Dear President Juncker,

The European Union might be over in less than a year. If Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen win their national elections next Spring, Brexit-like referendums will be held in the Netherlands and France. Both dominate the polls. Both have called for a referendum. And both their countries were precisely those that rejected the EU Constitution in 2005. It goes without saying that two founding members dropping out of the EU would constitute a fatal blow to the European dream, the largest peace-building effort history has ever witnessed.

Ever since Trump won the US elections, we have seen analyses of America’s people, politicians and parties, but not of its procedures. There has been little reflection on the tools that our democracies use. It is still heresy to ask whether elections, in their current form, are a badly outmoded technology for converting the collective will of the people into governments and policies.

This should be surprising. In an election, you may cast your vote, but you are also casting it away for the next few years. This system of delegation to an elected representative may have been necessary in the past – when communication was slow and information limited. But it is completely out of touch with the way citizens interact with each other today. Referendums are hardly any better. In a referendum, we ask people directly what they think when they have not been obliged to think – although they have certainly been bombarded by every conceivable form of manipulation in the months leading up to the vote.

Referendums and elections are arcane instruments of public deliberation

Referendums and elections are both arcane instruments of public deliberation. If we refuse to update our democratic technology, we may find the system is beyond repair. The year 2016 has already become the worst year for democracy since 1933. Donald Trump is not an oddity, but the very logical outcome of a democratic system that combines the 18th century procedure of voting with the 19th century idea of universal suffrage, the 20th century invention of mass media, and the 21st century culture of social media.

Both Brexit and Trump painfully illustrate the dangerous road that all western democracies have taken: reducing democracy to the act of voting. By refusing to change procedures, we have made political turmoil and instability defining features of western democracy. This may even hold true for the European Union you preside.

And there is more. This December, Austria might vote in its first far-right head of state in modern times; his love for the EU is cool at best. Italy may be profoundly shaken if prime minister Renzi loses his referendum on parliamentary reform. Poland will further catch up with Hungary in terms of authoritarian rule. Bulgaria is increasingly looking towards Russia after last week’s elections. And Germany, often seen as the last stronghold of liberal democracy in the EU, will see a steady increase of right-wing populism in the runup to the 2017 elections. With the eurosceptic AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) already beating Merkel’s CDU in certain regional elections, Germany’s sudden reputation of being ‘the new leader of the free world’ may prove short-lived.

Countless western societies are currently afflicted by what we might call “democratic fatigue syndrome.” Symptoms may include referendum fever, declining party membership, and low voter turnout. Or government impotence and political paralysis – under relentless media scrutiny, widespread public distrust, and populist upheavals. The World Values Survey paints a grim portrait: less than half of young Europeans believe that living in a democracy is essential.

Yet democracy is not the problem. Voting is the problem.

This is the state of the European continent, Mr. President. We are falling apart. In your State of the Union [You can read the State of the Union here.](https://ec.europa.eu/priorities/state-union-2016_en) State of the Union last September, you admitted that Europe was “at least in part, in an existential crisis.” Yet why don’t we see even the beginnings of a new and daring vision of what European democracy could stand for?

We voted for you, Mr. Juncker. Wasn’t that the whole idea behind the 2014 election with its Spitzenkandidaten [Read more about these elections.](https://decorrespondent.nl/116/hoera-een-debat-zonder-meningsverschillen-tussen-politici-die-we-niet-kunnen-kiezen/11595012-40bb96a8) Spitzenkandidaten and its televised debates on Euronews? To give Europe a face? To make sure that the winning faction in Parliament would presideover the Council? To show that Europe was not only about slow procedures but political dreams, too? You won. Now you must lead.

Yet so far the EU has given Brexit the worst possible response: shrugging its shoulders and returning to the technical proceedings of the day. As if to say, ‘Well, the Leave campaign was based on so many lies, the EU should not do any introspection. Surely, there won’t be any chain reaction.’ [See for instance here.](http://www.dw.com/en/schulz-there-will-be-no-chain-reaction-after-brexit/av-19351854) chain reaction.’

So far you have also given the US elections the worst possible response, by blaming [This is what you said.](https://www.rt.com/news/366568-juncker-trump-eu-nato/) blaming Trump for his ignorance: “I believe we will lose two years, until M. Trump has toured the world that he doesn’t know.” While this may be true, bluntly dismissing the likes of Trump, Farage, and Johnson as nitwits and liars, while refusing to take the anger and the fear of so many voters behind them seriously, is only adding fuel to the fire. Yes, part of that anger may be imagined and inflated by populist rhetoric, but part of it is real and deserves your fullest attention.

There are again two Europes now, there are even two Germanies again. And this time it is not East-West, or capitalist-communist. It is a divide between those who feel politically represented and those who don’t – until a populist leader comes along, that is. For at that moment, all old resentment finds an outlet in the new leader.

