



Involvement of Young Citizens in Transnational Communications flows: Together for Europe*

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Introduction

The citizens' rejection, distrust and distance from institutional Europe emerged several times during the integration process (Hix 2008; Beck 2012; Habermas 2012; Giddens 2014; Fabbrini 2017). Brexit is the most traumatic example, introducing the disintegration issue, the pandemic and the war are the latest one, challenging the EU's ability to deal with an unprecedented event. Also in these cases, scholars have highlighted a generational cleavage (Norris, Inglehart 2019) with the youngest more pro-European Union than the older generations (Lubbers, Scheepers 2010; Lauterbach, De Vries 2020).

The young citizens born in one of the European Union member states have always lived in a Europeanized society without borders for studying, working, and travelling; a lot of them share a common currency and they vote in the European elections as well as in their national ones. We can assume they are properly European citizens in the way they live. However, their experience is socially constructed in everyday interactions and through a hybrid media ecosystem, eventually in a context that could be affected by a nation-based way of thinking (Beck 2004). Mainly, the multiple crises which have afflicted the EU over the last twenty years (economic-financial recession, management of migration flows, and institutional reforms) are intertwined with a cultural backlash as a response against progressive cultural change (Norris, Inglehart 2019) that often turn towards nationalistic reaction linked with populist dichotomous frames. The youngest people, used to living in a deeply mediatized environment, do not inevitably become more cosmopolitan or pluralistic through digital media, even if the ways of communicatively building a community have changed, and a variety of different communities are accessible (Hepp 2020:186). Nevertheless, we assume young people are relevant agents in the European public sphere tending to be reconfigured through horizontal processes of communication encouraged by digital platforms.

A lot of European policies, above all those related to cultural and social dimensions, consider the young people a priority target for supporting knowledge, values, trust, and sense of belonging to the EU. In addition, communication strategies underline the importance of empowering citizens, in particular the youngest, in order to sustain social cohesion and democratic process (Fossum, Schlesinger 2007; D'Ambrosi 2019; Parito 2012, 2019; Belluati, Marini 2019).

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In this scenario, the paper aims to analyse emerging communication flows of transnational public debate supported and promoted by the European institutions. In particular, innovative and autonomous experimental practices that involve young people will be considered.

1. Citizens' involvement in European Public Debate

The research comes within the sociological approach to European integration that is focused on cultural and social dimensions (Beck, Grande 2004; Castells *et al.* 2018), highlighting the importance of sustaining the making of a collective European identity and a European public sphere (Fossum, Schlesinger eds. 2007; Koopmans, Statham 2010; Habermas, 1992 1996, 2014) in order to face common issues, to deal with global challenges, and to manage crises. Mainly, European integration is considered as a project in identity in which a communicative construction is fundamental, indeed, the communication process allows the sharing of meanings and the shaping of a symbolic common space (Delanty, Rumford 2005; Parito 2012; Hepp *et al.* 2016; D'Ambrosi 2019).

The public communication point of view is adopted in this study as an opportunity for European institutions to strengthen democracy and affect citizens' attitudes (OECD 2021), also contributing to a greater societal culture of integration. Several studies have highlighted how the use of a unidirectional process of communication and public bureaucracy's performances, with an institution-centric view, have influenced the relationship between the EU and its citizens, both at national and transnational level (Valentini, Nesti 2010; Luoma-aho, Canel 2020). Moreover, the crises have accelerated the processes of growing distrust in institutions (Edelman 2020).

Considering this scenario, it must be observed that the European Commission and Parliament have developed strategies taking into consideration several dimensions of public communication, in order to improve relationships with Europeans. At the same time, the pervasive use of digital and social media in the context of open government (Lovari *et al.* 2020; Ducci *et al.* 2020), have enhanced communication practices to increase transparency and interact with citizens also in digital activism (Barisione, Michailidou 2017).

The different presence of citizens in public space refigured by the characteristics of social media (Canel, Luoma-aho 2019; Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri 2021) has stimulated new forms of public engagement at local level on political and societal issues (Mosca, Vaccari 2011; Firmstone, Coleman 2015; Bartoletti, Faccioli 2020) and also recent changes in citizens' participation, in particular the move towards a bottom-up approach to debate regarding European values and protection of democratic systems. These innovative forms of connective actions (Bennett, Segerberg 2013) that gain visibility in informal arenas of public debate, highlight a significant mobilisation of citizens on social media to influence policies as well as supporting common causes, such as social media campaigning after the Brexit referendum, petitions on climate change, pro-EU movements (Della Porta 2020; Brändle, Galpin, Trenz *et al.* 2021).

