



Lab 8 - Corruption and Populism: can citizen watchdogs help?

Sponsored by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

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Initiatives:

Vouliwatch: "Empowering Democracy" (Greece) by Mr Stefanos LOUKOPOULOS, Director of Vouliwatch
Partidos Públicos (Chile) by Mr Pablo COLLADA CHAVEZ, Executive Director of Fundacion Ciudadano Inteligente
Cumuleo, Cumuleo.be / Anticor.be / Transparencia.be (Belgium) by Mr Christophe VAN GHELUWE, Founder of Cumuleo.be

Discussants:

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The lab in brief

Democracy is a political system in which citizens are supposed to participate, not only by electing their representatives but also by discussing a wide range of political debates. Although they are recognised as vital, some debates, like the amount and the origin of all money earned by a politician, still suffer from a lack of transparency. Transparency is the key to draw links of trust between politicians and the civil society. Mistrust towards political leaders is at the heart of corruption and, consequently, populism. Politicians can rather make themselves accountable to citizens, by opening some sort of pieces of information they believe should be known to prove they are not corrupted.

Citizen watchdogs are initiatives taken by citizens who wish to document a fact: the lack of transparency regarding what politicians do, what they vote for or against, what their views were on a question being discussed in the public debate, who they might work for on top of the political mandate etc.

Enabling and encouraging citizens to know more about these topics should renew the interest towards politics while reducing hostile behaviors at the origins of populism. It should also encourage politicians' responsiveness towards their votes, as well as their funding, which in the end could reduce the level of corruption.

If corruption and populism go hand in hand, can citizen watchdogs help out? The lab analysed the impact of citizens' monitoring initiatives on corruption and their potential influence on tackling populist trends through strengthening the integrity of, as well as trust in, parliamentarians and other elected officials.

About the initiatives

Vouliwatch: "Empowering Democracy" (Greece)

In the midst of the financial and political crisis which hit Greece, people lost their trust in the Greek democracy, which provoked growing sympathy for extremist parties. As a matter of fact, 93% of the people interviewed in 2013 thought that the Greek politicians are corrupt. The idea behind *Vouliwatch* is that promoting accountability, transparency and information can reconnect the citizens and the political elite. In order to reach this objective, the founders of *Vouliwatch* put their hopes in the possibilities offered by the digital era. *Vouliwatch* (*vouli* means "parliament" in Greek) is an online platform which provides different kind of tools enabling the users to get an overview of what is going on in the Greek Parliament. Citizens can therefore monitor MPs' votes and behaviours, and also compare political positions to understand the political landscape.

On *Vouliwatch*, every MP has an individual profile providing information about their function, their committee, their party, their political history, and their financial declaration. But in order to rebuild trust in democracy, there is also a need for strengthening the dialogue between civil society and the political elite. Therefore, *Vouliwatch* allows citizens to ask questions to the MPs through the website – the questions are monitored by webmasters who will approve them before they are addressed via email to the MPs, whose answers are then published on the platform. For instance citizens can ask their representatives the reasons for their voting behaviour on specific subjects, but they can also share their thoughts and suggestions with them.

Another interesting aspect of this initiative concerns the presentation and reorganisation of political data. Every bill that goes to the Parliament is analysed and presented by *Vouliwatch*. Considering that political documents are written in a very technical and formal manner, the organisers translate these bills into texts which could be readable and understandable for citizens without political and legal background. There is also a filter tool which enables citizens

to easily cruise through different bills and types of legislation, delivering historical and political backgrounds on political debates

Other features provided by the platform concern policy monitoring, which allows the comparison between political parties on specific issues by providing voting data and crossing activities from different stakeholders inside the Parliament. Last but not least, *Vouliwatch* collects financial data which are displayed on the platform. Citizens can monitor and ask questions on the budget used by the Parliament, in particular which exact amount was spent on every topic.

