

## **THE EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE EYES OF PROFESSIONAL ONLINE USERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The process of legal convergence between the EU and the Member States is not sufficient to consolidate a European identity and to catalyze the Europeanization dynamics. Europeanization cannot be seen just as an institutional endeavor as the key pertains to actors – who apply directly European norms. Here, the network society dramatically alters the overall landscape. Internet active users are part of a hypersocial society which combines different forms of communication, consensus-oriented discussions and dissension. Deliberation is live on the Internet, having a supportive action on civil society within the context of European citizenship, mainly when the user is part of a professional area. Starting from these premises, the paper lays emphasis on facts and attitudes towards e-participation and towards the features of a European online civil society, having as aim revealing the perceptions of judicial professionals, a circle that has not been properly examined before. The research relies on an interview-based survey conducted with 12 subjects in the legal field. As the findings show, the online European civil society, seen through the eyes of judicial people, is still in an incipient stage, its primacy being founded on practical issues and not on the acknowledgement of a European identity.

**Keywords:** Europeanization, network society, civil society, online users.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within the framework of a ‘hypersocial society’ (Castells, 2005, p. 11), the European political communication and deliberation are live on the Internet. They provide a supportive action for the civil society, the periodicity and content of e-participation crafting the status of the European citizenship. Against this background, the bond between citizens stands for an incentive for deliberation and for outlining messages and decisions for the common good whenever the civil society is opened to collective reasoning (Nanz, 2007).

Digital communication systems have brought the disappearance of spatial and temporal limits, changing patterns of activities, proximity setting itself up as the new concept of the new media technologies (Mitchell, 2005, p. 328). In this setting, Europeanization also implies disclosure to other cultural demands, strategies, expertise, values or patterns, and a society cannot remain disconnected from the rest of the world (Himanen, 2005). Building on this logic, the concept of a 'networked' Europe goes beyond the European borders because it creates connectivity in the European space and between this space and non-European spaces (Rumford, 2006, p. 138). Connectivity means interactivity and reveals a public space which transforms the passive receivers of mass media into receivers who contribute directly to the content of debates (Bruszt, Vedres and Stark, 2005).

Europeanization is understood as an interactive process, not as a unidirectional one: 'Europeanisation consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies' (Radaelli, 2004, p. 3). Two main pillars are invoked by the EU: territoriality and people hood (Borneman and Fowler, 1997). Mutual learning and coordination can lead to networks bonding people into democratic aggregations (Youngs, 2015). Europeanization involves a reorganization of national identity, including a new political and cultural framework (Borneman and Fowler, 1997; Spohn and Triandafyllidou, 2003; Vătămănescu, Gorgos and Andrei, 2015). Romaniszyn (2003) sustained that Europeanization operates for the diversification of national identity, bringing a new element: the European identity, supporting the pluralism of Europeans' cultural domains -material, social and symbolic aspects. Identity does not have national institutions as feature, but the moral and spiritual characteristics, which differentiate between 'us', 'them' or 'the other'.

In Schifirneț's opinion (2011, p. 17), the Europeanization of institutions generates the Europeanization of society and citizens, be they ordinary people or political leaders, who are not just passive receivers of European standards, but are active figures, able to subdue and to express themselves freely, thanks to the principle of democracy. Europeanization has a horizontal dynamics. The cognitive form and normative systems have the European citizen as central actor, capable of proroguing exchanges through interaction, not just taking-up from the EU institutions (Radaelli, 2004). Challenging interaction and belonging are effects of living together and understanding social layers (Van Leeuwen, 2014). Through horizontal networks of communication, people are influenced by other persons who are not public figures and harbor social change. Amongst them, intellectuals, in general different types of elites play a relevant role (Schifirneț, 2013). Professional elites proved to be relevant in this context.

In this way civil society emerges, building on reciprocity and taking action, on informal engagement and responsibility that come from the personal will (Laine, 2014, p. 73). In the online space, the focus is on informal movements and collective action among citizens who are members of civil society. Concentrating on equal participation of citizens, the European project has the opportunity to surpass cultural differences and to transcend fragmentation through practice and reflexive self-critical discourses, admitting the quality of other persons' ideas (Nanz, 2007, p. 23).