Using a social constructivist perspective, this contribution considers the European public sphere as emerging in the process during which people debate controversial issues (Risse 2011). This is a space fuelled not only by issues spread by legacy media or by debates fed by the political-institutional actors, but also by citizens and civil society organisations. In particular, public communication becomes constitutive for a European public sphere when it is related to the common issues of an emerging society. Thus, to what extent everyday people have a connection to the European public sphere becomes an important question, how they are involved in common European issues, and how controversial these issues are (Hepp et al. 2016).

The suggestion is the European public sphere¹ reconfigured through discursive and horizontal processes encouraged by digital media and within which, we assume, young people are interesting agents (Lauterbach, De Vries 2020). According to Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri (2021), a multitude of coexisting arenas, with different dynamics of power, converge in the public debate, developing differentiated “networked publics” (boyd 2010), “micro public spheres” (Dayan 1998) or smaller “sphericules” (Cunningham 2001) clustered around affinity interests and orienting the flows of communications towards specific “public issues” (Habermas 2006). These processes became even more articulated at the EU level where the political-institutional and social actors and their relations multiply, and also the extensions of the issues, going through local, national and transnational dimensions. Nevertheless, in the European context, governments and civil society organisations could have a relevant and proactive role in negotiating public values on behalf of citizens, also countering information disorder and “polluted” debates because of the characteristics of social media platforms as social bubbles of discussion and often featuring partisan polarisation (van Dijck *et al.* 2018, Marinelli 2021).

In this multifaceted and articulated space, we can argue that young people, mainly those with a higher level of education and socialisation and used to living in a digital environment, have a significant role (Parito *et al.* 2022). The most educated young people tend to have a postmaterialist values orientation, related to autonomy, and self-expression that could generate support for the EU’s normative role in political cooperation (Inglehart 1984). In addition, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards the EU and they feel that European institutions are influential in their time (Down, Wilson 2017; Fox, Pearce 2018). For example, in the 2016 Brexit referendum, age and education divided the EU public more than social class: Brexit reflects the points of view of older voters who feared the cultural threat of open borders and migrations (Norris, Inglehart 2019: 36).

In this context, we assume that a composite European public arena with a variable geometry takes shape through different kinds of information flows, also encouraged by digital media: those produced by European and national institutions, those

¹ For the epistemology of the European public space see Belluati, Marini (2019). The conceptualization of this space is a tricky point. The most used definitions are based on an institutionalised infrastructure, considering the space of interaction between politics and media (Koopmans, Statham 2010; Esser, Strömback 2015). For the aims of this contribution, we remark the role of the citizens in the ongoing process of Europeanization of the public sphere.

produced by news media, and those managed by the various components of civil society. This articulated and dynamic set of information flows shapes a de facto European public space structured in spontaneous and creative forms (Sampugnaro 2015; Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, Trenz 2018; Belluati, Marini 2019). In particular, citizens activating transnational flows of communication, could discursively participate in creating an EU common environment (Barisione, Michailidou 2017), in which they discuss and debate about what the European Union is, how it could be or how it should be.

In such environments, the formation and developing process of Europeanisation can be considered the result of a network of interactions with different actors (civil society organisations, trade unions, political parties) and crossed by journalistic representations about EU-related issues (climate change, immigration, health, human rights). It must be underlined that controversial debates on EU related issues are interesting elements of the Europeanisations. For instance, political party campaigns, such as those for the Brexit referendum, or NGO and civil-society movements on immigration policies or those that take bold actions to stop the war Ukraine - Russia can be considered as a sentinel tool to monitor public opinion through media coverage and discursive strategies around hashtags.

Thus, the crises, stimulating the politicisation of the EU-related issues are occasions for building a post-national public sphere (Statham, Trenz 2013; Grande, Kriesi 2015).

