

Garnet Network of Excellence - Garnet Mobility Grant

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Host Institution: Institut d'Etudes Européennes, Université Libre de Bruxelles (supervisor: Prof. Mario Telò)

Title: Organised Civil Society in Brussels: counter discourses on participation

Period: 15/10/2008-15/02/2009 (4 months)

Lever of mobility: Junior

The context which opened up after the breakdown of the referendums on the Constitutional Treaty in France and Holland appears to be one of the most controversial and difficult moments that the process of European integration has had to face since its coming into being. The perception of an internal crisis thus prevails, with processes which seem to threaten the bases of legitimacy of the European project, but also an external crisis, as is clear from the difficulty the EU is facing in creating a coherent image of itself on the international scene. This perception strengthened again after the Irish's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in June 2008. Once again this event reopened the fracture existing between different actors –institutions, political parties, media, civil society actors, etc.- at the various EU's levels (Bee 2008).

Since 2005, start the of current EU's crisis, the European Commission started to undertake a series of measures in order to gain consensus and legitimisation and to overcome the stalled situation. The so-called Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate together with the White Paper on European Communication Policy (published on the 1st of September 2006), have lead to the establishment and implementation of a variety of new initiatives aimed at enhancing participation and raise consensus towards the EU's project. One example of the recent attempt to enhance participation in the EU is the initiative entitled *Empower the EU* which addressed civil society groups in the city of Bergamo (Italy) with the aim of providing some solutions to reduce the gap between EU institutions and citizens. Civil Society participation is currently granted within the most recent EU's programmes (such as European Citizens for example) but it is also considered essential in Public Campaigning. One of the 2008's "Year of intercultural dialogue" set of initiatives and campaigns' aims -for example- is to network between NGOs and involve them in the different communicative activities.

My proposal's objective is to understand how different Civil Society Groups are dealing with the recently renewed approaches to active citizenship and participation proposed by the European Commission. These concepts' guiding principles have been widely expressed in key documents and are reflected in specific programmes aimed at gaining a wider Organised Civil Society's participation. More specifically, I am going to: 1) study social representations and alternative visions of Europe elaborated by these groups, but also elements of criticism about the strategy of the Commission during the period of reflection; 2) analyse the process of interaction going on between Civil Society Groups and the EU institutions through consultation processes.

Organised Civil Society (OCS) can be defined as that group of organisations which have a direct, institutionalised relationship with Brussels and which include "the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social movements, advocacy groups, charities, representatives of self help organisations and promotional groups" (Greenwood 2007; Ruzza 2004). A timely analysis in order to understand positioning of these kinds of actors in respect to the recent events characterising the European

Integration but also an evaluation of the strategies provided by the European Institutions is then necessary. The roles of these kinds of groups have then grown in the European system of multilevel governance and their role in the current crisis undergoing at the EU level is surely interesting to take into account, because of their functionality in order to solve the democratic deficit problem. They are functional in the prospect of the European democratisation and constitutionalisation, since they should be representing citizens' needs and could be considered as proactive actors centrally oriented in readdressing the EU's policy making on questions of public interest. As Ruzza for example underlines: "Their presence is seen as the voice of an emerging European Civil Society – a voice to be encouraged because it addresses a perceived isolation of the European Level of governance- and as a potentially useful counterbalance against the power of organised private interests".

In particular, I will orient my interest to the following OCS's actors which are Brussels-based: 1) networks of the OCS which are dealing with citizenship policies (for example Active Citizenship, Friends of Europe, Eur Activ); 2) networks of the OCS which are dealing with Young policies (such as for example those groups relying on the European Youth Forum); 3) networks of the OCS dealing with sensitive questions (such as environmental groups or health promotion driven organisations) and are actively participating in the organisation of the EU's public campaigns (such as those organisations taking part in initiatives related to the European Year Against Discrimination). I choose to concentrate my attention on these areas since awareness of the role these organisations play in the EU's policy making has recently consistently grown.

My research plan develops along a period of four months (15/10/2008-15/02/2009) and is subdivided in three main phases:

- 1) First phase: collection of documents, working papers, reports, etc. which are not online available and produced by Brussels-based Civil Society Groups. This phase of the research work will be conducted during my first month in Brussels and will be useful in order to complete the first part of the research I carried on within the Jerp 5.2.7 "The Role of Non State Actors and Civil Society in the Global Regulatory Framework" principally based on online sources;
- 2) Second phase: semi-structured interviews with OCS's responsables and representatives. This part of my research work will last two months. In particular, my aim is to interview 40 subjects based in Brussels. The interview is meant to be structured along these three points: 1) Description of the Organisation's set of activities; 2) Evaluation of the current EU's strategies to enhance participation; 3) Proposals for improving the current set of policies.
- 3) Third phase: analysis of data and writing up. This last part of my research plan is meant to last one month and is aimed at data analysis. After having typed the whole set of interview in Word format, I will codify and analyse them through the support of Atlas.ti (a software for analysing textual data) and with reference to a code book previously prepared.

At the end of the field work in Brussels, I will produce:

- a working paper on the European Organised Civil Society's interactions with the European Institution to be proposed to the Garnet's Working Papers Series
- an article to be published in a book on 'The Role of Civil Society in Regional Governance' (book to be edited together with Prof. David Armstrong and Dr. Valeria Bello)
- a research proposal on Civil Society in Europe to be submitted in the forthcoming 7th framework programme calls for proposal.

Selective Bibliography

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