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Altuna, Asier ; Suárez, Mariluz

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The European Citizens' Initiative: a Tool of Direct Democracy?

Steven Otterman

Abstract

Even before it came into effect, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), a scheme whereby one million European citizens may request the European Commission to put forth legislation, was heralded as bringing a new era of direct democracy to the European Union (EU). Given the perceived democratic deficit in institutions at the EU-level, this news was particularly significant. In light of this, this paper sets out to answer the question "to what extent is the European Citizens' Initiative actually a tool of direct democracy?" To do this, the concept of direct democracy is analyzed in order to determine which criteria must be fulfilled for something to be considered "direct-democratic." Next, the ECI, including its procedures and regulations, is explained and then analyzed to see to what extent the ECI fulfills the criteria of direct democracy established in this paper. In the end it is concluded that the ECI is not a tool of direct democracy and three suggestions for how we might label it (a tool of promotion, a tool of representative democracy, or a *legislative popular initiative*) are put forth. In answering the main question posed in this paper, the nature of the ECI is clarified and myths about its status as a tool of direct democracy are dispelled, thus providing European citizens with the information they need to take full advantage of a significant political tool and participate effectively in civic life at the EU-level.

Keywords: European Citizens' Initiative, Democracy, Direct Democracy, e-democracy, European Union

Introduction

On 22 November 2010 BBC news published an article on its website claiming, “Direct democracy is coming to the EU, in the form of the European Citizens' Initiative.”¹ Several other media outlets seemed to share this sentiment.* Two years later, the European Parliament announced the start of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) in a press release, referring to it as “the world's only transnational tool of direct democracy.”² The ECI, simply put, is a way for European citizens (or, more accurately, a group of one million European citizens) to request the “European Commission to propose legislation on matters where the EU has competence to legislate.”³ However, while some were quick to praise the ECI as an advance for EU-level direct democracy, others remained skeptical. The apparent disparity between media coverage of the ECI and its actual content has led to the primary question of this paper, namely: to what extent is the European Citizens' Initiative actually a tool of direct democracy? In answering this question, the paper establishes a clear concept of direct democracy and explains the contents of the ECI. After this, the procedures and regulations of the ECI are analyzed to determine whether they fulfill the criteria of direct democracy established in this paper. Once the ECI's status as a tool of direct democracy is assessed, the paper presents alternative suggestions for how we might view the ECI.

I. Rationale

Democracy is one of the core values upon which the European Union (EU) was founded.⁴ Yet, since the 1980s, the democratic deficit, or the alleged lack of democracy, in EU institutions has been a widely acknowledged phenomenon among scholars.⁵ Assuming the ECI is to address this deficit by connecting citizens to their legislators, it needs to be properly understood. This way, citizens are aware of what this political tool can accomplish and how it may be utilized most efficiently. If the ECI really is a tool of direct democracy, then citizens need to know how to take advantage of it, and if it is not a tool of direct democracy, this myth needs to be dispelled so that Europeans have a better understanding of their rights as citizens and can participate effectively in civic life. Thus, ascertaining

¹ “Europe's direct democracy in action,” *BBC News*, 22 November 2010, Europe Section, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11791272> (accessed 4 April 2012).

* See, for instance, the 7 December 2010 article from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, “Direkte Demokratie: ‘Europäische Bürgerinitiative’ nimmt Form an” (<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/europaeische-union/direkte-demokratie-europaeische-buergerinitiative-nimmt-form-an-11085804.html>) or the 7 April 2010 article from *TIME Magazine*, “Direct Democracy: Citizen Initiatives Come to Europe” (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1978069,00.html>).

² European Parliament News, “European Citizens' Initiative Starts on 1 April,” Official Website of the European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20120330IPR42289/html/European-Citizens%27-Initiative-starts-on-1-April> (accessed 18 April 2012).

³ *The European Citizens' Initiative Official Register*, “Basic Facts,” The European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/basic-facts> (accessed 4 April 2012).

⁴ “Policy Areas of the European Union,” Official Website of the European Union, http://europa.eu/pol/rights/index_en.htm (accessed 7 May 2012).

⁵ Simon Hix and Bjørn Høyland. *The Political System of the European Union* (England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 132.

whether the ECI is a tool of direct democracy is important, as this will shed light on a potentially significant political tool that could enhance the quality of civic participation at the EU-level.

II. Methodology

In order to answer the question at issue in this paper, it is necessary to establish exactly what is meant by the term, “direct democracy.” The problem with this is that defining direct democracy is notoriously difficult, as even definitions of the broader term, “democracy,” vary wildly.⁶ In fact, that the term has been defined in so many different ways suggests that any definition of direct democracy will be contentious. In light of this, a straightforward method to establish a working definition of direct democracy is employed: a number of accepted definitions of the term are examined in order to identify their common elements. In doing this, it shall be possible to identify some of the *most important* characteristics of direct democracy and thereby determine criteria for establishing its existence. Now, it is beyond the scope of this paper to establish a flawless or exhaustive definition of direct democracy. Instead, the goal is to establish some of the essential criteria for it by considering a variety of accepted definitions from authoritative sources. These criteria will then be used to analyze the ECI’s procedures and regulations (as presented in official guides and on the European Commission’s ECI website) to determine whether the ECI is a tool of direct democracy.

III. Direct Democracy

Direct democracy, although defined in various ways, is often understood in contrast to representative democracy. Ian Budge, however, argues that the two concepts should not be viewed in terms of an either/or dichotomy, but rather as a continuum in which certain systems or mechanisms are seen as promoting direct and/or representative democracy to varying degrees.⁷ As Budge puts it, “...direct and representative democracy may actually merge into each other in practice.”⁸ Moving forward, then, it is important to remember that direct democracy should not be understood merely as the opposite of representative democracy, as the relationship between the two is one of degree and nuance.

If direct democracy is not to be viewed simply as representative democracy’s opposite, how should we view it? Sanford Lakoff writes, “Direct democracy enables citizens to decide for themselves whether to adopt or change laws...”⁹ Although quite concise, this understanding of the term illustrates a key component of direct democracy:

⁶ Ian Morley, "Democracy," *Encyclopedia of Politics: The Left and The Right* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005), <http://www.sage-ereference.com/view/politics/SAGE.xml> (accessed 22 April 2012).

⁷ Ian Budge, *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹ Sanford Lakoff, *Democracy: History, Theory, Practice* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 180.

citizens “decide for themselves.” The *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought*, offers a similar definition, stating: “Direct democracy exists to the extent that citizens can vote directly on policy alternatives and decide what is to be done on each important issue.”¹⁰ In this sense, the key aspect of direct democracy is personal, direct decision making or voting. Ian Budge essentially repeats this definition in his *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*, but includes the importance of debate: “...we can characterize direct democracy... as a regime in which the adult citizens as a whole debate and vote on the most important political decisions, and where their vote determines the action to be taken.”¹¹ Thus, for Budge, a system or tool may be deemed direct-democratic when a framework is offered in which all citizens may directly (i.e. without representation) debate and decide on (e.g. vote on) policy issues.

David Altman and David Robertson offer similar definitions of direct democracy in their *Direct Democracy Worldwide* and *A Dictionary of Modern Politics*, respectively. Altman defines a mechanism of direct democracy as “a publicly recognized institution wherein citizens decide or emit their opinion on issues – other than through legislative and executive elections – directly at the ballot box through universal and secret suffrage;”¹² whilst Robertson holds that for direct democracy to exist, “all concerned citizens must [be able to] directly participate in the making of decisions and the passing of laws, and this function can neither be delegated to others, nor can it be carried out by others chosen to represent the interests of the many.”¹³

From these two definitions, as well as the three considered above, we notice the following two critical aspects of direct democracy: decision making/voting and (direct) participation of citizens.¹⁴ All five definitions listed above include variants of the word ‘decision.’ Conspicuously missing from these definitions, however, is mention of the ability to pose or frame the decisions that are to be made. That is, while emphasis is placed on *deciding* and *voting*, how the vote came to be is of secondary importance in a direct democracy. Even according to Altman’s definition, in which citizens must be able to “omit their opinion on issues,” it is not mentioned that the citizens must also decide on *which* issues they should be permitted to opine. This means that, according to the literature, it is not essential in a direct democracy that citizens are able to pose questions or issues to be voted upon - what is most important is that the citizens, not representatives, can freely and directly decide among options for policy issues.