European communication policies, in particular since 2005, have aimed to foster the involvement of citizens, promoting listening and dialogue initiatives, also using the opportunities provided by social media (D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2021). Commission and Parliament have settled goals, tools and strategies to deal with challenges and crises improving information and communication activities. Often they used a reactive approach rather than a proactive one to anticipate the problems to be addressed and a bureaucratic logic tending to evade the controversiality of the common issues, even if this is a proper feature of a European public debate. Most of the various and fragmented initiatives have had less impact than expected (Parito 2016, 2019). Nevertheless some initiatives have used innovative methods, mainly supporting networks of debate and not top-down contents: we can argue whether these kinds of proposals may have been effective.

2. Aims and method

The paper aims to analyse the emerging communication flows of transnational public debate promoted by European institutions. In the context briefly described above, the initiatives supporting the involvement of citizens will be considered, in particular those that encourage, through funding or collaborations, networks of interactions from which contents and actions emerge spontaneously. The hypothesis we investigate is that European institutions can act as "activators" of participatory actions and practices that involve citizens, according to spontaneous trajectories and outcomes not necessarily predefined from formal processes.

The study is focused on the *together.eu* initiative, a pan-European community promoted by the European Parliament after the 2019 elections, as an extension of the *#thistimeimvoting* campaign launched at the end of October 2018. The project is oriented in a decisive way towards citizens' involvement, in particular the youngest, stimulating both participation via social media and the organisation of autonomous initiatives.

Starting from these considerations, some questions arise: how do young people consider the role of European institutions in promoting participation? How are young citizens involved in autonomous initiatives and in emerging flows of communication? What does it mean to be EU ambassadors and which European values do they most adhere to?

The methodology of the research adopts both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The analysis follows two main steps:

- a) A background investigation aiming at studying the project *together.eu*, how the network encourages citizens to participate in democratic processes and to take action as volunteers in the pan-European Community. This first phase of the research rested on a meeting with the coordinators of the project *together.eu* (European Parliament) and on a quantitative analysis of existing datasets on young people's behaviours in respect of EU engagement (Eurobarometer 2021).
- b) A qualitative analysis aiming to explore how young people mobilise others in order to raise awareness towards EU policies and to promote participation. This phase of the research was supported by 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews with young Italian volunteers enrolled in the *together.eu* community, who had a relevant role in getting the citizenry involved in initiatives and actions led by the EU. In particular, some volunteers of the community, and some co-founders of independent youth organisations about Europe² were selected.

The interviews are focused on the ways participation in spontaneous networks around the EU is organised and the meanings and narratives these experiences can have for young people in increasing their sense of belonging in Europe. Some main dimensions of analysis were considered: the educational background of young volunteers, the aims and form of engagement, the perception of the role of European Institutions in getting the citizenry involved, and opinion on their contribution as 'EU ambassadors'. The interviews were carried out during the period October 2021 – January 2022.

3. The *together.eu* initiative: feelings of community?

The first step of the research considers the impact of initiatives or events promoted by the European Parliament in which young Italians become engaged. The analysis is focused on the events and activities organised by *together.eu* to support EU democracy.

² The volunteers (5 women and 5 men) were selected from *#together.eu* and the following youth networks: *One Hour for Europe*, *#Coffe4EU*, *Eu & U*, *Young European Society (YES)*. Most of them have been launched in Italy and then they have spread through other countries of the EU.

The Youth Eurobarometer survey (2021) highlights that a majority of young Europeans (64%) have heard of at least one initiative promoted by the European Parliament: specifically, more than 20% of respondents have actively participated in activities mostly those for students, included in primary and secondary school programmes, through both online and in-person initiatives, visits, and events. Half of these agree that participation made them feel relevant actors in contributing to debate and in influencing what happens in the EU.

This trend appears to be quite similar in Italy, especially for events organised by the European Parliament Liaison Office (38%), the Charlemagne Youth Prize (31%), or initiatives for debate involving contacting a Member of the European Parliament (30%). Specifically, a good proportion of young Italians express interest in programmes, which are more likely to create a feeling of community and public debate, like the #*ThisTimeImVoting* campaign (33%) and the activities organised by *together.eu* (30%). In both these initiatives, citizens have been involved in the political process or have helped to promote the importance of voting in previous elections (fig.1).