According to Beckert et al. (2011), there has been diagnosed a democratic deficit in the EU and a way to diminish the negative responses or non-responses of citizens is constructing e-participation as an interaction cycle between different participants and the institutional system. Public sphere is a space where deliberative actions are imaged, not only a space to release public opinions and many-to-many communication. Digital democracy has the profile of a total revolution or technological modification concerning the trust of people in governmental institutions. The Internet itself is a democratic platform, where all people are free to express proposals and collective creation is a way of connecting people, which directs mass media attention and even politicians' enactments (van Dijk, 2012).

Civil actors participate in debates, and although they do not represent the entire European civil society, they are part of it and their engagement contributes to the decrease of democratic deficits (Beckert et al., 2011). The complaint about the democratic deficit is real - so are the many researches investigating the true value of a European public sphere as an opportunity for the formation of collective identities (Nanz, 2007). Sharing cognitive identities is an important piece of the civil society; diffusing news, civic disobedience and selective participation are characteristics of nowadays civil society (Youngs, 2015, p. 18). Public debate is a form of understanding governance; consensual governance is the answer for shared meaning that transforms into sustainable projects and decisions (Castells, 2008, p. 91). A democratic animus reveals the desire to keep alive discussions between citizens and politicians through information transparency, cooperation and citizens' awareness (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002; Rumford, 2006; Beckert et al., 2011; Shahin et al., 2013; Youngs, 2015).

The actors active online are both organizations and individuals: 1. European institutions; 2. national public bodies; 3. nongovernmental organizations - especially those active in fields such as human right, democracy, civic engagement etc. -; 4. professional associations and experts directly influenced by the evolution in the European space and the increasingly more closer union; 5. (active) citizens from different EU countries. All of them contribute in many ways to the formation of the online European civil society, therefore to the Europeanization. Academic research gave much attention to some of these actors especially to the involvement of the

European institutions (Bârgăoanu, Negrea and Dascălu, 2010; Mansell 2014; Michailidou 2009), as well as to the participation and the impact of citizens' implication (Beckert et al., 2011; Bruszt, Vedres and Stark, 2005; van Dijk, 2012). Other actors benefited from less consideration. In this last situation are the professionals in domains influenced by the increased Europeanization of societies and economies.

Starting from these premises, the present paper provides some light on the way experts in the judicial field relate to the online European civil society and how do they contribute to its shape and enlargement. The research answers several questions: 1. In the view of the experts in judicial field is the European civil society present or active in the online space?; 2. How do the online users in the judicial field evaluate the European civil society?; 3. Are online users from the judicial field actively involved in Europeanization debates in different virtual aggregations?. The focus is on legal advisers and lawyers as they are directly connected to the European legislation and policies and they are often afflicted by their dynamics when performing their jobs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Europeanization at the crossroads of institutions and citizens**

Institutions monitor each other, have consultation groups, try to reduce incompatibilities and develop networks of interaction and they might even change each other after the process of interaction. Mutual adaptation is a base for the co-evolution of institutions in the EU (Gualini, 2003). They are also oriented towards individuals, offering them instruments to encourage civic debates in online spaces which have democratic potential (Youngs, 2015). But these spaces have not been very much visited by common citizens. The online consultations are mostly about institutionalized experts and not about regular citizens or communities of practice (Beckert et al., 2011, p. 10). The EU also has a digital public agenda, which has been criticized from the perspective of its contribution to an inclusive and effective dialogue (Mansell, 2014).

Habermas (1996) saw civil society as part of the active public sphere, the risen voice that expressed publicly the needs, the remarks, the insufficiency or the countenance of citizens for their representatives and their resolutions. The enhanced political engagement of the civil society in the politic area links people, through the participatory democratic area; through the means of European political institutions. European citizens achieve more power by mobilizing in transnational civic organizations (Tomšič and Rek, 2008; Thiel, 2014). The commonly used institutional forms of e-participation that are e-consultations initiated by Parliament and government and e-petitions initiated by citizens, which have a mere consultative nature (Beckert et al., 2011, p. 61).