Thus, for the purposes of this paper, the most important criteria when examining direct democracy will be:

1. *Citizens decide/vote on issues*
2. *Citizens participate directly*

Of course, as mentioned earlier, other criteria, such as free debate and easy access to voting tools, are important for a direct democracy. The goal here, however, was to establish solid, overarching criteria for direct democracy based on various, acknowledged definitions of the

¹⁰ Paul Barry Clarke and Joe Foweraker, eds., *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2001), 224.

¹¹ Budge, *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*, 35.

¹² David Altman, *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

¹³ David Robertson, *A Dictionary of Modern Politics* (London: Europa Publications, 2002), 148.

¹⁴ The definitions also place importance on the ability of all (adult) citizens to vote, thus emphasizing access to voting tools. This is, of course, a very important aspect of any democracy, but as the mechanism of direct democracy in question here, the ECI, is found on the internet, which *theoretically* is available to anyone, and because an appropriate discussion of this issue would require its own paper, the question of access to the ECI (and the internet in general) will not be examined in this paper.

term. In this way, the two criteria listed above will serve as a guide when evaluating the ECI for its direct-democratic tendencies.

IV. The European Citizens' Initiative

Signed on 13 December 2007, Article 11 of the Treaty of Lisbon stipulates:

Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties.¹⁵

This article became the basis for what would become known as the European Citizens' Initiative. Entering into force on 1 April 2012, the ECI "enables one million EU citizens from at least seven EU countries to call on the European Commission to propose legislation on matters where the EU has competence to legislate."¹⁶ But while the concept of the ECI is simple, the process involved in successfully carrying out an initiative is quite complex.

First, after an issue has been identified, it must be determined whether the ECI is actually the proper means for addressing this issue. As the ECI regulations state, an initiative must focus on an issue concerning a policy area where the EU has competence and is able to propose legislation.¹⁷ Thus, initiatives regarding common foreign and security policy, for instance, are not appropriate for the ECI because, although the Commission has competence in this area, it may not propose legislation relating to it.¹⁸ Furthermore, even if an issue relates to one of the Commission's policy areas, a potential ECI organizer must decide if a Citizens' Initiative is the most efficient or appropriate means to address a particular issue. There are already a number of ways European citizens can bring attention to political issues at the EU level including taking part in public consultations, petitioning the European Parliament, or lodging a complaint with the European Ombudsman. If any of these methods seem more appropriate for addressing a certain issue, then the ECI should be abandoned.

Once it is certain that an ECI is the best option for promoting a particular issue, an "initiative committee" must be formed. This committee, comprised of seven adults from seven different EU member states, is officially responsible for organizing the initiative.¹⁹ After forming the committee, the initiative is registered on the European Commission's website. The initiative must be written concisely, in an official EU language, and with 800

¹⁵ *Consolidated Versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union of Lisbon* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2010), 22.

¹⁶ *Guide to the European Citizens' Initiative* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2011), 4.

¹⁷ *The European Citizens' Initiative Official Register*, "Competences," Official Website of the European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/competences> (accessed 4 April 2012).

¹⁸ *The European Citizens' Initiative Official Register*, "Competences FAQ," Official Website of the European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/competences/faq> (accessed 4 April 2012).

¹⁹ *Your Guide to the European Citizens' Initiative, 2nd Edition – March 2012* (Brussels: European Economic and Social Committee Visits and Publications Unit, 2012), 10.

characters or less, including the title, subject matter, and a description of the objectives.²⁰ Once received, the Commission has 2 months to decide to accept the ECI or to reject it on legal grounds. In the event that the initiative is rejected, the organizers will have the right to appeal the decision or file a reworded initiative. However, if the initiative is accepted, it will become legally registered and published on the Commission's website. It is at this point that the initiative committee must start collecting signatures.

To do this, the committee has two options: it may collect signatures, or statements of support, on paper or online. If the statements are collected online, the online collection system (which may be obtained through open-source software provided by the Commission) must be certified by a proper authority in the EU member state where the data are to be stored. This process can take up to 1 month. If physical statements are collected, the proper form for each respective member state must be used, as each state requires different information to validate support. In Finland, for instance, a statement-of-support form requires only a name, country of residence, date of birth, and nationality, whereas in Austria this information, in addition to a passport number and specific address, is required.²¹ After the online collection system is certified and/or the proper statement-of-support forms are located, the initiative committee has exactly one year to collect one million valid statements of support. These one million signatures must reach specific quotas, based proportionally on a country's number of MEPs, in at least seven EU member states. Thus, the threshold for signatures is higher in larger countries than in smaller ones. In Germany, for instance, 74,250 signatures are required to meet the threshold, whereas in smaller countries, such as Malta or Luxembourg, only 4,500 signatures are required.²² These quotas add an important dimension to the signature collection aspect of the ECI, yet so long as the thresholds are met in seven EU member states, it is not important from which member states the rest of the one million signatures are produced.

After one year, if one million signatures have been collected, meeting the minimum threshold from at least seven EU member states, the signatures must be officially verified in the member state in which they were collected. In other words, Belgian signatures are verified in Belgium, Spanish signatures are verified in Spain, and so on. This process can take up to 3 months. However, once the statements of support are certified, the initiative is submitted to the Commission. Within the 3 months thereafter the following will occur: 1) representatives of the Commission will meet with the ECI organizers, 2) the organizers will be given the opportunity to present the initiative at a public hearing before the European Parliament, and 3) the Commission will respond to the ECI, detailing what action it intends to take and why.²³

The ECI is **not binding** – the Commission has final say as to whether the initiative will be put forward as legislation. If the initiative is rejected, there are no means of redress and no appeals process. As the ECI official register states in its FAQ: “The citizens' initiative is an agenda-setting initiative which obliges the Commission to give serious consideration to requests made by citizens, but it is not obliged to act on them.”²⁴ The Commission does assure, however, that if an initiative is rejected, the reasons for this will be clearly explained. If, on the other hand, the Commission decides to put the initiative forward in the form of legislation, the normal legislative procedure will be in effect, meaning, in general, that the initiative will have to be approved by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

²⁰ *Guide to the European Citizens' Initiative*, 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁴ *The European Citizens' Initiative Official Register*, “FAQ,” Official Website of the European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/faq> (accessed 4 April 2012).

Now that the procedures and regulations involved in carrying out a successful ECI have been clarified, we see that organizing an ECI is no simple task. It involves, at the very least, a familiarity with the ECI procedures and regulations, diligent work, and months of patience. Nevertheless, a detailed understanding of the ECI will be necessary when it is evaluated in accordance with the criteria for direct democracy established above.

V. The European Citizens' Initiative and Direct Democracy

Now that the procedures and regulations for completing a successful ECI have been explained, we turn our attention to evaluating its status as a tool of direct democracy.

V.a. Do citizens decide/vote on issues?

By signing an ECI, European citizens are not voting (or making decisions) as such and, in light of this fact, it is difficult to claim that the ECI is a tool of direct democracy. Citizens may sign their names and show support for a cause, but they are not voting or deciding between policy choices; they are merely joining with their fellow EU citizens to “ask,”²⁵ “call on,”²⁶ or invite²⁷ the European Commission to propose legislation to the European Parliament and the Council. And, since the Commission ultimately has the authority to reject the initiative without recourse to an appeals process for the organizers of the initiative, those who sign statements of support cannot even be seen as voting to compel the Commission to put forth a piece of legislation. Although the fact that it was signed by at least one million citizens perhaps confers some degree of power to it, one can view an ECI merely as a document requesting action from the Commission. And, although the Commission may not ignore the letter completely, it is certainly not required to obey the instructions or requests within it.