Partidos Públicos (Chile)

In a recent survey carried out at the national level, *Fundacion Ciudadano Inteligente* noticed that citizens' trust in the political parties was around 5%, while 70% of the Chileans stated that for them the political parties are the most important stakeholder for a healthy democracy. Such suspicion was seen by *Fundacion Ciudadano Inteligente* as a fertile soil for populism and authoritarianism. The initiative *Partidos Públicos* wants to address this challenge and contribute to turning political parties into trustable entities by promoting a culture of transparency and openness. This project provides citizens with participation tools and channels to strengthen transparency and accountability in political parties, through a digital platform for the publication and display of information on their finances, decision-making, organisational structure and relationship with other entities.

The first challenge that *Partidos Públicos* had to face was the access to the data. In the meantime a Chilean law passed in 2016 because of a huge political financial scandal. This law now forces political parties to publish certain amounts of data concerning for example their finances, their organisation, decision-making and the connections with other structures and institutions. However, this kind of information is still hardly accessible and readable. Collaborations with parties themselves, journalists and volunteers, are fundamental in order to link information with financial data. Through *Partidos Públicos*, citizens can inform themselves about the income and expenses of a party, their latest decisions, the mechanisms of decision making, how to join them, the national presence and the number of militants, the participation of historically excluded groups among its members, among many other features.

Partidos Públicos also has a strategy for the promotion of citizen participation, through workshops with civil society organizations and the media, in order to promote the use of the platform and spread a democratic culture of transparency.

To reach a larger audience and to encourage public debate on this issue, the initiative also makes a communication campaign to relieve the role of political parties as intermediaries between the State and citizens. In this campaign, the activists from the Foundation Smart Citizens make concrete propositions to improve the democratic culture in Chile – for example, while the law on transparency in politics was drafted in 2016, they could contribute to the debate by suggesting to add certain elements to the law in order to strengthen it.

Cumuleo, Cumuleo.be / Anticor.be / Transparencia.be (Belgium)

Since 2004, all Belgian public offices are to be declared to the national court of audit and the documents are published online. This concerns high level politicians as well as every other official, for example police officers. But the way this information is available to the citizens makes it unreadable because of the complexity of the data and the multiplicity of formal documents.

Cumuleo.be addresses this issue by collecting, analysing and summarising the data, hence helping the citizens to understand the activities of politicians. The elements published by *Cumuleo.be* are regularly quoted by the press and discussed on social media, helping therefore to keep the debate on cumulated mandates and conflicts of interest in the public discussions.

In 2017, in the midst of corruption scandals in Belgium, *Cumuleo.be* received a lot of public attention. But this fact is not enough to prevent conflicts of interest, as the legal frame which exists in Belgium is not implemented correctly, and still needs to be improved. Officials do not give all information they should and only 40 of all the cases of possible conflicts of interest were brought before the court – and none of them had real legal consequences. The lack of political will to change the situation, as well as the inadequate financial support to the legal system in Belgium, which consequently results in lack of sufficient financial means to fulfil such investigations, are the two major problems, which can only be addressed by strong protest from the civil society.

Key points issues by the debate

Positive counter-narrative to reestablish trust. The press and social media only focus on scandals and draw all the attention on corrupt individuals. This leads to a systematic negative image of politics which is devaluating the work done by MPs. Good practices done by MPs are not mediated, neither are the efforts made by politicians on an everyday basis. By masking the fact that most of the MPs do a good job, the public simply does not get the chance to understand what the work of an average MP is made of. Citizen watchdog initiatives, such as those presented, are therefore welcomed: “politicians need the civil society, because without civil society, what politicians say is not believed by the people anymore”, as proved by the testimony of the politician acting as discussant, Ms Anne Brasseur, Member of Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. She reported cases where citizens rejected what she said. When she encouraged them to verify her statements in the press, people replied that they did not believe in anything from the press either. In this context, people from the civil society – associations, watchdogs, activists – seem to be in the good spot to enable a constructive dialogue between citizens and politicians.

Transparency behind initiatives addressing transparency. How to be sure that the citizen watchdogs – or someone else – do not intentionally or unintentionally misuse pieces of information? As example, Ms Brasseur explained that a similar initiative in Luxembourg monitors MPs’ parliamentary work. During the time she is participating in the World Forum for Democracy (WFD), the application will display that she is absent from the parliament – therefore reinforcing an image of a politician who does not do her job – while she, in fact, is contributing to the WFD precisely in her quality as MP. Other politicians among the lab participants confirmed such concern: they agree on the idea to foster transparency and openness, but they are worried about the misuses such information can generate. A culture of transparency and openness does not only mean an effort from politicians to change their habits, but also requires fostering the publics’ ability to handle the data they are given access to. It is a process of mutual trust and learning from both sides which will lead to a new way of re-thinking our modern democracies. At the beginning, there might be some abuses but with some time and good will these challenges will be effectively addressed.