European initiatives receive responses from the Member States according to their institutional and socio-cultural proficiencies, the internal configuration being decisive for the manner of implementing European policies. The focus is on two levels: 1) the institutional level which is capable of regularizing social actions and 2) the interactional level contrives preferences and decisions that generate reactions from the European citizens, who reject or comply with the European projects (Cirtautas and Schimmelfennig, 2010, p. 429).

In this line, European citizens must adapt to the changing landscapes, driven from top-down. For a better perspective, Cyrus (2003, p. 192) claimed that it is not advisable to ignore the cultural and social process of 'bottom-up adaptation' in Europe. He considered framing as the most desired way of Europeanization, by changing expectations and beliefs. The needed reforms must be explained in order to be understood by people. The EU's interest should be finding the same views in citizens, or if they are different, trying to convince them that the final decision results from a potential negotiation and cooperation, not from a compulsory view. In this vein, the allowance of change is important for the success of negotiation and listening to the other (Durand and Kaempf, 2014, p. 352). Schifirneț (2011, p. 24) insisted that Europeanization implies the existence of European social groups who show transnational solidarity that exceeds national forms. Professionals and elites could contribute to the understanding of these views. The mechanism of Europeanization does not consist in simply showing the effect, it sustains identification with a certain European model which can be adjusted and applied as a new regulation for Member States (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002, p. 271).

Pursuant to Schifirneț (2011, p. 35), the lack of public debates is the cause of the default of an adequate support for the European construct and of the establishment of a more direct link between citizens and the EU. European public debates are conducted, *in generis*, vertically from the European Union to the Member State, through its institutions, with national direct effects, but without a horizontal public debate between EU Member States about European issues.

Amongst individuals, two categories have a deeper impact on shaping the European discourse and influencing the Europeanization of the societies. On one hand are the professionals directly connected with the European processes, and on another hand are the intellectuals, the cultural elites (Dobrescu and Bârgăoanu 2011; Schifirneț 2013). The personal and professional characteristics of these individuals make them more active and influential than other persons.

Tomšič and Rek (2008) sustain that participatory democracy is not to be found (at least as a lasting one) in the European arena because it has to reveal citizens' active involvement in the process. They admitted that a proper opportunity to gain accountability is the formation of civil associations, composed by experts who have the capacity of training ordinary citizens and informing them with all that counts for the EU. This is followed by the exchange of information

in digital media (van Dijk, 2012) that finally, leads to public communication and to the power to influence policy-making in the EU. Nevertheless even if these associations are directly influenced by the European processes and/or they aim to contribute to the development of (a European) civic society, they might not decisively influence the public (Warleigh, 2001; Zbucnea and Bîră, 2013).

A European public sphere for the distribution of common thoughts and common conceptions and projects is essential for the creation and expansion of a political organization and for the feeling of belonging to the same entity. Thus, the potential to enhance democracy by civic groups with civic activities brings to the fore a new perspective about the views adopted by the authorities who ought to be in dialogue with citizens even if they are more combative in debates, implying a bridge-building civic activism and civil society borders (Youngs, 2015, p. 42). This emphasizes participatory democracy, whose main instruments are public debates and public education and community participation in political life (van Dijk, 2012; Vătămănescu, Gorgos and Andrei, 2015).

Collective actions are making people more aware of the fact that the same issues can be regarded from distinct dimensions and examined through different factors and the decision which is finally shaped is representative for all the participants and implemented for all (Brito Vieira and Carreira da Silva, 2013). Exposing different views and ways of reasoning can promote the understanding of those contradictory views and their potential effects and their final decision will embody the product of all discussions and of a common legitimized ground (Brito Vieira and Carreira da Silva, 2013).