Moreover, even if the Commission decides to put forth legislation as a result of the initiative, it must still pass through normal legislative channels (i.e. the European Parliament and the Council) before becoming EU law. That is, citizens do not vote on the legislation along with their MEPs; and, even if an ECI ultimately becomes an EU law, we may say only that a group of citizens suggested this law to the Commission, not that they had any role in the decision making, i.e. voting, process. In addition, in claiming that the ECI is not “an instrument of direct decision making by citizens at the EU level,”²⁸ but merely an agenda-setting tool, the ECI guide itself shows again that the European Citizens' Initiative entails a complete lack of voting and decision making on the part of citizens. If we accept the premise that direct voting/direct decision-making constitutes an essential part of direct

²⁵ *Your Guide to the European Citizens' Initiative*, 2nd Edition – March 2012, 7.

²⁶ *Guide to the European Citizens' Initiative*, 4.

²⁷ *The European Citizens' Initiative Official Register*, “Basic Facts,” The European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/basic-facts> (accessed 4 April 2012).

²⁸ *Your Guide to the European Citizens' Initiative*, 2nd Edition – March 2012, 7.

democracy, then it seems difficult to conclude that the ECI represents any significant advance in direct democracy at the EU level.

V.b. Do citizens participate directly?

The ECI is hardly direct. It *is* direct in that citizens sign an initiative directly, whether online or on paper, but from this point on, the process is quite mediated. It was established in the last subsection that an ECI does not permit citizens to directly vote on anything and, as an ECI is non-binding, it cannot be seen as a tool for direct legislation. The initiative is not even sent directly to the Commission, as its signatures must first be certified. Furthermore, it is the (non-elected) Commission that decides in the end whether legislation should be put forward or not, thus mediating the legislative process and nullifying claims of directness. Therefore, we see that the ECI is already quite mediated in these respects.

Indeed, the Kafkaesque procedure for registering and maintaining an ECI also mediates the entire process, making it less direct. The ECI requires the potential initiative organizer to first find six other EU citizens from six different EU member states. That a transnational, seven-member *initiative committee* must be created in order to even register the ECI on the Commission's website, refutes any claim that the ECI is a tool for direct democracy. With the initiative committee rule, the ability of an individual citizen to *directly* impact legislation is negated. Individual **A** may not go directly to the Commission's website and start an ECI - instead she must first find individuals **B** through **G**, who not only support her cause but also come from six different EU member states.

But this is only the beginning. The initiative committee must then have their potential initiative (of less than 800 characters) approved, have their signature collection system certified, collect one million statements of support including a minimum number of statements from seven different EU member states, have these statements of support certified, and, finally, send the initiative to the European Commission. From the day a particular ECI is approved and officially registered (i.e. not including the preparation time involving forming an initiative committee, etc.), assuming there are no problems, the Commission will respond in 18 months. And, after almost two years of navigating the bureaucratic labyrinth and collecting one million signatures, the Commission may simply reject the ECI without any recourse to an appeals process for the organizers.

It is also worth noting that while the ECI is technically a free tool offered by the European Commission, completing a successful ECI will certainly not come at a cheap price. One guide to the ECI admits "...organising a Citizens' Initiative will require resources and money."²⁹ In fact, according to *The New York Times*, some groups estimate that each signature for an ECI will require €1 of funding, making the ECI "prohibitive for all but the biggest players."³⁰ Obviously, with each signature costing €1, an ECI organization group should expect to raise at least €1 million (and almost certainly more) in order to be successful. As *The New York Times* article suggests, the average citizen will find it difficult, if not impossible, because of practical constraints, to complete an ECI. Thus, even if the ECI

²⁹ *Your Guide to the European Citizens' Initiative, 2nd Edition – March 2012*, 9.

³⁰ Paul Geitner, "E.U. Seeks to Involve Citizens in Law-Making," *The New York Times*, 9 April 2012, Europe Section, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/09/world/europe/09iht-brussels09.html?_r=1 (accessed 15 April 2012).

were a tool to directly contact the Commission, it would be a tool that was available only to the wealthiest Europeans. Although this issue can be understood as it relates to access to voting tools, the €1 million threshold can be seen as another form of mediation in the ECI process. This is because if average European citizens want to start an ECI, they must first seek funding, which adds another step to the already arduous procedure of carrying out an ECI, thus mediating it further. It also introduces the practical necessity of finding sponsors for an ECI, as the individual citizen must rely on other institutions (e.g. businesses, lobbying organizations, etc.) to complete an ECI, again mediating the process by coming between the citizen and his ability to ask the Commission to propose legislation.

Speaking about communication technologies in general, G.J. Mulgan writes that they are “not an end to mediation, but rather the emergence of more complex structures of mediation.”³¹ The ECI certainly seems to prove this point - the complex procedures for establishing an ECI as well as the practical need for funding mediate the “direct legislative” process, thereby making it less direct. Furthermore, as we saw earlier, the ECI does not involve voting or decision-making. Thus, as the ECI fails to fulfill the two criteria for direct democracy established in this paper, we may conclude that the ECI is not, in fact, a tool of direct democracy.

VI. How Might We View the European Citizens’ Initiative?

Due to the fact that the ECI is still in its infancy, it is perhaps too early to label the European Citizens’ Initiative in terms of its status as a political tool. However, based on preliminary evidence, this paper will now suggest three alternative ways to view the ECI, seeing as its status as a tool of direct democracy has been refuted.

VI.a. The ECI as a tool for promotion

Richard Davis’s *The Web of Politics* offers an interesting perspective on the role of technology in participatory democracy. Davis argues that all new communication technologies, from the printing press to cable television, were, in their early years, predicted to bring great advancements to democracy.³² Yet, in the end, all of these technologies failed to do so. According to Davis, this is because institutions representing the status quo harness these new communication technologies and adapt them to serve their own purposes. With regard to the internet, Davis writes, “The threat and challenge of the internet has motivated groups to adapt this new communication tool for their own purposes.”³³ It is not in the interests of institutions of representative democracies to allow

³¹ G.J. Mulgan, *Communication and Control: Networks and the New Economies of Communication* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1991), 7.

³² Richard Davis, *The Web of Politics: The Internet’s Impact on the American Political System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 84.

communication technologies to undermine their current positions. Thus, in this case, although the internet may have the *potential* to strengthen direct democracy, Davis would argue that “groups,” such as EU legislative institutions (and the Commission, in particular), have adapted the internet in order to further their own goals – in this case preserving the current system of representative democracy. The ECI, then, is merely an example of the European legislative apparatus adapting itself to online technologies. With its heavy online presence, the ECI takes full advantage of the internet’s interactive nature, without, as we have seen in this paper, actually providing a tool of direct democracy to European citizens.

On this view, then, the ECI is an adaptation on the part of the Commission - but what purpose does it serve? Davis’s work also suggests an answer to this question. He states that, “Legislative [web]sites are designed for publicity about the institution and, increasingly, the individual members as well.”³⁴ Although the ECI is more than a legislative website, its strong online presence is one of its defining characteristics. Furthermore, that the ECI was well publicized in the media is unquestionable. The media outlets mentioned in this paper alone (BBC news, The New York Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine, and TIME magazine) are some of the most prominent in the world, and a simple google search will produce a myriad of websites and blogs explaining, reporting, and opining on the ECI. We see from this that the ECI has brought much publicity and attention to the European legislative bodies and often in a positive light, portraying the ECI as an advance in democracy. With this in mind we may consider the ECI as a tool that not only promotes the European Union as a legislative body, but also helps legitimize its power by attempting to highlight its democratic character. And if it is true that “there’s no such thing as bad publicity,” then even the articles that are critical of the ECI can be seen as having some promotional value for the EU. Thus, from this perspective, the ECI may be seen as a tool for promoting and legitimizing the EU, particularly in light of its alleged democratic deficit.

