

ROBERT SCHUMAN AWARD 2020

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The strong wind of alienation is blowing across Europe and indeed the world. While Europe is its cradle, democracy is frequently seen as an impediment to decisive action. In this dawning age of disillusion, Europe must rediscover the true spirit and practice of democracy in order to safeguard seven decades of progress and peace. Only through real action that corresponds with our unshaken belief in self-government, will we salvage a shared European future.

Population movements, volatile economics and a widening gap between generations; profound socio-economic change has undercut our social fabric and challenged identities. European integration brought us prosperity and security, but the appeal of populists can no longer be written off by merely calling them xenophobic or intolerant, regardless of how their discontent is voiced. Through reinforcing our common home from the foundations up, the peoples of this great continent can build a Europe strong and high enough to withstand the coming authoritarian storm or a rising tide of climate change.

Let us embark upon a new phase in our centuries-old experiment with democracy. We propose that 30% of the EU budget will be allocated to so-called 'citizen budgets'. Collectives of self-organizing citizens may apply directly for European funding in areas as different as the fight against climate change, renewable energy, local or cross-border infrastructure projects, regional development, or the integration of migrants into host communities. Devolution of spending power will breathe new life into existing local communities or create new ones where the social fabric has severed.

Funds will first be allotted to European regions based on population size and indicators of social cohesion; the GDP of a region will be irrelevant. Groups of as few as a 1000 people may request resources, with the possible allocation increasing in size parallel to numbers of citizens participating or benefitting. A premium will be made available for collectives that form across national or language boundaries, as to foster integration and avoid communities getting hijacked by local politics. Collectives that form may not overlap with existing political representation.

European officials will be appointed to support such collectives directly as advisors, but communities will be able to remove and replace them through majority vote. Spending will be monitored by the collectives themselves, but subject to reporting duties and auditing. Limited conditions will be attached to spending, but these should be reasonable, understandable and their complexity should decrease in line with the allotted amount. The European parliament will be able to veto any spending that is inconsistent with meaningful European integration or the founding principles of the Union.

In experiments with citizen budgets across the globe, corruption tends to decrease while approval ratings of local politicians and engagement soar. Globalization affects every community differently, so the citizen budget is the appropriate tool to come up with fitting solutions, based on local knowledge. The center of gravity in politics is increasingly local, but the need for global action is more pressing than ever. As smaller units of decision-making will feel a greater need for cooperation and protection at the continental level, devolution will give rise to the need for a stronger and more coherent European Union.

The European Union has a unique opportunity to allow its citizens to build a future in Europe, within and beyond the nation state. Citizen budgets will not limit the power of Member states, but simultaneously enhance the coherence within and between local and supranational levels. Member States will benefit from local initiatives, and see social cohesion and support for its membership of the EU increase. The reality of social change over time renders entrenching contemporary communities in a representative body or treaty superfluous, instead the power of communities to govern and organize themselves will prove unstoppable.

Many a voter laments a lack of choice and influence during election time. Imagine instead a world in which citizens coordinate and debate how to use their tax money. Not through representatives in some far-away national capital or Brussels, but by getting to know their neighbors. If European leaders want citizens to trust them, they must trust their citizens first. Not only will it make tangible, mutual and personal the relationship of the European institutions with citizens, but it will allow trust to be rebuilt, force politicians to serve their constituents and give new meaning to the word community.

No longer will decision-making be an abstraction; no longer will we need strongmen to solve our problems; no longer will voting seem futile; no longer will politics make us cynical. If Europe is to further develop into the regional power it was once poised to become, it must first put its house in order. We need more democracy, not less, if we are to resist the siren song of authoritarianism. In a world where democracy is backsliding, Europe's role will be indispensable.

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