### **European civil society and the ‘network Europe’**

The diffusion of information is an actual imperative of the present social life, also labeled as the network society or the information society because it exhibits a specific type of social architecture (Castells, 2005). Access to information is free to anyone who has a device connected to the Internet and who is willing to share his/her opinions and try to influence decision-making in a better way. Online communication is the most adequate for members who have never met before as the public sphere is de-territorialized thanks to interactive technologies (Bruszt, Vedres and Stark, 2005).

The concept of ‘network Europe’ describes a European Union which is free in connectivity and mobility (Rumford, 2006, p. 127). A Europe with territorial borders is seen as cooperative in fulfilling common objectives if its citizens communicate, debate subjects, turn to a positive aim and make decisions which are good for all Member States. Network societies are the new domain

for the civic society and their importance in handling civic problems cannot be ignored (Cardoso, 2005). The actual society is not based on division, but on informational new technologies.

In this light, Castells (2008, p. 90) posits that public awareness can be raised by using the new communication technologies and policy debate succeeds by providing the right platforms where civil society can be active (Castells, 2008, p. 90). The responsiveness of the European citizens denotes the degree to which the views of the public are read by the EU institutions, in their decision-making process. The online participatory area promotes learning, facilitating citizens' mobilization and building a stronger European social capital (Beckert et al., 2011).

Europeanization requires an ideational structure, shared by citizens, with same directions of norms, and with desire to consolidate liberal democracies (Flockhart, 2010, p. 810). European citizens, stated as agents of diffusion, employ 'internal self-reflective processes' (Flockhart, 2010, p. 804) when they debate online subjects like social welfare, health policies, structural norms, and they perceive themselves as Europeans by making a difference between them and other populations such as Americans, Muslims and so on. They identify themselves as European citizens especially when they see differences in their views and practices towards others. This delimitation as a supranational society is motivated by common ideas, actions and region.

Belonging to a community and sharing the same values is a start to reconfigure a new space for the public sphere (Himanen, 2005). Moreover, online platforms amplify political implications and interactions and support an active position of civil society (Beckert et al., 2011; Kostanyan, 2014). Prosperity in Europe can be translated through making the European network society 'inclusive and accessible' (Liikanen, 2005, p. 378).

Democracy as a European norm fits conceptions of social identity, which is in a permanent process of reconstruction, defining the manifestation of European feelings (Flockhart, 2010). From a social-constructivist framework, social processes and causal relationships existent across time are part of Europeanization. The line of thought which appeared after 1990 has placed civil society in direct correspondence with democracy and at the European level, civil society is a transnational one who acts as an independent actor on the European arena (Laine, 2014). The essential ingredient of democracy is composed by citizens' reactions in the public sphere. The cultivation of social cohesion and social support among European citizens provides a social space, where the diversity of interests gives contributions to problem solving, activating knowledge enrichment and evaluating people's feedback (Kohler-Koch, 2009; Van Leeuwen, 2014).

The online exchange of knowledge, discourse and discursive elements help individuals understand and interpret the society and material entity. Interaction between civic representatives

and policy-makers is also led by patterns of behavior and expectations, norms and these are contributions to the beginning of new discourses which can incorporate subjective elements (Tucker, 2014, p. 385) and might constitute widely accepted norms at the European level. Behavioral change is accomplished by social learning, institutionalization, and adaptation, having as provenance two sources: the structural level and the agent level (Flockhart, 2010, p. 796). The agent level involves the configuration of social identity of the European citizen, which is constantly modifying through interactions. The best way of improving the understanding of EU policies is keeping contact with media, civil society, business associations and trade unions (Kirova, and Freizer, 2015, p. 32), as well as with professionals influenced by the transformations within Europe or other types of elites.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

### **Research objectives and questions**

The present paper is intended to qualitatively investigate the drivers and the features of the European civil society through the lens of the judicial experts connected with the European process. To this end, three research questions were developed: 1. In the view of the experts in judicial field is the European civil society present or active in the online space?; 2. How do the online users in the judicial field evaluate the European civil society?; 3. Are online users from the judicial field actively involved in Europeanization debates in different virtual aggregations?. The focus is on legal advisers and lawyers as they are directly connected to the European legislation and policies and they are often afflicted by their dynamics when performing their jobs.