VI.b. The ECI as a legislative popular initiative

In his book, *Direct Democracy Worldwide*, Altman establishes a “typology of mechanisms of direct democracy” that identifies the various forms in which direct democracy may express itself.³⁵ What is surprising, particularly in light of claims that the European Citizens’ Initiative will bring direct democracy to Europe, is the fact that the ECI does not fit any of the seven mechanisms of direct democracy identified by Altman. Instead, the ECI is what Altman describes as a *legislative popular initiative* (LPI).³⁶ He writes, “An LPI exists when the citizenry forces the legislature to consider a proposed action or bill (though the legislature will not necessarily accept it), which represents control over the agenda rather than a tool for political change.”³⁷ He goes on to describe such initiatives as “populist placebos,”³⁸ presumably because they give one the impression of participating in a direct democracy, although one is not actually doing so. An ECI forces the legislature, in this case represented by the European Commission, to consider a proposed action, while being under no obligation to accept it. Furthermore, it is described on its own website as an “agenda-

³⁴ Ibid., 144.

³⁵ David Altman, *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.

³⁶ Ibid., 17.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

setting initiative.”³⁹ Thus, Altman’s work gives us reason to look at the ECI as an alternative means to wield (limited) political power, that is, as a legislative popular initiative.

VI.c. The ECI as a tool of representative democracy

Although the ECI cannot be considered a tool of direct democracy, perhaps it *can* be considered a tool of representative democracy as it helps connect citizens to policy-makers, albeit in a complicated and time consuming manner. Despite the fact that the ECI is non-binding, it still offers an additional channel of communication with EU legislators. It is clear from this paper that this channel of communication may be quite limited in what it can achieve; but it does not seem that the ECI negatively impacts democracy or European citizens. In fact, it seems logical to conclude that any tool that brings citizens closer to their legislators (even infinitesimally so) would strengthen a representative democracy. As a result, we see, at this early stage of the ECI’s existence at least, that there is reason to view the ECI not as a tool of direct democracy, but a tool of representative democracy, albeit a seemingly ineffective one as complex and expensive procedures threaten to make completing an ECI quite difficult for the average citizen.

Conclusion

Given the perceived democratic deficit in EU institutions, claims that direct democracy is coming to the European Union are particularly significant. It is therefore of the utmost importance to understand the true nature of the European Citizens’ Initiative as this tool has the potential to link citizens to their legislators, thereby fostering civic participation at the EU-level. Although it was eventually determined that the ECI is not a tool of direct democracy, as it does not fulfill the relevant criteria (entailing neither a vote nor direct participation on behalf of citizens), it was also demonstrated that the ECI could be used for a number of other political purposes, for instance, as a tool of promotion, a tool of representative democracy, or a legislative popular initiative. However, as the ECI is still in its infancy, it may be too early to tell under which, if any, of these headings the ECI might fit – only time will tell how the ECI will be used. For now, we will have to content ourselves with the label supplied to it in the “Your Guide to the European Citizens’ Initiative” – that is, merely “a unique way for citizens to participate in modern democracy.”⁴⁰

³⁹ *The European Citizens’ Initiative Official Register*, “FAQ,” Official Website of the European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/faq> (accessed 4 April 2012).

⁴⁰ *Your Guide to the European Citizens’ Initiative*, 2nd Edition – March 2012, 7.

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“People of Europe – Rise up!” The European protests of 2011 and their contribution to a united Europe on a citizen’s level

Charlotte Sepp

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to find common elements among the protests which took place in many European cities in the summer of 2011. Even though the protests, which started with the movement of the “Indignados” in Spain, had a lot of different names and were organized autonomously, they nevertheless had certain common elements. To extract these elements, different categories like the official objectives, used symbols and wording, organizational systems and used communication channels of the protests in different countries will be analyzed and compared. The focus of the research is hereby laid on the protests of October, 15 since on that day protests were organized Europewide. The analysis will be carried out through the examination of different communication channels. Through the analysis of newspaper articles and pictures common symbols of the protests will be extracted. The examination of the websites of national protest organizations will serve as a basis for the analysis of the published objectives and international websites will be analysed in order to find cross-border communication channels. The findings will suggest that the European protests of 2011 were not only of national importance, but they were the expression of a European public opinion. Initiated by the economic crisis, the people of Europe made their desperation heard and thereby exercised their right as European citizens. The objectives were therefore not only limited to national achievements, but they also called on decision-makers on a European level.

Keywords: Protest, European Identity, Economic Crisis, Social Movements, 15 M

Introduction

12 May 2012, Madrid. Thousands of people are gathering at Puerta del Sol to continue what they started one year ago.

12 May, Athens. They want a change, a future perspective for themselves, for their kids, their friends, their relatives – and for their country.

12 May, Budapest. The mass rests in silence when the first speaker enters the stage. Shortly later, the first hands are raised into the air, then more, then hundreds.

12 May, Berlin. People from different starting points make their way to Alexanderplatz, to share their outrage, to discuss and make their desperation heard.

12 May, Europe; 12 May, world. People gather to discuss a change in society, a global change as they call it, and to find solutions or, at least, solidarity.

Situations similar to these could be observed in many European cities during the second week of May 2012. Especially many Spanish protesters are following up on a movement they started one year ago, on 15 May 2011, when thousands of people took the streets against the political and economic situation of their country. These protests inspired a whole movement following the Spanish example, especially in Greece, Portugal, France and Italy, but also in many other European countries. By the end of summer, the protests had even reached a global level, turning into the anti-capitalist *occupy* movement in the USA.

Contemporary transnational protest studies often (and in most cases justifiably) take a connection between protests in different countries for granted. But can the same be assumed for the different protests in Europe in 2011? Can they be seen as expressions of one voice? Do they represent one united European social movement? Or do they reflect national desperation and can hardly be seen as connected?

This paper provides some answers to these questions by drawing connections between the protests of 2011. The aim is to map the protests regarding their *communication channels*, *objectives* and *organizational structure* as well as their *symbols and slogans*. It is thus examined in how far the protests are related and how these transnational connections are structured.

To lay a theoretical foundation, the **first part** serves to define international movements and to locate this paper in the sphere of international and especially European protest studies. The focus is then set on the concepts *diffusion*, *scale-shift* and *global framing*, since they provide the most vital ground for the later analysis.

The **second part** briefly describes the development of the protests, with their starting point in Spain, their spread over Europe, the connection to the Occupy movement and the joint actions which were carried out internationally.

Subsequently, in the **third part** the above named elements are tracked back to their roots in order to draw connections between the national, the European and the global sphere. Based on the theoretical concepts, it will be analysed how elements were passed from a national to a transnational scale. To trace this path different channels are taken into account: The focus is laid on the examination of *websites* of national protest organizations, as well as joint transnational internet presences to gather information about cross-border communication channels, common symbols and slogans, organizational structures and objectives.

However, the complex network the protest groups build cannot be analysed entirely, since this would reach far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the hypertextuality and “linkability” of the Internet are used to provide a wide overview over communication channels and to find examples for the exchange and distribution of

information among the different scales. Newspaper articles and protest photos will furthermore be taken into account to complete the image, especially concerning the used slogans and symbols.

The **conclusion** compiles the findings to give an integrative overview over the protests and to provide an outlook for future research.

