

Communicating European Citizenship

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Communicating European citizenship without mentioning it

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This paper describes the development of a European network of civil society leaders, Euclid Network, launched to help civil society cross national borders to benefit from knowledge-sharing and joint initiatives that an integrated Europe offers and requires.

The authors argue that the solution to connecting citizens to the European Union lies in enabling citizens to live as Europeans, taking advantage of all the benefits of integration, connecting with fellow citizens, and participating in the European project.

Civil society leaders are dormant advocates for the EU, interested in the European project but also discouraged by the perception that it is just about politics and institutions; citizens are not in its remit and their views are ignored.

A clique within civil society has thrived in this context: Brussels-based civil society platforms have monopolized the dialogue between European institutions and citizens, flourishing with minimal effort, facilitated by the EU.

Inspired by the success of the Erasmus programme and partially funded by the EC, Euclid Network has developed a new methodology connecting citizens - specifically civil society leaders - through a variety of activities, including twinning programmes facilitating peer-learning and cross-border partnerships. Such engagement coupled with concrete personal benefits has become the best advertisement for the EU and a gateway for European integration.

Euclid Network is aware of the fact that its target group does not really care about the European Union as the highest level of government, finds its institutional set-up difficult to grasp, does not know what goes on in Brussels and is quite often as distrustful or Euroskeptical as your average citizen in the member states. They are probably not impressed by the level of EU democracy and unaware of the improvements the Lisbon Treaty has brought.

Euclid's target group is not concerned with being 'European citizens' either, and we doubt that they are even aware of the fact that they are supposed to become just that. But what a considerable part of our target group is interested in is 'Europe at street level'; a Europe that provides funding for their projects and better laws for their operations.

Apart from gradually learning about European policies, this has them almost automatically interested in both dialogue with different levels of government (as actual or potential providers of (co)financing and potential changers of rules and regulations), and wary of possible threats to their independence and operations from these same levels of government.

Although the remit of our members' work is mostly national, they are also interested in having a single European space for visits, events, exchanges, knowledge-sharing, cross-border partnerships and joint development of ideas and initiatives. This is why they join and this is why we might consider them an 'avant-garde'.

All the above makes our target group a good breeding ground for, indeed, European citizenship -in the sense of being actively concerned with what goes on in their field nationally and willing to look and act across borders to improve things- and leads us to believe that they are dormant advocates for the EU.

They may not like what they are seeing just now, but most (certainly not all) of our members, we think, would like more rather than less Europe, especially where it concerns reinforcing a social Europe and putting a better system of checks and balances for the free market economy in place.

Living Europe

As a professional association; a network of European Civil Society Leaders, we deal with all kinds of sectors: e.g. mental health, refugees, elderly, environment, development, handicapped, poverty reduction or relief. Euclid Network connects and supports members Europe-wide. Our priorities are in the areas of cross-border leadership, good governance, social innovation, income generation and EU policy. We are an infrastructure organisation, but not an umbrella and do not work at grassroots level. We do not consult with organisations, but individual members.

We work primarily for our members, not for Europe. But as Euclid's management team, we think that striving for a just, peaceful and prosperous continent is an extrapolation of what our members strive for nationally.

We also know what our CSO members often do not know: that much of what they work on is framed by European policy and law and that creeping internal market regulation and the third sector make strange bedfellows. We know that this reality is not going to go away and therefore needs to be dealt with accordingly. Not only through citizens' initiatives, but through other activities as well.

Therefore, we have tried to find new ways to engage our members in the European discussion. And we decided to do that starting with what Europe can do for them in terms of practical assistance:

Euclid Network receives core funding from the EU as well as project funding, and facilitates engaging with Europe transnationally or at Community level in various ways.

We have connected CSO leaders in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood nationally, with their direct neighbours and with leaders in the member states.

We support our members by explaining EU dynamics: the institutions and their functioning, policy and lawmaking and lobbying and advocacy; through our website, individually or in groups.

In the area of leadership, we have used the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs scheme to stimulate peer-learning through a series of cross-border exchanges.

In the area of good CSO governance, we have started mapping different member states' range of civil society organisations and are trying to find the common ground for a Pan-European code of good governance. That means defining concepts and values (like independence, democracy, leadership, accountability, governance) commonly used in the governance discourse and finding out if they mean the same thing in different member states.

In the area of social innovation, we inform members of new developments and put them in contact with counterparts in other countries, and hold workshops about social enterprise.

In the area of income generation, we 'teach' both about European funding and the reasoning behind it.

In the area of policy, we take part in consultations, among which the most recent ones about the European Citizens' Initiative and the new Lisbon Strategy, and have chaired a working group that drafted recommendations for the simplification of the financial regulation. We are members of DG Education & Culture's civil society contact group and of the EP's Social Economy Intergroup. We take part in EESC meetings and are often invited to expert meetings and round tables, for topics like 3d sector accountability or IPA/ENPI matters.

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Euclid Network does not normally preach about the EU as a 'good thing' in itself, nor do we propagate European citizenship or lecture about the benefits the EU has brought to the areas our members work in, although this might not be a bad idea at all.

We take the current European reality as a fact and work with it. And truth be told: as a fledgling European network, we would not be able to do all this without European funding.

By working the way we do, we demonstrate the advantages -for the national level- of our members being more than citizens of a single member state: getting to know counterparts and their situation in other member states, exploring possibilities of exchanging information, views, support and cooperation, and finally joining forces in transnational work. This, essentially, is the Communitarian method.

We like to think that this approach will decrease isolationism, provincialism or prejudice and increase European solidarity, and, in the end, lead to our members becoming de facto European citizens.

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