### **Participants**

The interviewees were chosen by employing a snowball sampling and conforming to two main conditions: 1) they should be active online users and 2) they should be legal advisers and lawyers (as this occupation field is directly linked to the European legislation and dynamics).

The interviews were conducted with 12 individuals - eight females and four men. The interviews took place at respondents' offices and proceeded between 3 March 2015 and 21 March 2015; the time of the interview was established in accordance with the respondents' agreement, with a view to avoid hyperactivity and time pressure. The time varied between 40 minutes and 70 minutes, having the respondents' perceptiveness and their proper canvass availability as delimitation factors.

### **Procedure**

In order to generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences, we chose to conduct phenomenological interviews on purpose to elucidate specific personal aspects. The personal perspective and interpretation are ways of gaining insights into persons' motivations and actions; the respondents were asked to describe their perception of the phenomenon in different situations, focusing on the particularities of living in a network society (Englander, 2012). The interviewees' observations, perceptions and understandings were investigated by employing a semi-structured in-depth founded on 13 open-ended questions (Vătămănescu, Pînzaru and Anghel, 2014).

Individual face-to-face interviews are deemed as more appropriate and flexible procedure to provide various information about the meaning of each participant's social context. The purpose, the length and the type of the interview were explained to the respondents and they were encouraged to cooperate. Still, they were not given too much detail that would have biased their responses. During the interview, subjects had the opportunity to ask for more details, clarify unclear questions, and offer examples, elaborate on new insights and on any comments relevant for the setting. The objective was to uncover the whole array of approaches shared by the participants (Vătămănescu et al., 2014).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to establish a general research setting, the first questions were focused on the Europeanization approach, the subjects being invited to offer a personal definition of the process. Here, the majority of the interviewees asserted that Europeanization refers to a process involving *European components gradually adopted by the institutions and citizens*, on purpose to create a new social identity and a new order. Some of the interviewees affirmed that Europeanization implies sharing common values among European citizens and mutual support regarding different issues in the legal, economic, social and cultural fields.

Other standpoints completely ignored the implementation of European laws and advanced more practical answers, asserting that Europeanization is, in fact, a political and social phenomenon, which comes in favor of Romanian citizens because it engenders *freedom of working abroad, travelling without special visa, exchange of experience and common projects*. In this manner, Europeanization is merely approached as a source of rights for citizens, insisting on prominent economic and social views.

European issues are of great importance for respondents when their profession implies a permanent adjustment to the European law system and their daily activities require more knowledge about tax measures, cross border structures and commercial activities.

Elena (33, y.o., legal adviser), clearly states:

*'it is very important to stay in touch with European issues because without reading European directives, I am not able to do my job effectively and to keep my clients informed and satisfied'.*

Accordingly, Diana (30 y.o., lawyer) highlighted the importance to study more the European legislation system:

*'The European Union tries to submit all legislative systems to a unitary one by adopting laws which are in favor of the European citizens. If you do not know European matters, it is impossible to be professional and to win lawsuits'.*

Transferring the discussion to the main paths used in promoting European ideas, most of the interviewees (9 out of 12) declared that *socialization and learning environments* are the most appropriate means. Leaving aside their work routine, respondents underscore that the process of *Europeanization requires common knowledge and a common public sphere*. The imperative results from the need to implement European concepts in the very core of society. Amongst the subjects who supported socialization as the best way to promote European conceptions, Roxana (31 y.o., lawyer) has given voice to a representative position:

*'The most preferred way to disseminate European thoughts is through informal online channels because many people use them and enjoy discussing specific matters with peers from other corners of the continent. Transnational communication via online platforms ensures the debate and clarification of European themes. Debates on European problems are more grounded in informal online discussions than in formal debates about citizens' obligations.'*