I. Theories of Transnational Activism

1) *Transnational and European Movements in Current Research*

Since transnational social movements are still a “somewhat new and certainly under-theorised territory,”¹ there is a wide range of underlying definitions and conceptualizations of the term. The most vital difference here lies in the context in which the term *transnational* is located, referring either to targets, motives and background of the protests or to the scope and the international collaboration within the movement. In their analysis of European protest movements, Imig and Tarrow define European protests as: “incidents of contentious claims making in which the EU or one of its agencies was in some way either the source, the direct target, or an indirect target of the protests.”²

They subdivide this rather broad definition further into *internalized* (or domesticated) protests and *transnational protests*. While the former have the nation-state as primary target and the EU level as a source or indirect target, the latter can have the EU as primary target, secondary target or as source, but is characterized by the participation of activists from more than one EU member state.³

Through a long-term media analysis Imig and Tarrow found out, that the occurrence of EU-related protests increased especially after the Maastricht treaty. They conclude that, even though the total number of European protests is increasing, the largest share of them is internalized and therefore has the EU as source or secondary target of the protest, but they break the issue down to a national level.⁴ Similarly, Rootes concludes his analysis of the European environmental movement by stating “collective action occurs overwhelmingly within nation states in the form of mobilizations confined on the local or national level.”⁵

Even though many transnational protests are incorporated into a national scope, there is certain consensus about a recent mushrooming of international protest activities.⁶ Reasons for their increasing occurrence can be found in the ever-growing connectedness of the world, since trends of globalization foster similarities between countries e.g. in terms of

¹ Robin Cohen, “Transnational Social Movements: An Assessment” (paper presented at the Transnational Communities Programme Seminar, Oxford, UK, 19 June 1998).

² Doug Imig and Sidney Tarrow, “Mapping the Europeanization of Contention,” in *Contentious Europeans: Protest and Politics in an Emerging Polity*, ed. Doug Imig and Sidney Tarrow (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 31.

³ Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 85-90.

⁴ Imig and Tarrow, “Mapping the Europeanization of Contention,” 35-6.

⁵ Christopher Rootes, “Conclusion: Environmental Protest Transformed?” in *Environmental Protest in Europe*, ed. Christopher Rootes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 383.

⁶ For an overview see Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 86-9.

identical threats: “Different national episodes of contention often arise through similar reactions to external threats, and this structural equivalence has grown with the increasing power of international financial institutions.”⁷ Furthermore, the communicative connectedness, especially through the Internet, facilitates transnational communication and therefore provides potential cooperation and organization of protest groups worldwide.

Yet, the low number of protests *directly* aiming at European institutions is, as della Porta and Tarrow point out, partly due to the lack of direct democratic interaction possibilities on the supranational level. Furthermore, the national level provides protesters with political and structural opportunities which facilitate protest activities.⁸

The above described connections between the national and the international sphere build the core of today’s research on transnational movements. In the following, the focus will be set on the concepts of diffusion, scale shift and global framing, which explain these interrelations more deeply.⁹

2) *Transnational Flows of Contention: Diffusion and Scale Shift*

One of the most frequently used concepts in the scientific discourse about transnational activism is **diffusion**. This term describes the “transfer of claims or forms of contention from one side to the other.”¹⁰ Direct connections between protest movements in different countries are not necessary for this form of transnational action. Rather, it describes the way social movements adopt specific organizational procedures, targets or claims from movements in another region or country.¹¹ Closely related to this concept is the term **scale shift**, which describes changes in the scope of contention. It contains diffusion as a main instrument,

but where ordinary diffusion is horizontal and has an initiator and an adopter, scale shift involves the coordination of episodes of contention on the part of larger collectivities against broader targets, new actors, and institutions at new levels of interaction. In doing so, it can affect the character of contention and its claims as well as its geographic range.¹²

⁷ Ibid, 64.

⁸ Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, “Transnational Processes and Social Activism: An Introduction,” in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, ed. Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 5.

⁹ For other concepts, which explain the protest dynamics between the national and the global sphere see e.g. Della Porta and Tarrow, “Transnational Processes and Social Activism: An Introduction,” 3; Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 77-98 and 143-60.

¹⁰ Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 32.

¹¹ Della Porta and Tarrow, “Transnational Processes and Social Activism: An Introduction,” 3.

¹² Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 122.

Tarrow and McAdam furthermore suggest not to see scale shift only as a result of diffusion, but to analytically differentiate three ways which can lead to a scale shift:¹³

By *non-relational* diffusion they mean the transfer of information via impersonal channels, such as the media; *relational diffusion* describes the transfer of information by the use of already existing channels and *brokerage* finally stands for the creation of new channels between two former unconnected social spheres. Focusing on the two ways, directly initiated by protest groups, a two-way model can be identified (see Fig. 1).

Irrespective of the path taken, scale shift requires the attribution of similarities. This step is of vital impact, since different groups of protesters need to share at least some elements in order to be interested in collaboration.

Nevertheless, the order of these mechanisms change within the two-path model: Since relational diffusion is carried out through already existing connections between social groups, “potential adopters can, in most cases, be expected to already identify with the initiator of the movement action.”¹⁵ In contrast, brokerage has to occur before the attribution of similarity, since it represents the first connection between two parties.

Yet, the attribution of similarities and the identification with one another do not automatically lead to the reproduction of the observed, since extrinsic factors might block such behaviour. This next step, which Tarrow and McAdam call *emulation*, is nevertheless a vital requirement for transnational action and a prerequisite for *coordinated action*.¹⁶

Concerning the use of the two paths, Tarrow and McAdams conclude: “while diffusion is the more common route because it uses existing identities and ties and facilitates emulation, when borders are to be crossed, and distant social actors brought together, brokerage is the more likely mechanism of scale shift.”¹⁷

The concept of diffusion is furthermore tightly connected to the existence of social networks and their internal dynamics. The decision of individuals to participate in collective action does not only arise from their personal motivation, but also from their perception of the effectiveness of the movement, which is drawn primarily from the number of already existing participants. In this context, the Internet plays a vital role in recent protests, since it allows movements to mobilize a big amount of people in a short time, with no need for co-presence or large organizational efforts.¹⁸

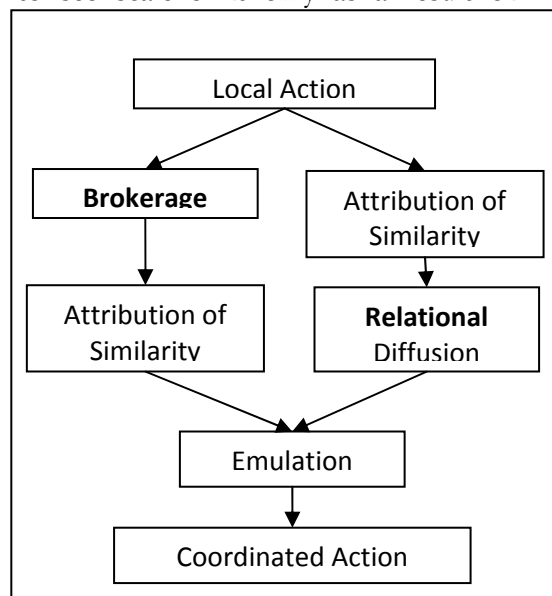


Fig. 1: Pathways of Scale Shift¹⁴

¹³ There different possibilities to conceptualize scale shift, but the version of McAdams and Tarrow seems especially suited for the aim of this paper. For other aconceptualization see e.g. *ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵ Sidney Tarrow and Doug Mc Adam, “Scale Shift in Transnational Contention,” in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, ed. by Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 129.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁸ Sandra González-Bailón, Javier Borge-Holthoefer, and Yamir Moreno, “Broadcasters and Hidden Influentials in Online Protest Diffusion,” *Social Science Research Network*, 10 February 2011, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2017808> (accessed 23 April 2012).

3) *Combining the Scales: Global Framing*

Based on the concept of framing, Tarrow describes how national claims are embedded in a global sphere by attributing a shared meaning to external symbols. “When it works it can dignify, generalize and energize activists whose claims are dominantly local, linking them symbolically to people they have never met and to causes that are distantly related to their own.”¹⁹ An often cited example of global framing is the anti-globalization movement. Since globalization contains a lot of different aspects, the movement was able to give shelter to a variety of sub-protests. Therefore, as Tarrow argues, the globalization movement served as a way of “frame-bridging” between national claims and the international arena.²⁰ However, frame-bridging is the least determined way of linking protests. The strongest mechanism, in contrast, is frame transformation, “which involves the planting and nurturing of new values, jettisoning old ones, and reframing erroneous beliefs and ‘misframings’.”²¹

By drawing these global frames, movements have to find a balance between generalizing in order to build a broader framework and staying close to the mobilizing features of its participants. Tarrow describes this difficulty as follows:

[Global framing] signals to overworked and isolated activists that there are people beyond the horizon who share their grievances and support their causes. But by turning attention to distant targets, it holds the danger of detaching activism from the real-life needs of the people they want to represent.²²

As Tarrow and McAdam state, the organization of international protests is not simple, nor does it naturally accompany global phenomena like economic integration. Rather, the creation of a global frame includes a lot of diverse processes on different levels and requires an active participation of protesters.²³

In the following sections, the focus will be turned to the case study of the European protests of 2011 to lay a basis for the latter adaption of the theoretical framework.

