

## Scenario-Workshop as a preparation for the NECE Conference 2013

***“The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:  
What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?”***

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### Input

**“The EU and the promise of democracy –  
Where do we stand one year before the European  
elections?”**

**by René Cuperus**

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It's my pleasure and honour to speak here for this pan-European workshop of NECE, Networking European Citizenship Education. You represent the Europe I very much like and fully support.

People from all over Europe are gathering for a common purpose. Sharing experiences, getting to know each other, working together on cross-border cooperation. Breaking down prejudice and national and cultural stereotypes. Stimulating European citizenship. This is the Europe I cherish, and which I am active in.

But let's assume:

NECE adopts a **guideline** about how to implement European citizenship in your country. Prescribing protocols and standard formats. *One size fits all*, from Lisbon to Helsinki, from Riga to Zagreb. Stimulating European citizenship through technocratic uniformity and centralisation.

There will be a board of NECE Commissioners. Dominated by the Big Countries, because they pay most. And this NECE Commission is monitoring your national activities of fostering European citizenship. Sending in inspectors to intervene in your plans and programmes.

This is the Europe of Control, Uniformity and Discipline: The Europe without democratic grip, the Europe, which we might not like so much. But this seems to be the Europe we are designing and building, and against which people revolt, more and more. This kind of Europe is not stimulating European citizenship, but undermining it.

**This observation, just for a starter.**

I concentrate my keynote speech this evening on around **four worries** I have, and they are related to your mission of European Citizenship.

1. **My first worry** concerns the fatal timing problem that contemporary Europe is facing right now. Why fatal timing?

Just at the moment that public support for the EU and the Euro is at dramatic unprecedented low levels, European political leaders consider a “Federal Leap” – new steps towards European integration, coordination and centralisation – unavoidable, for rescuing the Monetary Union at all costs.

This is a risky situation, because for the first time, the “**output legitimacy**” (Fritz Scharpf) of the European Union is seriously questioned. Before the EU guaranteed more or less prosperity, economic growth and jobs.

**People never liked European politics** in Brussels. Far from our bed, meta-politics for policymakers and politicians only: Far too complex and boring to get involved in. But people in general have a positive pro-European mind set and tolerated the outcomes of Brussels Technocracy.

**But now, due to the euro crisis**, the EU is no longer guaranteeing prosperity and jobs, but instead producing mass youth unemployment, rescue packages for banks and hostility between European partners, between the North and the South.

And just at that moment “the input legitimacy” of the EU is damaged by new federal plans undermining national parliamentary democracy, at a very risky moment in time. That’s what I mean with fatal timing problems.

**This new ‘European overstretch’** (after the Big Bang Enlargement and the ill-designed EMU) will put the already existing shortcut between the European ‘Elite-Project’ and electoral majorities in the member states under enormous pressure. Risking a pan-European Populist Revolt against the EU.

2. **My second worry** therefore concerns the planned attack on the European Project by the radical right-wing-populists

Bad news is coming from the party political front. The right-wing populist and extreme-right parties formed an alliance for the 2014 European Elections. The Dutch PVV of Geert Wilders, Front National of Marine Le Pen, and the “Vlaams Belang”-party of Filip Dewinter made an agreement for mutual assistance and common campaigning for the European Elections. This is for several reasons bad news.

It is clear that the right-wing populist movement in Europe will try to exploit the mood of Europe-blues (disillusionment with the European Project) of the European electorate to the max.

If **we look at international opinion** polls, an electoral bloodbath indeed may take place. According to a recent Pew Research report (under the title: “*The New Sick Man of Europe is the European Union*”) a disastrous breakdown of support for European Union occurred since the outbreak of the euro crisis.

The average support for the European Union diminished from 60% in 2012 to 45% in 2013. Less than a third of all Europeans think their economy benefited from European integration. Disastrous figures. They suggest huge electoral success by the anti-European parties at the forthcoming European elections.

**What's worse is that mainstream politics** does not seem to have developed yet a new positive story about Europe. **Or it must be this story** tweeted on Twitter last week by Martin Schulz, the acting President of the European Parliament. He tweeted this: *'US have one currency, one Central Bank and one Govt. Europe has one currency, one Central Bank and ...17 govts! Cannot go on like this'*.

Martin Schulz, who for sure will become the candidate for the European Social Democrats to succeed José Manuel Barroso to become President of the European Commission, plays a risky game here.

**For me, this Martin Schulz tweet stands for:** The European Technocracy trying to enforce European unity on an unwilling European population. Calling down a frontal attack on the European Project by nasty parties. **It is very bad news** when only the right-wing extremist parties exploit the doubts, fears and worries of people about the European Union, while the mainstream parties put the European Project in fast forward mode to rescue the euro to all costs. This is asking for big trouble.

**The coming year,** I fear, there will be a harsh **black and white polarisation** about Europe: You are either 100% pro-EU, or you are 100% anti-EU - friend or foe.

In that case, there will be no place for a moderate story about Europe, making connection to the large majority of the European population, which is nor fanatically nationalistic is, nor fanatically 'europistic'.

3. **My third worry** therefore is that this black and white, friend or foe-polarisation between the radical right and established politics **will undermine one of NECE's goals**, which I fully support: namely (and now I quote from your preparatory paper) "...to concentrate more on the criticism and doubts of frustrated European citizens' as way of discussing and stimulating European citizenship.

Indeed, making connection and contact with the criticism and doubts of ordinary European is very urgent to fight the growing disaffection of large groups in our society toward the European elite project, and to fight the Europe-blues due to the euro crisis.