Figure 1 The European Parliament's offer: some ways young Italians actively get engaged
Base: Respondents who have heard of these activities (n=1498)



Source: Eurobarometer, 2021

This propensity toward different forms of political and civic engagement is particularly interesting if it is compared to the average at the European level (Eu27): half of young Italians (50% vs 46%) consider voting an important duty in supporting the EU (Eurobarometer 2021). At the same time, young Italians are voicing online their opinions on political and social issues more than others (31% vs 26%), taking part in street protests or demonstrations (28% vs 24%), or joining a youth organisation (17% vs 14%). In this perspective the youth participation moves towards new transnational agencies and trajectories of activism dealing with EU-related issues and values (Deželan, Moxon 2021) in which expressions of "self-actualizing citizenship" (Bennet 2008) and

new alternative forms of resilience in offering support to others and influencing political outcomes (Teorell, Torcal, Montero 2007; Kousis 2017) emerge. Although the institutions remain in the background, young people consider these actors as a source of inspiration for them in fostering the political debate in regards to the EU.

An interesting case study concerns the *together.eu* project from the European Parliament, a pan-European community non-partisan and independent from any political party and ideology, where people of all ages can support the EU. The initiative is promoted by European Parliament Liaison Offices (EPLOs) in the Member States, with the support of the Web Communications unit of the European Parliament.

The official website – *together.eu* – is organised as a collaborative online platform, available in different EU languages, which encourages citizens to participate in democracy, to take responsibility for the future and to promote other people's involvement in the European project. As it reports:

together.eu has been developed in order to empower citizens and organisations to play an active role in creating a brighter future in the EU. Users can also share stories and personal testimonies, record actions and events, suggest and organise events for the rest of the community, and contribute promotional material to support Parliament's communications.

Some preliminary considerations concern the impact of this initiative. More than 83,000 people joined the *together.eu* platform, around 19,000 of whom were more deeply involved in the activities promoted and organised by the offices or in spontaneous initiatives. The countries with the highest number of subscribers are Germany (over 9 thousand), Spain, and Italy, which far exceed the threshold of 8 thousand subscribers³. Most of the members turned to the *together.eu* platform after their experience in the *#Thistimelmvotingcampaign*, which, as we have seen above, had engaged a good proportion of young people.

A focus on participation in Italy shows that, according to Eurobarometer (2021), respondents who have taken part in this activity are mainly male (56%) and in young adulthood, aged 20-25 years (42%) and 26-30 (30%), with higher educational level (table 1).

Table 1 Events or online activities organised by *together.eu* (IT) by gender and age

Base: Respondents who have taken part in this activity (base n: 121)

Gender	
Male	56%
Female	44%
Age	
16 - 19 years	28%
20 - 25 years	42%
26 - 30 years	30%

Source: Eurobarometer, 2021

One of the main aims of the project *together.eu* is promoting Europe-wide integrated debate on cross cutting issues. In particular, the EU-related issues involving Italian citizens are more focused on the 'future for Europe' and the 'opportunity for young'. Moreover, questions on universal values and social problems (such as 'human rights', 'environment') are reported as relevant.

³ Information was provided by the coordinators of the project and dates to 31 August 2021. Data relating to age, gender or level of education are not required for registration on the platform and are therefore not available.

The interaction with the volunteers is managed through the online platform. For better monitoring the engagement and the discursive dynamics of the *together.eu* community, other institutional social channels are not used. An informal pan-European Facebook group is used by the community members to share ideas and best practices, with the Webcomm unit of the European Parliament in a facilitating role.

As the coordinators of the project claim:

The goal is to foster dissemination of actions and development of pan-European actions by providing together-volunteers with a space to exchange ideas between themselves, share experiences and meet other volunteers across Europe, as well as for the European Parliament team to support them in their volunteering journey with visuals, tutorial videos or with events such as Facebook Lives or Zoom cafés.

An open approach is promoted by the European Parliament in using the *together.eu* community to foster cooperation around EU-related issues and building opportunities for interactions. Interesting is the attempt to motivate the more active members to play a sort of role as opinion leader or micro-influencer in reaching out and connecting people from different transnational networks of the debate. The coordinators of the project declare:

Members decide to participate in the proposed activities or to organise autonomous initiatives of their own. In this way, through a more intensive participation in the initiatives, a direct contact is established in supporting the project locally across the countries (e.g. school visits) and online (such as community events).

However, despite these statements, different problems arise in the effectiveness of the participation. First of all, engagement on the platform (in terms of social interactions and comments) appears irregular over time and is often related to some specific initiatives held by people in collaboration with national, regional and local authorities. Especially some trigger events – such as elections or protest campaigns on rights – are important in increasing reactions from citizens and stimulating bottom-up debate. As noticed above, citizens perceive voting in European elections as the most effective way to make EU decision-makers hear their voice. Also the “migration” from the *#thistimeimvoting* campaign to *together.eu* was prompted by a core event that encouraged the activists to still be part of the community.