II. The European Protests of 2011

Due to the economic situation of Spain, the high rates of unemployment especially among young people, and the increasing severity of the government’s austerity measures, the atmosphere among the Spanish population was tense already in 2010. This tension made its way to the surface by several smaller protests as well as the first general strike in eight

¹⁹ Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73; Global framing and scale shift cannot be seen as strictly separated concepts. Tarrow and McAdam e.g. place frame-bridging in the context of scale-shift (and not global framing), see Tarrow and Mc Adam, “Scale Shift in Transnational Contention,” 129. Following the concepts explained above, global framing is here seen as a mechanism which facilitates scale shift.

²¹ David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” in *From Structure to Action: Social Movement Participation across Cultures*, ed. Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesche, and Sidney Tarrow (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1988), 188, as cited in Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, 62.

²² Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* 76.

²³ Tarrow and Mc Adam, “Scale Shift in Transnational Contention,” 145.

years.²⁴ Since, reacting to the economic crisis, structural, political, and social reforms were conducted in many European countries, Spain's citizens were not an exception in using strikes as the first visible means of publicly expressing their discontent: The same phenomenon (albeit in different degrees) was seen in Greece, France, Italy and Belgium (Brussels).²⁵

Nevertheless, it was not until the Arab Spring began in 2011, when the Spanish citizens began to organize large protests for 15 May 2011, one week before the regional elections.²⁶ Frustrated by the hopeless employment situation of the country and outraged by the corruption of politicians on the electoral lists, on 15 May people protested in more than 60 Spanish cities and demanded to remove the suspected candidates from the electoral lists.

Since the protests took place all over Spain and laid the foundation stone for further protest action, 15-M got a symbol and became one of the terms frequently used to describe the whole movement.²⁷ At Madrid's Puerta del Sol, where one of the biggest 15-M protests took place, the so-called *Indignados* spontaneously decided to camp at the square until the election day one week later. The news were spread to many other Spanish cities, where people organized camps, mostly in front of their city halls and stayed there partly for more than three weeks.²⁸

First of all through Spanish migrants in other countries, the main ideas of 15-M were represented throughout Europe and even beyond its borders.²⁹ The following weeks were characterised by the spread of online communities as well as real-world protests and camps of different dimensions in large parts of Europe – from Paris to Rome, from Lisbon to Dublin.³⁰

Nevertheless, indicators for a direct connection or joint organisation of the country groups did not become visible until 19 June, when protest groups called for joint protests against the Euro-pact.³¹ Yet, this was not the only action, which made clear, that the *Indignados* turned their focus to a European level: In July and September, they organized several marches to Brussels, mainly from Spain, but also protesters from Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, France and Italy made their way to “the heart of Europe” in order to take their grievances to a new level.³²

²⁴ M.R.P., “29-S: Menor seguimiento que en la huelga general de 2002 y más detenidos,” *20minutos*, 30 September 2010, <http://www.20minutos.es/noticia/828908/0/comparativa/cifras/huelgas/> (accessed 17 April 2012).

²⁵ Aura Ribeiro, “Sindicatos Europeos se Plantean Hacer una Huelga General Conjunta,” *Tercerainformacion*, 01 June 2010, <http://www.tercerainformacion.es/spip.php?article15680> (accessed 26 March 2012); Antonio Jiménez Barca, “Los Sindicatos Sacan más Gente que nunca a las Calles contra la Reforma de las Pensiones,” *El País*, 12 October 2010, http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2010/10/12/actualidad/1286834404_850215.html (accessed 27 March 2012).

²⁶ Reuters. “Factbox – Spain Regional and Municipal Elections May 22,” *Reuters*, 11 May 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/11/spain-election-regional-idUSMAE7430NW20110511> (accessed 24 April 2012).

²⁷ Whenever the terms 15-M or *Indignados* are used here, they refer to the movement as a whole, since different protest groups cannot be distinguished strictly.

²⁸ Raphael Minder, “Despite Ban, Protests Continue Before Spanish Vote,” *The New York Times*, 21 May 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/22/world/europe/22spain.html?ref=spain> (accessed 21 April 2012).

²⁹ Anonymous. “Españoles (que protestan) por el Mundo.” *El País*, 22 May 2011. http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/05/21/actualidad/1306005995_753968.html (accessed 09 April 2012), translation mine.

³⁰ Mathieu Von Rohr and Helene Zuber, “Aufstand der Krisenkinder,” *Der Spiegel* 23 (2011): 100.

³¹ Paul Day. “Tens of thousands march against Euro Pact in Spain.” *Reuters*, 09 June 2011. <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE75116T20110619?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0> (accessed May 10 2012).

³² Take the square, “Marches to Brussels,” <http://marchestobrussels.takethesquare.net/en/who-we-are/> (accessed 27 April 2012).

By September it was clear, that the Indignados had also inspired a new movement in the USA, which spread the term *Occupy* all over America, back to the European protests and even to other parts of the world. With the scope of the movement, the intensity of joint action also increased: Through the Internet and under participation of the existing movement groups, global peaceful protests were organized for 15 October in more than thousand cities in ninety countries all over the world.³³

III. Common Elements of the Protests

1) *The Communication Channels*

As González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer and Moreno stated in their analysis of the use of the network Twitter, the real-world protests in Spain were only the outcome of a debate and an organizational procedure, which had started in Internet-platforms quite some time before.³⁴ In fact, the Internet did not only play a vital role in the mobilization, but also in the transnational and national organization of the protests, since it enabled protesters to distribute information to a large amount of people worldwide in a short time.

In the context of the European protests, though, there is not *one* website which can be described as the exchange platform and primary communication channel for the manifold protests. Rather, the scattered patchwork formed by the real-world protests (which is represented by the different names, like Indignados, Real democracy now!, Occupy, Movement of 15-M or Spanish Revolution), seems to multiply in the Internet: Not are there only different websites, groups in Facebook or so-called *hashtags* in Twitter for every single one of these sub-movements, they are also sub-divided into continents (#occupyeurope), countries (#occupyitaly) and cities (#occupyfrankfurt).³⁵ Only on the website *democraciarealya.es* there are links to more than six hundred groups in support of the movement.³⁶

Nevertheless, the sheer endless dimensions of the internet, as well as the strictly regional or national focus of many of the social network groups or websites, make a large-scale connectedness between international groups via these channels unlikely. Rather, there are at least three different ways in which these national web presences are connected: links, international mediating websites and innovative structural online tools.

Due to the hypertextuality of the Internet, **links** are found on almost all of the protest websites, mostly leading to their own profiles on social networks, to other protest groups or to external sources of information. The complex network built by these links is to some extent structured by what can be called **international mediators**. Through their websites, mediators provide nexuses between the groups and they generally feature a high amount of international links on their own page, as well as a great variety of references and

³³ Protests on 15 October 2011, "Map of global actions," <http://map.15october.net/main> (accessed 02 May 2012).