What's going on is a complex mix of insecurities, discontent and disillusionment.

#### **Just in brief: what are the criticism and doubts of European citizens?**

- Firstly relating to the euro crisis.
- Important to note is that euro-blues can be found in both North and South Europe. They both perceive themselves as victims of the euro crisis, and project this resentment on Europe as a whole. Euro-scepticism has now spread across the continent like a virus. Everyone in the EU has been losing faith in the project: both, creditors and debtors, Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries. (See the figures of Pew Research.)
- The euro so far turned out to be not an instrument for integration, but for disintegration and division.

- No Convergence Union but Divergence Union
  - Not producing positive European citizenship, but negative European citizenship: prejudices confirmed between North and South.
  - The South wants solidarity; the North does not want to accept further liability for the debts of nations they mistrust.
  - But the headline news about the North-South divide within the EU is a more complicated and delicate story. It shows that a simple, black and white dichotomy between debtor and creditor countries, centre and periphery is far too simple.
  - There are relatively poor people in the rich North (look at the Harz IV benefit recipients and ‘working poor’ in Germany; watch the dramatically rising youth unemployment in the Netherlands). And there are very rich people in the South, not paying any prize for the reconstruction of their national economies.
- **Austerity politics** in Europe, apart from its economic rationality, does harm European solidarity. Because due to austerity politics, huge welfare state retrenchment take place in countries, also in relatively rich countries such as the Netherlands: national solidarity is under pressure. And the slogan “**no international solidarity without national solidarity**” has some truth.
  - **Fear for Americanisation of Europe:** free movement of labour undermining welfare states and labour relations. Rude exploitation of cheap labour. The painful **EU Paradox:** how EU regulation and dynamics (the “four freedoms”) are undermining the European way of life: bringing labour standards, social security, progressive values back for a century.
  - There is the unintended return of the **German Question:** unintended hegemonic power, while the EU was built to integrate and overcome German dominance.
  - **We encounter new forms of euro-scepticism with the young network generation, those who believe in and practice the “Do it yourself-society”.** They are pro-Europe, cosmopolitan, but hate the hierarchical, non-democratic power structures of the new European empire.
  - An overall cause for discontent: There seems to be **no brake and no limit** to the European Project: permanent Enlargement, permanent deepening. Out of any grip and control by national democracy. The small country-trauma: no grip and control in EU.
  - Fear for undermining of national traditions, culture, identity

So, overall, no secret: The situation before the European elections is quite depressing.

- Trust in EU: at a deep point.
- North-South divide: South feels treated like monetary colonies; Northern tax payers fear they are treated as financial milk-cow by corrupt elites in South.

**What makes things worse, is that doubts and criticism are unequally distributed:**

EU-support is unequally distributed: highly educated ("the modernisation winners") support, the European integration; the non-academic professional lower educated ("modernisation losers"), seem not wholeheartedly to support the European Project.

The pan-European Revolt of Populism reflects this increasing polarisation between 'cosmopolitan' higher educated academic professionals and 'national-communitarian' lower educated people. Between those who feel interconnected to the new world of globalisation, Europe, the knowledge-based economy and those who feel threatened by this new world.

The EU is right in the middle of this shortcut between higher educated and lower educated, the so-called winners of globalisation and losers of globalisation.

I come to the end of my speech:

4. **My fourth and final worry concerns your concept** of European Citizenship - the glue, which brings you together here. Beautiful idea, beautiful concept: who can be against European citizenship? But what does it exactly mean? How can we measure it, observe it? Does it really exist? I hope to learn more today from you what European citizenship is all about, because I tend to be a bit sceptical about this concept.

I do not like to use the word 'Europe' too easily, too laconically. It's a broad, vague umbrella concept. For me it is a great misconception to think that Europe = Brussels. Europe = Barcelona, Stockholm, Riga, Bratislava, The Hague. Not the complex labyrinth, the "corridors of power" of Brussels only. That's a very artificial way of looking at Europe: A-culturally, a-politically, technocratic. European citizenship is not bussing all 500 million Europeans to Brussels, just (uncritically) explaining and communicating what the EU institutions are all about. This is Brussels arrogance of EU "connaisseurs" (who passed the European *concours*) who blame all those out of Brussels for lack of knowledge. Europe, instead, is fostering and stimulating cross-border, transnational exchanges and contacts: *The slow Europe*.

Let's break down Europe into national democracies. In the end, Europe is the sum of these. What exactly is German citizenship? Or Dutch or Spanish? It's hard to define? Hard to impose, stimulate or implement, already at the national level, or local level, let alone in a diverse empire of 500 million people. Do the Germans and the French share citizenship? How? Is there mutual or common citizenship between Poles and Czechs, Dutch and Flemish, Slovenians and Serbs?

These are complicated, complex stories. You should not overstate the concept of citizenship. Citizenship, in terms of Republicanism or Hannah Arendt's conception, is far more than tourism, travelling, Erasmus programmes or Facebook.

Be modest, be moderate, don't dream away in idealistic concepts only and stay critical about realistic goals.

**I am a Euro-realist:** against fanatic nationalism, but also against fanatic "europism".

Promoting the idea of European citizenship, without pointing at its practical, geographical, cultural, political, linguistic, psychological limits, for me, in the end, is very problematic in itself. Therefore, I like this NECE-gathering, being a critical assessment of the future of Europe by the young generation.



★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

*My final statement:*

**I fully support NECE's aim** "...to concentrate more on the criticism and doubts of frustrated European citizens."

European Citizenship may never become a monopoly for academic professionals only.

**I thank you for your attention.**