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DARING A EUROPEAN
PUBLIC SPHERE

PAVING THE
WAY TOWARDS

DISCOURSES
FOR ALL

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DARING A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE:

PAVING THE WAY TOWARDS DISCOURSES FOR ALL

This paper outlines challenges and opportunities to creating a robust and resilient European public sphere. First, we present an overarching vision of a possible European public sphere in 2025 as well as milestones that need to be reached to achieve such a reality. We then narrow in by presenting a vision of how European discourses can thrive in 2025. These bold visions assist us in developing policy recommendations and gathering existing successful practices that bring us closer to a truly European public sphere. The ideas presented in this paper are an outcome of a collaborative and co-creative process of experts and professionals passionate for a more united Europe. This future-oriented exercise was launched within the Daring New Spaces project in a working group focusing on European discourses and narratives.

I. DARING VISION: A EUROPE FOR ALL

In our vision for the year 2025, a truly European public sphere has emerged. In this world, Europeans engage in respectful and constructive discourse on European issues across national borders. This shift is noticeable across all corners of the continent: from political decision-makers at EU institutions to the broader public, there are high levels of engagement and interactions in many spaces. In 2025, Europeans truly live according to the EU's slogan: They are united in diversity. But also networked through lived, shared experiences.

A CONNECTED EUROPEAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In this future, national and transnational media actors cooperate across borders. The daily digital exchange of data, information and perspectives on current issues has become a normality. Regular exchange programmes are also normalised: journalists throughout Europe are able to better understand other countries' narratives and priorities. These new networks lead to more and better informed coverage of current topics, including both EU politics and stories about the daily realities of EU citizens

in other member states. Thanks to these exchanges, European narratives have emerged and have managed to reconcile different views on Europe, while creating mutual understanding of differing public opinions.

The emergence of a European media landscape has been backed by public funding. This helps to support independent and diverse media outlets, but also is directed at creating an EU public service broadcaster that carries out European journalism in the public interest and takes into account diverse perspectives. This publicly funded journalism upholds an independent media, while supporting and improving the level of European public debate.

A COMMON AND SOVEREIGN DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The emergence of a European public sphere has also taken place digitally. This development is closely linked to the EU's investment in its digital sovereignty. This digital public sphere is supported by an independent European digital infrastructure and improved connectivity across the EU, with high data protection standards as well as ethical and transparent Automatic Decision Making Systems (ADM systems) and pan-European digital platforms.

Hate speech, fake news and online disinformation are regulated by European laws and repeated offenses lead

to consequent and effective banning from the platforms. The EU has invested massively in the development of open source and public platforms, developing competition that is beginning to seriously challenge the existing private US tech firms. Instant translators allow for new forms of direct communication and exchange. This well-funded digital infrastructure, opens up new possibilities for networking throughout Europe: between cities and the countryside, between government and citizens, and amongst citizens themselves. Europe comes closer together thanks to a strong digital public sphere.

A VIVID EUROPEAN CULTURE THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

Spaces to experience Europe are abundant and accessible in 2025. There are more opportunities to share experiences, both on and offline. Similarly to the Eurovision song contest, which is watched (and its results debated) across Europe, there is a crime series (“Euro-Crime”). This rotates between cities across Europe and introduces viewers to particular characteristics of regions and areas every Saturday evening. The idea of the Ryder Cup has also been transferred from golf to other sports, with all-star European teams playing against teams from other continents every two years. EU-Tubers go viral with videos on European E-Sports, EU elections and cooking shows. These events give Europeans the opportunity to develop a common sense of belonging.

The shared space of experience is not limited to common media consumption or sports - in-person exchanges have also greatly increased and are widely accessible. The Erasmus+ programme has been expanded, as well as the DiscoverEU programme for 18 years olds to travel across Europe by train. Students aged 15 and up are encouraged to go to an EU country of their choice for a school exchange year and European Community Service Programmes are well-funded and popular. A core part of military training is to participate in one-year stints in other EU armies or a joint corps. Europeans from all walks of life are able to grasp and experience Europe in their everyday lives. Europe is not a far-removed concept, but a tangible reality.