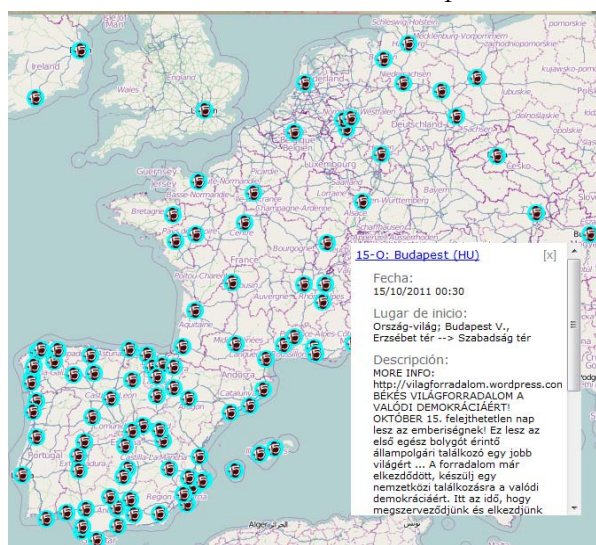
³⁴ González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer and Moreno, "Broadcasters and Hidden Influentials in Online Protest Diffusion," 23.

³⁵ See section Twitter in the Bibliography, "Online Sources for Analysis".

³⁶ Democracia real ya, "Adhesiones," <http://www.democraciarealya.es/adhesiones/> (accessed 10 May 2012).

links to them on other websites. Furthermore, the mediators try to connect the national levels by giving overviews over joint action.

One tool to facilitate this is the interactive world map on which national and regional protest groups can enter their protest plans and locate them with an icon on the map.³⁷ After clicking on the respective symbol, further information about the protests as well as a link can be retrieved (Fig. 2).



*Fig. 2: Section of interactive Worldmap*³⁸

In fact, the webpage of *Democracia Real Ya!* can be categorized as such a mediator, since it provides detailed and up-to-date information about the background, organizational tools and upcoming actions worldwide. Furthermore, it contains an international subpage in English with partial translations of the content into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and (albeit to a very small extent) Greek.³⁹ It therefore bears the potential to function as a diffusion channel, since the same information is more likely to be spread from one origin to many different destinations. Of similar quality is the website *Take the Square*, with the difference that this website provides a higher amount of practical information about the diffusion (“How to cook a pacific revolution”) and organisation of protests.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, neither of the two websites provides direct communication channels between international protest groups and therefore they have to be classified as tools of non-relational diffusion (see Chap. 2).

Due to the lack of direct participation possibilities, the above mentioned websites – like most of the other websites analysed – also use Facebook or Twitter and provide direct links to their respective profiles on their websites. In general, these two already “established” platforms seem to be used frequently for the national and international communication. Especially the organization of joint international events, like the protests of 15 October, were promoted here, but mostly again combined with a traditional website.⁴¹

Since the shift of the movement into an international sphere complicates the accumulation of information, the protest groups combine traditional websites and established social networks with the use of **innovative structural online tools**, like the network *n-1* on which they try to foster international exchange about the consensus

³⁸ Democracia real ya, “Convocatorias,” http://convocatorias.democraciarealya.es/?id_plan=3 (accessed 01 May 2012).

³⁹ Democracia real ya, “International,” <http://international.democraciarealya.es/> (accessed 10 May 2012).

⁴⁰ Take the Square, “How to cook a pacific revolution,” <http://takethesquare.net/2011/07/15/how-to-cook-a-pacific-revolution/> (accessed 20 April 2012).

⁴¹ Protests on 15 October 2011, <http://15october.net/> (accessed 01 May 2012).

reached in their assemblies.⁴² Furthermore, the groups make attempts to hold international assemblies via chat or telephone calls, using voice over IP applications, which allow a large number of people to participate.⁴³

Even though the movement partly relies on already existing channels, like the above mentioned social networks, the path of diffusion has to be defined as brokerage, since the creation of new groups or hashtags also connects people who were unconnected before.

2) The Use of Symbols and Slogans⁴⁴

With regard to the initial protests in Spain, there are at least two categories of slogans to distinguish. The first category consists of slogans with a primarily national scope, directed against the Spanish political system and the upcoming elections. The claims shouted and written on the protest posters especially expressed the grievance of the Spanish citizens about corrupt politicians appearing on the electoral lists and the lack of democracy in Spain's bi-party system. Prominent among this category were slogans like: "No les votes!" (*Don't vote them*), "Ni PP, ni PSOE" (*Neither PP, nor PSOE*)⁴⁵, "No nos representan!" (*They don't represent us*) and the popular claim "Democracia real ya!" (*Real democracy now!*).⁴⁶

The second category consists of claims, which mainly address economic issues. These build a nexus between the national (or personal) scope of unemployment and the European (or global) context of crisis: "Es violencia cobrar 600 euros!" (*Paying 600 Euros is violence*), "No somos mercancías en las manos de políticos y banqueros" (*We are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers*), No es crisis, es estafa! (*It's not a crisis, it's a rip-off*).

A comparison of these initial slogans with those used internationally later on, e.g. at the global protests on 15 October, reveals that certain terms and slogans diffused and thereby connected different protest groups in Europe and beyond. The internationally shared slogans can be distinguished into three different categories:

Firstly, there were slogans, which were directly taken from the **Spanish initial protests**. One of the most prominent was the term of the *Indignados*, which originally is based on the bestselling tract "Time for outrage!" in which the French diplomat Stéphane Hessel calls on the people to stand up against the power of financial capitalism in today's "developed" world.⁴⁷ Mostly in the respective translated version this slogan was used by protesters in Germany (die Empörten), France (Indignés), Italy (Indignatos), Greece (Aganaktismenoi), and the UK (Outraged) among others. Interestingly, the international protests also took over topics and slogans, which in the initial phase of the protests in Spain had a national scope. The slogan "They don't represent us!" for example, was initially used in the context of the forthcoming elections, but when the protests entered the

⁴² N-1, <https://n-1.cc/> (accessed 10 May 2012).

⁴³ See e.g.: Democracia real ya, "Mumble – Voice Chat," <http://international.democraciarealya.es/category/mumble-2/> (accessed 10 May 2012).

⁴⁴ Since the analysis is based on a variety of different Internet-sources, detailed references are avoided here for readability and clarity reasons. Rather, the websites taken into consideration are to be found in the Bibliography, section *Online Sources for Analysis*.

⁴⁵ PP stands for "Partido Popular" (People's Party) while PSOE is the acronym of "Partido Socialista Obrero Español" (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party).

⁴⁶ The slogans (including those below) were found on protest websites, Facebook and Twitter. For examples, see Las Provincias. "Las Lemas de los Indignados." <http://www.lasprovincias.es/multimedia/fotos/comunitat-valenciana/77486-lemas-indignados-0.html> (accessed 20 April 2012).

⁴⁷ Stéphane Hessel, "A Time For Outrage," transl. Damion Seals, *The Nation* 7/14 (2011).

European stage, the slogan was framed differently, describing the democratic deficit protesters accused the European Union to have.

Secondly, the slogans merged with those of the **Occupy** movement in the USA. Therefore, many protests on 15 October were carried out under this slogan, like *Occupy Amsterdam*, *Occupy Salzburg* or *Occupy the London stock exchange*.⁴⁸ Furthermore, references to this term appear frequently on protest pictures, often combined with the symbol # at the beginning. This combination (f.e. #occupyeurope) is a nexus between the “real-life” protests, and the Internet collaboration, since it is an allusion to the hashtags in Twitter.

Another symbol which was added to the protests when they gained popularity in the USA, is the Guy Fawkes Mask. This mask was originally used by the Internet-based group *Anonymous* to hide their faces, but in 2011 became an international symbol for protest.⁴⁹ The slogan “We are the 99%”, which originally was published in a blog to describe the unequal distribution of wealth among the top 1% of income earners in modern societies⁵⁰, can also be described as an American adaptation and as a global frame of the movement.

Thirdly, there were references to certain topics, which can be seen as more **universal**, broad and ideologically loaded. One of these topics was solidarity, expressed directly (“International Solidarity”, “Solidarity for Europe”) or indirectly, either through reference to other countries in crisis – especially Greece (“We are all Greeks”, “Your struggle is our struggle”) or an appeal to other (potential) protest groups (“People of Europe, rise up!”).

3) *The Objectives and Organization*

One thing all social movements have in common is that their participants are not satisfied with their particular situation and publically call for change. But what exactly is it that outrages the Indignados so deeply?