In the absence of events with high news value at European level, the top-down process prevails, and the online platform plays a purely informative role providing evidence of how European institutions bring *together* volunteers across EU related activities. For example, reporting projects or initiatives, such as *The Conference on the future of Europe*, in order to promote the role of supranational institutions in supporting the feeling of community and European public debate.

Furthermore, involvement in the *together.eu* community, online and offline, is stronger among people, especially youngsters, who are already interested in promoting and protecting EU democracy and common values. Most of these activists come from other networks and trajectories of life where the attitude toward the EU is the framework through which they experiment their role in European society (from

studying to working). The involvement in the institutionalised network is an opportunity for them to build connections and activism in a transnational common space.

4. Young ambassadors: how to turn ideas into experiences

The in-depth interviews with young Italian activists aim to explore their experience and perception about the pro-European involvement.

The interviewees are young adults aged 20-29 with higher educational level. Almost all of them are university students⁴ or are attending postgraduate programmes. Interviewees, considering their experience, suggest that activists involved in the Italian *together.eu*, and also in other pro-Europe networks, are largely university students or have joined the communities during the university period.

The relevance of this educational stage is linked with different kinds of reasons. First of all, the disciplines studied provide a better knowledge and awareness as to the importance of the integration process and living in the European Union; indeed, the youngsters interviewed all have an educational path concerning languages, social, juridical and economic sciences, often with an international view, as do the other activists they declare they know. Of course, disciplines studied may impact on pro-European attitudes and engagement because students who are already more interested in political and social issues tend to choose to study related subjects. However, some researchers suggest that social science subjects can impress greater political interest, awareness, and engagement by leading towards significant changes in how students think about the world and their own role within it (Abbas et al. 2016).

As some interviewees highlight, it is more difficult to involve those who have not developed a European awareness during their studies. Interest in being an active citizen of the EU public sphere is polarised into narratives, online and offline, related to an *echo chamber* effect (Pariser 2011): this explains the difficulties of including in the community people with different beliefs or educational background.

Some respondents claim:

Students from social sciences and humanities are more likely to get involved (Andrea).

Involving people with different ideas into the pro-European “bubble” is almost impossible. We need a cultural change that lies at the root. You can't expect volunteering to do this (Carola).

The opportunities provided by their teachers are other significant elements: some professors seem to have inspired students' activism offering not just disciplinary competences, but enthusiasm too and information about the chances for being actively involved. Also the relationship among students with the same interests is mentioned, both with respect to opportunities for discussion and for sharing activities.

Some research has been carried out on students' political engagement, and it suggests some results coherent with our exploration: the higher education institutions can play important roles in developing students' engagement, for example providing

⁴ It's interesting to highlight that just one of the interviewees, after school, decided not to attend a degree course; in any case, he shows a pro-European attitude in joining the European Solidarity Corps.

safe spaces for new solidarities to form, and gathering together people with particular interests (Crossley, Ibrahim 2012; Loader *et al.* 2015; Brooks *et al.* 2020).

The impact of the institutions emerged with regard to the role of school and EU local offices. Events on European issues promoted by schools have inspired early curiosity and knowledge, suggesting that European policy and strategies aimed at involving the youngest citizens could have an actual impact. The EU local offices affect the young citizens' involvement not just in promoting information regarding EU initiatives, but also in offering a space for discussion and by providing the perception that European institutions are close to the citizens.

Interviewees living in places in which the EU local offices are absent or lacking report difficulties in sustaining their interests and the need for better support. Social media, in this case, are useful in information campaigns aimed at the "general public" but are not at all adequate. Young people are critical of the way institutions communicate with citizens about EU policies and actions, especially to facilitate consensus on the political decisions and the sense of belonging to the European project. A large part of them argue that European institutions promote unidirectional information, increasing the distance between the places where decisions are taken and leading people to think that European issues do not affect their local life (Michailidou, Trez 2010; Parito 2012; Maresi, D'Ambrosi 2017).