II. REALISING THE VISION – WORKING TOWARDS 2025

How can we arrive at such a reality? Some elements of the above-mentioned vision already exist, but others do not. As we work towards the goal of a truly European public sphere, it is clear that we will need to reach certain milestones. They include: public spaces that can withstand diverse and contrasting opinions, a European media landscape, accessible opportunities for non-electoral democratic participation, increased European civic education, and the development of Europarties, to name a few. Normalising and institutionalising these components of the public sphere are crucial stepping stones towards our goal.

When working towards our overarching vision, it is important to take into account current regional and global socio-political developments. As we enter the post-Brexit period, we must consider how the EU is now more politically united and how EU integration is advancing. Economic inequalities stemming from the Euro-Crisis and expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic will surely continue to be a central point in any discourse on Europe, in addition to persistent regional challenges such as migration and the rule of law. And as the global political order shifts, the role of Europe as a single unit within larger political and economic systems is still to be decided. Together, these topics remind us that Europe is also interconnected with a larger world - one that cannot be ignored.

With these milestones and overarching topics in mind, the next section will zoom in on a more detailed vision of how European discourses and narratives could thrive in 2025. This closer examination serves to expand on the overarching vision and dive even deeper into a future society to see more clearly on how we can arrive at that point.

III. A VISION FOR EUROPEAN DISCOURSES OF TOMORROW

Societal, cultural and political debates in Europe predominantly take place in 27 separate national bubbles. If we want to move towards the above sketched vision of a vivid European public sphere, it will be essential to develop common European discourses in which all Europeans can engage with each other across borders, classes and generations. In our vision, European narratives have developed and flourished within three components of the public sphere.

MEDIA DISCOURSES – ACCESSIBLE, DIVERSE AND COOPERATIVE

In 2025, the European media landscape is no longer a mix of independent national perspectives on EU related news, but a space of real exchange and cooperation between European journalists, experts, citizens, and politicians. These engaged actors have the possibility to debate the news and major EU political topics digitally and respectfully. Journalists receive a complete training on EU decision-making processes and they are able to truthfully cover the most important news from an European perspective. Following the example of investigative journalists from the 2010s, a close cooperation and exchange has become normality.

Newsrooms have diversified in many ways, there are multilingual staff members and each department has a representative for European cooperation. Realtime translation apps make it possible and easy for readers and listeners to consume the full variety of European media programmes. Investment in media infrastructure along with the prioritisation of producing European media has provided real spaces for European discourses and narratives to blossom.

CULTURAL DISCOURSES – FROM STATE THEATRE TO EUTUBE

The cultural public sphere is of utmost importance for thought-leading discourses on European identities, critical reflection and belonging – from state theaters

to EUTube channels. Citizens are not only informed about European topics through news coverage or political discourse, but also through culture. As culture is exchanged across borders, so are discourses. Moreover, the cultural discourse engages citizens to participate in the discourse, to reflect about themselves and to have respectful encounters with others. What it means to be European is critically discussed throughout cultural activities like plays, art exhibitions, literature, music and design.

Culture is transmitted and shared in abundance. It is not confined to classical categories, but also moves between the various channels and circuits of mass-popular culture and entertainment. Communication on European topics is more creative than before and this brings real change. As more people are able to relate to Europe through shared interests, narratives and discourses become intertwined with more parts of society.

Thanks to the creation of new narratives on Europe that are not anchored purely in politics, this investment into the cultural public sphere results in an increased feeling of belonging to transnational spaces. This does not only mean an increase in European narratives, but also a noticeable improvement in the quality of the narratives and discourses. The articulation of these narratives is combined with more effective modes of communication and expressions online and offline alike, enriched by the variety of cultural backgrounds who are now able to better participate.

PRACTICAL DISCOURSES – ENABLING INTERACTION AND APPRECIATING PARTICIPATION

Public spaces are created through commonalities. In 2025, Europeans will not learn about each other from school books or summer vacations only, but through everyday interactions and practices.

Firstly, Europe has made lifelong learning a reality and a permanent right for all. The civic education of Europe and its institutions has transformed from the teaching of abstract facts and figures to a much more vivid, colourful, and positive hands-on experience of European realities. An important aspect of this offer is the training of skills, capacities and competences that enables the participants

to articulate coherent and impactful discourses about Europe, thus making the interaction between communities across Europe more meaningful.