Politicians and journalists often accused the European protesters, as well as the participants of the later arising Occupy movement, for having too broad and unrealistic goals and for representing an “anti-movement” without providing substantial ideas for realistic political and societal changes.⁵¹ In fact, a unified statement or public claim which unites all of the protests does not exist. The declaration which comes closest to this is the *Manifiesto*, which was compiled during the camps in Spain and published on the website of *Democracia Real Ya*, from where it was spread by a chain-reaction to many different protest websites in Europe. It was subsequently translated to French, German, Italian, English and even into sign language, and is so far “electronically signed” by 68,638 people.⁵² From the Internet, the manifest also entered traditional media and was even read out on Spanish television.

⁴⁸ Protests on 15 October 2011, “Map of global actions,” <http://map.15october.net/main> (accessed 02 May 2012).

⁴⁹ Euclides Montes, “The V for Vendetta Mask: A Political Sign of the Times,” *Guardian*, 20 September 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/10/v-for-vendetta-mask> (accessed 05 May 2012).

⁵⁰ Adam Weinstein, “We are the 99 Percent’ Creators Revealed” *MotherJones*, 07 October 2011, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/10/we-are-the-99-percent-creators> (accessed 09 May 2012).

⁵¹ Andrew R. Myers, “Dissent, Protest, and Revolution: The New Europe in Crisis,” *Student Pulse* 4, no. 3 (2012), <http://www.studentpulse.com/a?id=624> (accessed 05 May 2012).

⁵² Democracia Real Ya, “Manifiesto,” <http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/> (accessed 08 May 2012).

A closer look at the published manifest reveals how the producers tried to combine the different frames of the protests, from the national to the global level, as well as from the individual to the collective sphere. The initial national aims of the Spanish protesters are represented in the expression of the grievance against the “corruption among politicians” and the direct reference to Spain’s democratic deficit and the “bipartism headed by the immovable acronym PP & PSOE.”⁵³ Nevertheless, these topics are framed by a rather universally valid notion of the right of co-determination when it says:

Democracy belongs to the people (demos = people, krátos = government) which means that the government is made of every one of us. [...] Politicians should be bringing our voice to the institutions, facilitating the political participation of citizens through direct channels that provide the greatest benefit to the wider society.⁵⁴

This ideal of representative democracy can serve as an element of identification for Spaniards, just as it can be applied to the assumed democratic deficit of the EU or to other countries and regions of the world.

In addition, the manifest draws an idealistic picture of a society based on universally valid values like “equality, progress, solidarity, freedom of culture, sustainability and development, welfare and people’s happiness”⁵⁵, which builds a broad basis for identification with the movement, as it leaves enough room for personal foci and individual interpretations. The global frame is completed by the reference to a variety of issues, including politics, economy, society, culture and environment. With this combination of national with international claims and issues, the protesters acknowledge the risk global framing bears of either being too broad or too narrow (see Chap. 2).

Turning the look to the organization of the movement reveals innovative structures, which were shared internationally. In addition to the above explained technological features which built the heart of the protest organization, their real-life performance during the camps can also be considered as a uniting element. In fact, the camps as such are an innovative means of collective protest action, which gained prominence with the Egyptian revolution, as della Porta and Tarrow analyse:

The occupation of Tahrir Square [...] introduced a new form of action – the long-term occupation of an important square, linked to the creation of a free space where citizens could express themselves and form networks. This practice quickly spread not only throughout the Arabic Spring, but also reached Europe, where it was adopted by the *Indignados* movement in Spain, and, then, in Greece.⁵⁶

The probably biggest innovation to be found in the “sub-cities” of the protesters is actually as old as democracy itself: The creation of open public spaces in which debate can lead to a democratic consensus. In the heart of this idea, which for the protesters represents their ideal of the claimed *real democracy*, is the public assembly. This structural tool was used in the Puerta del Sol protests in Madrid and in the following adapted by many other protests across nations.

The diffusion of the information here again, was mainly carried out through the Internet. The exchange consisted not only in the accumulation of protest documentation, but it did in fact contain detailed guides on how to organize mass discussions, in which

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, “Interactive Diffusion: The Co-Evolution of Police and Protest Behaviour With an Application to Transnational Contention” (paper presented at the General Conference of the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR), Reykjavik, Iceland, 25-27 August 2011).

hundreds or thousands of people might participate. One tool to facilitate the assemblies is the use of gestures to declare assent or dissent with the present speech. This mechanism was used to avoid waiting times, caused by applause or heckling, without depriving the participants from actively involving in the debate.⁵⁷ Alongside with other detailed practical tools for the organisation of assemblies, these mechanisms were summarized by a special commission at the Puerta del Sol protests and electronically published in form of a “Quick guide to assemblies.”⁵⁸ Using the “linkability” of the Internet, this guide, as well as other texts, pictures and videos on the organization of assemblies diffused to the international sphere and inspired the organization of the protest camps in many different countries.

Conclusion

This paper made evident that the protests of 2011 had common elements on an international scale, not only regarding widespread slogans, but also in terms of the protesters’ objectives, the communication channels used and the organizational processes.

In general, the communication channels are the most scattered of these elements, since the different sub-protests build a complex system of websites and social networks, above all Twitter and Facebook. Although protest groups try to centralize the information exchange through links, mediators and innovative technological features, direct communication channels on a European basis are still few, which is however also related to the problem of language barriers. Yet, the system of websites and social networks provide possibilities for the non-relational diffusion of protest material, both practical and symbolic. Therefore, Internet communication has built a vital channel for the distribution of slogans and symbols, organizational tools and joint action announcements. These elements built a common ground for the protests, and provide a frame-bridging between national and European concerns.

This connection is especially obvious in the used slogans, which consist of a combination of Spanish initial claims, references to the European crisis, anti-capital slogans from the occupy movement and universally valid features. The same is true for the manifest, which is widely distributed through the Internet and cleverly combines national, European and universal claims.

In line with former studies the paper furthermore shows that most of the protests were internalized in the way that protests were planned and carried out nationally or locally, often prioritizing national concerns on their agenda. Nevertheless, the protests of 2011 tried to create a European sphere, for example by the organisation of joint marches to Brussels or the international protests e.g. on 15 October, but also with the use of common structural features, like assemblies.

In conclusion, the protests of 2011 combined the national with the European (and a global/universal) level which might even be a key to its relatively broad societal success. Furthermore, with the transfer of online claims into real-world joint action, the protests managed to mobilize large societal parts, bridging not only geographical regions, but also age groups and socio-economical levels. Nevertheless, to speak of a European social

⁵⁷ Bert Eder, “Basisdemokratie in Gebärdensprache,” *der Standard*, 08 June 2011, <http://derstandard.at/1304553970093/derStandardat-aus-Madrid-Basisdemokratie-in-Gebaerdensprache> (accessed 01 May 2012).

⁵⁸ Take the Square, “How to camp,” <http://howtocamp.takethesquare.net/> (accessed 02 May 2012).

movement would disregard the fact that their distribution among European member states was fairly unequal, with considerable participation only among a few countries, namely Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, France, Germany and the UK.

The shared elements of the protests, combined with their focus on solidarity – particularly in the context of the European crisis – can lead to the assumption, that the protests did foster the feeling of a united Europe among the participants, although this would have to be subject to a deeper analysis, e.g. by conducting interviews with protest participants.

This paper contributes to the scientific discourse by showing that today's international movements are as complex as the globalized world itself, building a patchwork of connected and unconnected social spheres and identities. This implies the scientific challenge of firstly uncovering and secondly deciphering these multiple connections. The first step was taken in this paper, which therefore provides a vital basis for further research to build on one of the elements in particular and provide an in-depth analysis.

As the large-scale protests on 12 May and 15 May 2012 showed, the Indignados survived their first year of existence and did not disappear from the public screen so far. Nevertheless, future will show if the global frame drawn by the movement will fall victim to the decreasing connection to people's daily life, or if it will endure and might end up as the only positive impact of the European crisis – the notion of a European citizenship.

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