Data interpretation and cross-collaborations with parties and institutions. How do these initiatives use the data? Are they politically engaged? The three presenters agreed that they want to contribute to the creation of a new political culture, which is based on trust and on transparency. But while *Vouliwatch* aims to remain neutral and refuses to interpret politically the data as much as possible, the *Fundacion Ciudadano Inteligente* and *Cumuleo.be* have political aims. *Cumuleo* considers its work as part of a broader lobbying – in the manifesto published on its website, the Belgian government is called to implement GRECO’s propositions, which are repeatedly ignored.

One of the main challenges, as reported by *Partidos Públicos*, is to display valuable information and to discuss it with various stakeholders – parties, institutions and other relevant partners. The *Fundacion Ciudadano Inteligente* tries, for instance, to come up with new ideas in order to improve the democratic institutions: while avoiding judging parties and politicians or choosing sides in the political arena, their actions inevitably do lead to a certain political engagement.

On the other side, politicians appear sometimes sceptical, suspecting that these initiatives are

financed by rivals or will work against them in some way. In the beginning, *Vouliwatch* was accused to be a far-left initiative, before being accused of being managed by far-right activists, then to be sponsored by the right wing. Concerning other aspects which require the cooperation of politicians – for example the online Q&A, *Vouliwatch* noticed that more and more politicians are willing to collaborate. The situation of *Partidos Publicos* is slightly different. Their initiative relies mostly on the data freely shared by the parties. In the very beginning, the *Fundacion Cuididano Inteligente* met opposition and scepticism. Political parties refused the dialogue, they were not used to this kind of initiatives – but with the time politicians were more comfortable with sharing their data, also understanding the benefits they could get from it.

Right to privacy? Many politicians among the audience voiced their concern about privacy. Displaying information about political parties and the parliamentary work is one thing, but what about more private data, like personal finances, investments and belongings related to individual MPs? Are they to be shared with the public as well? Some politicians might be comfortable with these requirements, but others would prefer to preserve their private sphere. Do politicians have a right to privacy? In the audience, certain MPs supported the idea, because MPs are also individuals like everyone else and therefore have the same rights as everyone: a distinction between their public life, which should be open and transparent, and their private life must be preserved. At the same time, it was argued that elected offices imply such high responsibilities that the need for transparency has to prevail on the right for privacy. This is indeed the only way to fight corruption. The cultural context makes the difference: in US, for example, people are comfortable with talking about their private finances and income, but in most European countries these questions are very sensitive. Some of this information is of public interest to the point that initiatives, such as *Vouliwatch*, display any relevant information about MPs even without their consent.

Watchdogs as a symptom of this crisis, and not an answer to it. These citizen initiatives contribute to solutions but we cannot expect them to solve the trust and corruption issues which are damaging our societies. Transparency is important, but it is not an end in itself: we have to create opportunities for dialogue, for citizens to interact with politicians. These tools will never be able to change the situation by themselves; they need to be translated and embedded into stronger institutions. In combination with other efforts and by synergising with other projects, these initiatives can contribute to strengthen democracy with a “trickle-down effect”. According to FCI, tools are useless by themselves. Their potential utility derives from being part of a greater advocacy plan. *Vouliwatch.org*, for example, launched a project which consists of going to schools in right extremist neighbourhoods and explaining democracy to young people.

Recommendations

- ✓ To promote mutual collaborations between neutral citizen watchdogs, parties and institutions to make reliable information more easily accessible.
- ✓ To create a culture of transparency, by sensitising politicians as well as citizens on the correct use and interpretation of the data. Transparency is not a goal in itself – but a first step on which a relation of trust and dialogue between politicians and citizens can be built.
- ✓ To embed these citizen watchdog initiatives into democratic institutions