Relationships with the men and women working for the European institutions help to see them closer and in a more real-world situation. For this reason some of the interviewees refer that visiting the European Parliament and understanding how members work was an important and inspiring experience. As some volunteers declare:

After being in the European Parliament I realised that politics, and the world of institutions is actually made up of people (Francesco)

In my opinion, European activism is born by doing. The closer you approach European institutions, the more you understand that they are not so far away and that each of us counts (Natasha)

These results seem to confirm the impact of an assumption of the European communication policies which insist on promoting several kinds of personalization strategies and disintermediation. These strategies could be relevant, in particular, in reaching young people.

For the interviewees the involvement with *together.eu* is the continuation of the *#thistimeimvoting* campaign, but, without a clear goal, the renewed community is a structure in which the contents and purposes need to be defined. If some difficulties emerge in reorienting the lines of actions, the young activists plan autonomous initiatives promoting independent networks linked with the institutional structure. As an interviewee has pointed out:

Institutions have stimulated an awareness that we did not have before. This message has passed: Active participation is important at European level. 'One hour for Europe' was born from this awareness. And things took place in parallel with *together.eu*. Two paths that are strengthened and go together with each other. 'One

hour for Europe' is something made with "heart", not institutional. together.eu is the institutional container. We are a kind of rib.... A kind of branch of together.eu (Carola).

The 'volunteers' – as some of them define themselves – consider the role of European Institutions for promoting citizens' involvement as very important, both for planning initiatives and also for supporting the arrangement of autonomous experiences:

The Europe Direct Centres are our strength, since I met them, I have been a 'subscriber'. They are essential and have immense strength. Unfortunately, they are little known, and they are not valued by the local administration they rely on (Pietro).

The interviewees' experiences show several pro-Europe initiatives, with different organisations and aims. The independent activities and the informal network are promoted for trying to respond quickly to specific needs they perceive as urgent. Their main mission is to develop an informed critical attitude (Bakker, de Vreese 2015) on current affairs and with some focus on European cultural and political issues. In such a way, most of these networks are likely to discuss controversial issues and encourage debate to offer a perspective about what Europe is or should be.

In addition, the activists think that information regarding the EU needs to be improved, especially information directed towards young people:

During the first phase of the pandemic, we always heard about the EU, but it often seemed that the EU was doing nothing. So we made an Instagram account, first just for our friends, to explain what EU was actually doing, things that newspapers do not say or not properly (Luca).

This project was born to bring EU closer to young of our age, to underline the weakness, because there are, but also the strengths, and how much European structure affects the national public sphere. But we can do very little compared to television and newspapers, which still consider the EU as a national issue of foreign policy (Martina).

The different kinds of initiatives, those promoted by EU institutions and those autonomously promoted by volunteers, shape a network with a variable geometry in which the young easily operate mixing formal and informal relationships, local and transnational levels, online and offline activities. The organisation model is based on a multifold approach, quite flexible in fitting quickly with the idea and moving towards action and interactions.

Social media are used to interact and debate about Europe considering their differentiated dispositions and functions. For example, the Instagram page is developed and updated to stimulate the network activities, considering the use of visual contents (images, live stories, video animatic), the friendly language and direct communication are more suitable in reaching young people. Some interviewees declare the use of interactive channels as being a key point of the success of these initiatives for infusing enthusiasm and positive feeling towards the EU. In these informal

communities, young people feel more “comfortable” in expressing their voice, even for political ideas. Instead, they perceive some barriers in institutional forms of engagement, mostly due to the processes and language used, sometimes experienced as asymmetric and distant.

It would be nice looking at our webpage as a friendly voice of the European Union (Luca)

It's not easy when a guy interacts with institutions: you don't feel them at the same level. On the other hand, seeing other guys like you who are involved stimulates you to participate too (Andrea)

In this perspective, the interviewees' sense of belonging to the EU seems linked with a view of the transnational public sphere as the common horizon of principles and values in which they live, and they feel they are properly agents of social change. In this European space the role of “facilitators”, “spokespeople”, “influencers” is part of their trajectories in life, made of experiences, relations, actions, and it is encouraged by the strong belief that they are European citizens.

As an interviewee has highlighted:

[...] to create a common sense of European identity we must recognize ourselves in something “unique” or at least similar. Volunteering has to do what institutions are not able to do alone, allowing citizens to unify towards a similar vision of European identity, through a bottom-up process. It is a mission that must be reached every day, in terms of communication activities as well as of experiences (Carola).

