

Promoting democratic citizenship in Europe: Young researchers initiate network in Zurich

ties. Very few interest groups can actually be called “mediatized.” Most groups communicate, when necessary, in issue-specific editions of their specialist magazines and membership journals, usually below the radar of national news audiences. Their contribution to democratic politics is, thus, often invisible, which does not mean however that they are unimportant. A close-knit network of political interest groups is in itself an asset to any democracy, because such a sponge-like structure of intermediary associations soaks up and solves (or prepares to solve) an incredibly large number of political problems. It is a systemic benefit: they relieve parliaments and government agencies of their already huge workloads. Even within the broader process of the mediatization of politics, most interest group representatives continue to find ways to adapt and efficiently communicate with their stakeholders in their day-to-day work through interpersonal contact and their semi-public communication channels.

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In March 2012, several young female NCCR researchers organized a workshop in Zurich to launch the network DemocracyNet.eu. This network aims to promote democratic citizenship in Europe by connecting young researchers working in the field and by transferring academic knowledge on the topic to society in general.

by Karima Bousbah, Antoinette Scherz, and Rebecca Welge

Who is a citizen? What are the rights and duties of a citizen? What makes citizenship democratic? Central questions for democratic states, these points have been engaging academics and political actors in recent decades. Conceptual and practical conflicts about citizenship revolve around the questions of whose concerns are legitimate and what the duties and rights of citizens are. These questions recur and grow more acute in times of increased mobility, the internationalization of politics, and the questionable democratic legitimacy of supranational organizations such as the EU. In 2011, to promote collaboration among young academics working on the topic of democratic citizenship in Europe, female academics from several European countries created a network. *DemocracyNet.eu* is made up of young researchers from diverse disciplines, all dedicated to analyzing the aforementioned key questions of legitimacy, duties, and rights. In particular, the network focuses on two inseparable aspects of citizenship: how it should be and how it actually is. In other words, how political actors conceptualize the link between state and citizen, and how citizens themselves actually experience their citizenship.

The network pursues two aims: first, to connect academic discourses that have

so far been running in parallel, by fostering collaboration and team work among young scholars. Second, to build a bridge between academics’ “ivory towers” and practitioners’ “real world.” A significant amount of effort will therefore be put into transferring academic knowledge to, and fostering dialogue with, the broader public, specific target groups in civil society, and practitioners active in the field of democratic citizenship in Europe.

Democratic citizenship – between theory and practice

While the research undertaken by *DemocracyNet.eu* members aims to create a more comprehensive picture of democratic citizenship in Europe, its practice-oriented activities are aimed at making European citizenship more democratic. In doing so the group links the normative question of how democratic citizenship should be constructed to the explanatory perspective of why citizenship exists as it does – taking into account all actors in a democratic system. The main research questions relate to several actors, affecting or affected by democratic citizenship: first, how do political and institutional actors understand democratic citizenship in Europe? Second, how is democratic citizenship under-



NCCR PhD students Valeria Camia, Karima Bousbah, Rebecca Welge and Antoinette Scherz (from left) took part in the DemocracyNet.eu's first workshop together with other academics from several European countries.

stood by Europeans and by civil society? Third, regarding institutions, how has democratic citizenship been implemented within Europe? Lastly, the group investigates whether and how citizens make use of the different opportunities they have to participate in the decision-making process. All these research questions clearly take national differences into account. In order to collaborate with other researchers, the group will regularly organize joint conference panels. Further, *DemocracyNet.eu* workshops will take place twice a year. The opening workshop took place at ETH Zurich in April and enabled the development of initial joint activities. The next workshop is scheduled for October 2012.

Apart from research, the group is deeply interested in collaborations that aim to transfer academic knowledge into society and foster exchanges between academics and practitioners. For 2012, two projects have already been planned:

Firstly, *DemocracyNet.eu* is collaborating with the institut franco-allemand (dfi) to create a chat session in which participants in the forum "It's our Europe!" (www.its-our-europe.eu) discuss with researchers their ideas regarding institutional participation mechanisms in Europe. Secondly, *DemocracyNet.eu* will take part in a symposium on "creative participation" in October 2012. The event will be held at the educational institution Haus am Maiberg in Germany and address representatives of the education sector.

In order to facilitate collaboration, the group has launched an online platform – www.DemocracyNet.eu – providing information concerning the group's goals, the participating researchers, and projects such as upcoming workshops or other collaborative activities.

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