Europeans of all ages, social groups, cultural backgrounds, and all levels of education now can experience positive and fruitful influences of European achievements in their own lives on a regular basis: they can access a common civic educational platform with courses, materials and content. English is used as the lingua franca, but steps are also taken to promote learning other languages, and Europe is on the forefront of providing alternative learning outside the classroom: combining language learning with leisure activities such as cooking, singing or coding. As Europe learns together, commonalities grow more apparent and differences are easier to communicate.

Secondly, many employees are in regular interchange with colleagues all over Europe, taking part in virtual trans-European job trainings or using their EU-job-exchange-tickets for a longer stay in another EU country. Employers understand the value of diversity and actively bring in employees from other member states. How industries are linked across Europe is easier to experience, resulting in narratives that discuss a wider range of fields of work as European.

Thirdly, the participatory component of European discourses is dramatically strengthened. This process allows an increased understanding of regions within Europe, fostering Europe's diversity and helping create more accurate narratives about the continent. Municipal and regional authorities in all EU countries offer active and co-creative participation to all local citizens in pan-European labs creating the cities and regions of tomorrow. Communication between the citizens and EU institutions has drastically improved and EU representatives are now much closer to the citizens.

Regular meetings and community gatherings are organised in all parts of the EU to debate European matters with EU politicians, which helps close the gap and co-construct pieces of legislation, at the local, regional and EU level. Political discussions, no matter if conducted through the press, on the internet or in face-to-face encounters, have radically improved. There may still be misunderstandings and quarrels over complex issues, but a new European sense of belonging has developed, and there is a better understanding of differences based on constructive dialogues.

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM VISIONS TO REALITIES

Creating European discourses that transcend national borders is an ambitious task - especially in times of crisis. For Europeans to speak with and not about each other, the highest priority in the foreseeable future will be that the European Union and its member states manage the Covid-19 pandemic and all of its social and economic consequences in an effective and transparent manner, which then builds trust in EU institutions and pan-European solidarity. Therefore, it is a good sign the recovery plan for Europe not only supports EU regions and member states in overcoming the economic crisis and transitioning towards a greener economy, but also invests in areas vital for a common European public sphere such as digital infrastructure, for example with the Digital Europe Programme. In the future, we would welcome more common actions aiming at improving citizen participation. We also look forward to further implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture, especially in its social dimension: "harnessing the power of culture and cultural diversity for social cohesion and well-being".



NEXT LEVEL EU CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: TRANSNATIONAL DIGITAL DIALOGUE

In a joint project between the European Commission and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, citizens from Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Lithuania came together online over the course of three days to discuss the democratic, digital and green future of Europe. The jointly developed ideas and proposals were later debated with high-ranking EU representatives.

For more information, please visit:

https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/ZD_Transnational_Digital_Citizens_Dialogue.pdf



TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

A variety of European media outlets already exist today, such as Forum.eu, eurotopics and Cafèbabel. Forum.eu is a network of publishers curating and translating quality journalism from all across Europe; eurotopics publishes press reviews reflecting the diversity of opinions in Europe and bridging different media landscapes; Cafèbabel is a multilingual participatory magazine for and by young Europeans reporting on everyday life stories.

For more information, please visit:

<https://www.eurotopics.net/en/>

<https://cafebabel.com/en/>

<https://forum.eu/>

The resilience of the European Union towards common threats such as the pandemic or the climate crisis heavily depends on whether or not Europeans understand these as what they are: common challenges that can only be overcome collectively. In other words, a resilient EU needs a strong European public sphere with European discourses.

Next to trust in EU institutions, the emergence of more European discourses depends on structural changes of the media landscape, a stronger sense of belonging, and more ways for citizens to actively participate in European politics, culture, and society. To help make this vision become reality, we present the following concrete policy recommendations.