Martin Schulz, the current president of the European Parliament and former Spitzenkandidat for the socialists, recently even dared to call for an *Aufstand der Anständigen*, a revolt of the decent ones, [See how decent that was.](http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/rechtsextremismus-eu-parlamentspraesident-schulz-fordert-aufstand-der-anstaendigen_id_5639375.html) revolt of the decent ones, thereby stigmatising and demonising large parts of the other Europe as being ‘indecent’. Strange, for I was under the impression that socialism was about caring for the underprivileged.

For Guy Verhofstadt, your liberal challenger as Spitzenkandidat, the answer to Trump is not more democracy in Europe, but more defense. [Here’s the full argument on defense.](https://www.neweurope.eu/article/protecting-europe-age-trump/) defense. As if the biggest danger does not come from within! The biggest threat to the EU these days is not Russia, but the EU itself. Herman Van Rompuy, however, the former president of the European Council, recently said, “I always have to laugh [Here’s the interview in which he said that.](http://www.knack.be/nieuws/wereld/van-rompuy-ik-moet-altijd-lachen-als-men-over-het-democratisch-deficit-van-de-eu-begint/article-longread-722525.html) laugh when people start talking about the democratic deficit. I admit that the EU has to function better, but there is nothing wrong with its democratic quality.”

The main reason why the EU is falling apart is the perceived gap between citizens and Brussels

I beg to differ. The main reason why the EU is falling apart is the perceived gap between citizens and Brussels. It’s time for citizens to have their say on Europe, not just through representation but participation. Ticking a box every five years is not enough. Where is the reasoned voice of the people in all this? Where do European citizens get the chance to obtain the best possible information, engage with one other, and decide collectively upon their future? Where do citizens get a chance to shape the fate of their communities? Not in the voting booth, for sure.

People care deeply about their communities and want to be heard. But a much better way to let the people speak than through elections or referendums is to return to the central principle of Athenian democracy: Drafting by lot, or *sortition* as it is presently called. In ancient Athens, the vast majority of public functions were assigned by lot. Renaissance states such as Venice and Florence worked on the same principle and experienced centuries of political stability. With sortition, you do not ask everyone to vote on an issue few people really understand. Instead, you draft a random sample of the population and make sure they come to the grips with the subject matter in order to take a sensible decision. A cross-section of society that is informed can act more coherently than an entire society that is uninformed.

Come on, Europe. Take Europeans seriously. Let them speak. Why educate the masses if they are not allowed to talk? Look at Ireland, the most innovative democracy in Europe. Just weeks ago, a random sample of a hundred Irish citizens, drafted by lot, was brought together to form a Citizens’ Assembly. [Read more about democracy, the Irish way.](http://www.rte.ie/news/2016/1015/824276-citizens-assembly/) Citizens’ Assembly. This is a country that trusts its citizens, rather than fearing them. Over the next year, they will discuss five topics, including abortion, referendums, and climate change. They will invite all the experts they want to hear. This Assembly is the second of its kind. In 2013 and 2014, a similar procedure [Read here all about it.](https://www.constitution.ie/) a similar procedure asked Irish citizens to make policy recommendations about a range of topics including marriage equality. Their proposal for constitutional reform was later voted on in a national referendum. It was the first time in modern history that a constitution was altered after deliberation with a random sample of citizens. Now, these are ways of doing democracy in the 21st century.

In South Australia earlier this year, 350 citizens were drafted by lot to decide whether the state should store nuclear waste from around the world in its desert. The topic was too technical for a referendum and too touchy for party politics. By pulling in random citizens, a much more informed policy proposal was made. (The panel decided against.) [See the article in The Guardian.](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/nov/07/citizens-jury-rejects-push-for-south-australian-nuclear-waste-dump) against.)

What if you were to call for a similar Citizens’ Assembly in the European Union? Every European member state could bring together a random sample of a hundred citizens. They would then meet on four occasions, over a period of several months, in order to answer one big question: How do we make the EU more democratic by 2020? From Portugal to Estonia, participants would get the same amount of time and materials. Every country would formulate ten recommendations. Then a selection of delegates from each national convention, again drafted by lot, would come together in Brussels to finalize a list of 25 shared priorities for future EU policy.

This would constitute some real change. By letting citizens speak, you would create an agenda for future action that’s generated from the bottom up. You would give citizens an active role in shaping their Europe. You would show an innovative path between those who call for ‘more Europe’ and those who want ‘their country back’. You would create a new dynamic between member states and Brussels. And more importantly, you would bring the two Europes together in true dialogue, rather than digital diatribe.

In your State of the Union, President Juncker, you rightly said that “the next 12 months are the crucial time to deliver a better Europe.” You were even calling for “a Europe that empowers.” Sadly, this went no further than promising 5G internet and a voluntary corps. How dare you come up with such weak solutions at a time when the EU is agonizing.

Today’s challenge is of an entirely different magnitude: Reestablishing trust in a unique project by involving citizens in the debate about the future of their communities. Democracy is not only government of the people, for the people, but also by the people. We have one year.

Yours sincerely,

David Van Reybrouck

<https://thecorrespondent.com/5711/we-have-one-year-to-make-democracy-work-in-europe-or-else-the-trumps-take-over/570854427-59d8ed4b>