Conclusion

Our study suggests that interesting communication flows of European public debate are emerging among young people in contemporary supranational society. Mainly, the most educated young Europeans are relevant agents in networks that seem to adopt an approach that goes beyond the distinction bottom-up vs top-down, instead they appear multifaceted and articulated. The engagement logic in these networks suggests pragmatism and realism among young people who are then able to find expression through different kinds of opportunities: institutional, but also personal and informal; local and transnational connections; face-to-face relationships and those mediated by the social networks sites. In such experiences, the European institutions represent a sort of connecting point to bring young Europeans closer together, and sometimes they can work as “activators” of the participation. Nevertheless, the young activists easily go beyond the institutional container if they feel confident in own initiatives can reach their generation more effectively.

These EU-related networks are fostered by social media (Bossetta et. al. 2018) through which younger generations find “new ways to embody and express democratic values and principles” (Dahlgren 2009: 14). Social media are used with different functions: as organisational infrastructure (Castells 2015), as an environment they live and share with other young people, and as a tool they use with ease to express their European ideas and way of life.

The research was focused on the *together.eu* initiative, to investigate how Italian youth are stimulated by European institutions both in formal networks of participation and the organisation of autonomous initiatives. The results show interesting discursive dynamics concerning the way this project is managed to increase European involvement, based on the autonomous commitment of citizens to play a sort of role as EU ambassadors or micro-influencers. In particular, some trigger events appear to stimulate a feeling of community, for example the 2019 European elections encouraged citizens to join *#thistimeimvoting* initiative and then to stay turned to the platform *together.eu*.

At the same time, the findings highlight some barriers concerning the effectiveness of these institutionalised means of public participation. On the citizens' side, involvement in dialogue and participation is limited to the most educated young people with a propensity towards civic and political engagement and who are often already interested in European issues or public debate. On the European institutions side, *together.eu* and *#thistimeimvoting* are interesting attempts to go beyond the usual top-down approach, nevertheless a strong bureaucratic and centralised way to manage the initiative has emerged. We can assume this method slows down the capability of the local European Centre to react to the citizens. What we observed is an underpowered impact compared to the resources and funds European institutions have invested in communication strategies and actions to involve citizens locally. The institutional communication still lacks the effectiveness of reporting the complexity of the decision-making and guaranteeing a service at all levels that aims to coordinate the information and facilitates its use by policy-makers. These activities require dialogue, debate, and negotiation with the various stakeholders such as journalists who shape its form and content more subjectively, which fuels political polarisation (Parito 2016; Maresi, D'Ambrosi 2017; Trenz *et al.* 2021). However, the recent communication strategies are engaging proactively with civil society to contrast disinformation and promote awareness about the EU, by allowing citizens to make their voice heard and stimulating the sharing of EU values.

New flows of public debate and engagement are growing around Europe (Trenz *et al.* 2021). Our findings suggest these networks are managed by young university students according to spontaneous trajectories and outcomes that are often focused on current affairs which also intertwine universal values and social problems (such as human rights, peace, environment). A European way of thinking and a European way of living seems to emerge in these "transnational citizens" (Balibar 2009), which are characterised by practices and expressions of a self-actualizing citizenship (Bennett 2008). In these networks of debate, facilitated by social media, young students perceive the pro-EU involvement as an opportunity to promote but also to contrast and criticise EU policies (for example, the interviewees disagree with EU responses to the migration crisis or climate change). Working for a different idea of Europe, young generations construct and reconstruct their identities around contexts (Ross 2019) of the social and political environment that intersects their narratives and dynamics of everyday life.

Following this viewpoint, a different orientation of the process emerges: the institutions are not the main driver of the participation but a functional instrument to help the young to generate other nodes of communication flows around Europe.

Some limitations of the study should be noted. First, the number of the in-depth interviews carried out in this explorative research is quite small and limited to young Italians. Second, the individuals considered in this study have mostly a higher education level, with a specific academic background. In addition, the research takes into account the views of young people who are already involved in the dynamics of EU movement and activism. Further research should explore socio-demographic groups with different levels of education to provide additional understanding of the attitudes of young people towards Europe.

In conclusion, this paper makes a contribution to studies that concern the EU-related discourses and practices among the younger generation, suggesting original forms of engagement that need to be observed and conceptualised through new categories and interpretative tools.

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