements like the pirats party in Germany or the 5 Stelle in Italy are symptoms of this problem.

Many of the social injustices behind this demonstrations are caused by the consequences of European economic integration. We could therefore try to develop an ECI in which we ask for European-wide (EU members and candidates) standards/ regulations for police actions against demonstrations. In other words: European citizens are asking the European Union for a kind of European Right to protest. Of course we have to think much further about this idea. However, the good think would be that you could connect all the different social upheavels in Europe and unite them for one common European goal.

4. Concrete steps to take

The following steps have to be done:

- 1) Create an AEGEE Working Group or AEGEE-Project and find interested, motivated people
- 2) Find a limited number of well defined ECIs that we could campaign for
- 3) Trying to get funds for our project (from European Commission, Foundations ect, ect.)

- 4) Create a webpage for our project and implement the European Commissions voting tool
- 5) Create a good Public Relations Strategy, including:
 - National media in every country
 - Special media partnerships (e.g. EurActive ect...)
 - A lobby strategy to get the support of members of the European Parliament (e.g. President Martin Schulz ect.)

5. Scientific Advisory Board

Another part of our project could be to create a scientific advisory board to give theoretical support to our campaign. We could try to involve leading institutions that are doing research on the fields described above (e.g. Robert D. Putnam). AEGEE members who are interested in the topic could write their essays or bachelor/ master thesis about these topics in cooperation with the scientific advisory board.

Topics could be for example the definition of 'European Social Capital', the importance of social networks for a European public sphere, ect.

AEGEE could also take part in the process of creating new theoretical approaches of European integration. AEGEE's vision of an open, integrated Europe, its goal to create a diverse network of young people based on trust and mutual understanding and its emphasis on the ever-active role of the citizens in Europe would fit perfectly in a new republican approach of European integration.