MEDIA

AN INTEGRATED EUROPEAN PRESS SYSTEM

- a **publicly funded digital platform**, which would be a branch of the European press agency, **meant to broadcast and host journalistic materials created by this agency within multiple European perspectives** (in contrast with national content produced by national media)
 - a **space for debate**, as a third layer of this press agency and digital platform, which would be a **space of exchange and debate on the news** and the content for all European citizens.
 - the establishment of good practices for **journalists to participate in at least one exchange in another member state's newsroom**.
 - a specific line in the EU budget, or at least, the expansion of the Creative Europe funding's volume (doubled) and the inclusion of specific funding for press and independent journalism, beyond audio-visual content.
 - **KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** European Commission - European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, here also Creative Europe Programme; Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency; European Media Alliance, European Journalism Centre and networks of journalists like European Federation of Journalists, Association of European Journalists.
- **OBJECTIVE:** building a backbone of a European media landscape that provides a European space for information, education and debate.
 - **DESCRIPTION:** The integrated European press system could consist of the following elements:
 - **an independent European press agency**, which produces neutral information about the EU and its member states from a European perspective, and whose aim would be to communicate information on European decisions and news in the way that would put the citizens' interests in the center, instead of national rhetoric. The European press agency should be **independent** from the European institutions or any national influence.

CULTURE EURO-STREAM

- **OBJECTIVE:** strengthening European culture in order to increase a sense of belonging in Europe.
- **DESCRIPTION:** The creation of Euro-Stream, a digital platform relaying European content, actors, directors: Artists and cultural practitioners from all over Europe need to have visibility in the eyes of their citizens and be promoted, so that new narratives of the diverse “European ways of life” can be showcased. This would not bring positive exposure for films and TV shows, but also content produced by musicians, artists, bloggers, vloggers, and journalists. The platform could be the product of a public private partnership, starting with a call for projects by a public venture fund, e.g. as part of the Creative Europe program, and then be further developed with the investment of private funds.
- **KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** European Commission - European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, here also Creative Europe Programme, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency; European Media Alliance and other networks like Cineuropa.

PARTICIPATION EUROPEAN CITIZEN ASSEMBLIES

- **OBJECTIVE:** Engaging EU citizens in deliberation on concrete policy issues in order to increase the democratic input legitimacy of the EU, strengthen transnational discourse and make the participants aware of the perspectives of their fellow EU citizens.

- **DESCRIPTION:** The EU should fund and organise randomly selected citizens’ assemblies in cross-border regions. In these transnational assemblies, residents from the respective member states would deliberate on specific cross-border and regional issues with the help of neutral experts and professional moderators. Depending on the legislative competences in dealing with the issue at hand, the assemblies would advise the local, regional, national or European Parliament. A perfect start for the EU to increase citizen participation would be to integrate citizens’ assemblies in the projected Conference on the Future of Europe.
- **KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** Vice-President of the Commission for Democracy and Demography, European Parliament, European Council, national Ministers for Europe and European Affairs - also within the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

MOVING FORWARD

Strengthening the European public sphere is an urgent matter. The visions we laid out in this paper are goals that can guide us and ensure that we are on the right track. What will ultimately determine the success of this endeavour will be if we are able to make the European public sphere accessible to all.

To do so, it will be important to actively pursue these visions, for example by implementing the above-mentioned policy recommendations and advancing similar existing initiatives. Structural change will be required. But the political will to implement these changes needs to be as bold as the visions guiding us.



PARLAMENT (TV SERIES)

Co-produced in France, Belgium and Germany “Parlement” is a European television series about the everyday life of a young intern at the European Parliament. The 10-part comedy series is a great example of European popular culture showing the very human side of EU politics and thus bringing Brussels closer to its citizens.

To see the first episode, please visit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UZiPl7D5Os>

or <https://www.france.tv/series-et-fictions/series-comedies/parlement/saison-1/1393275-episode-1.html>

ABOUT



The project “**Daring New Spaces: Striving towards a European Public Sphere**” was initiated by Das Progressive Zentrum and supported by the German Federal Foreign Office in cooperation with the Mercator Stiftung, with the support of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).



Meet the working group on European Discourses and Narratives:

<https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/european-discourses-and-narratives/?lang=en>

Das Progressive Zentrum (DPZ)



is an independent, non-profit think-tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different back-

grounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves the next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes: “Future of Democracy”, “Structural Change” and “International Dialogue”, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organization is based in Berlin and also operates in other European countries (including France, Poland and Great Britain) as well as in the United States.

www.progressives-zentrum.org

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The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the partner institutions.

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