Other respondents, as Elena(33 y.o., legal adviser), deemed that learning spaces stand for the best opportunities to link to European items:

*'The learning environments are very important in promoting European ideas among teenagers, helping them understand how the European Union functions, its structure and attributions. They are the future, after all. I trust that this approach will gain more popularity in time as mutual exposure and learning is the red wire of the European spirit.'*

Only two respondents (Viorel, 50 y.o., lawyer; Sandu, 40 y.o., legal adviser) have embraced a more passive attitude, uttering that adaptation is perfectly rooted in Romanians' conduct and this would be the only way to conform to European norms – *'Sometimes, it seems better to conform than to give way to your amendments'*.

The discussion about the main driver for European discussions brought into light the respondents' willingness to become part of a formal European platform where they would be able to debate different European directives and recommendations, in conformity with specific cases of interest. Almost all the respondents (10 out of 12) asserted that they use informal social sites to discuss European problems, from different domains such as law, economy, politics, and social aspects. As stressed by Oana (32 y.o., lawyer), informal forums are also used to convey information and to share different problems in order to find proper solutions. An opposite view is brought to the fore by Letitia (31 y.o., lawyer), who declared:

*'For documentation and also for receiving answers, I prefer to use formal European sites like Europe direct because the available information is verified and reliable. As a support to my statement, I can say I do not like having conversations with other European lawyers because informal channels cannot validate their professionalism. Maybe they are mystifying the data and they confuse me more with inadequate information'.*

Bringing real identity to the forefront of the question shifts the focus away from an informal online area where European subjects are freely released and discussed to a lack of trust area. Still, this opinion remains marginal, most of the respondents finding informal channels as trustful to participate in.

The issue regarding the acknowledgement of the European project advances the idea that the transnational environment would be the proper ground to pronounce that Romanians are European citizens. The construct 'We Europeans' is understood by the respondents as having *we-feelings*, meaning *feeling as being a piece of the European construct* and most of the interviewees said they use this expression when they are abroad or when they talk to non-European citizens. In line with this perspective, some of the respondents said they assume the European identity more when they discuss online with other peoples - French, German or Italian.

A contrasting view is underlined by Georgian (30 y.o., legal adviser):

*'I never use this wording. But I understand it as making a difference between communities, at a continental level. In my everyday life, I do not feel as a European citizen. Our country image amongst the European media and peoples places us in obscurity, as if we were a second-hand nation'.*

At a first glance, most of the interviewees identify themselves with the European identity, but, as posited in their responses, this manifestation escalades mainly when they travel to a non-European country, when confronting with more radical views and merely different values. These

declarations are convergent with similar aspects which were revealed by Romaniszyn (2003), Rumford (2006) and Youngs (2015).

When asked if they see themselves as agents of Europeanization by disseminating information among citizens, the majority of the respondents (9 out of 12) said they did not consider themselves as propagators of European values and rules; they are just citizens interested in understanding European norms and in making the best of it when performing their jobs. The responses reveal the intention to be active in discussing core problems, without deliberately embracing the advancement of Europeanization.

When discussing the importance of adjusting national structures in the spirit of Europeanization, all the respondents admitted that this would be a milestone. Most of the interviewees (11 out of 12) stated that national organizations and institutions have an important role in Europeanizing the society, in the same tone with the assertions of authors as Gualini (2003), Radaelli (2004), Beckert et al. (2011) or Schifirneț (2011). Civil society does not comprise only elites or intellectuals, common individuals are also part of the civil society and the Europeanization process has to be understood and adopted by all citizens. Romanian institutions have the legal possibility of informing ordinary people, who lack European information and who do not have access to the Internet. Through their assertions, the respondents show that they consider people with no access to the Internet as being less likely to know and understand the meaning of the European Union. This is the motivation for the respondents' insistence in requiring the involvement of institutions into supporting ordinary citizens.

Another topic brought into discussion regarded the existence of a strong European civil society in online medium, which succeeds in entailing convergent and divergent viewpoints. In this framework, Ioana (41 y.o., lawyer) claimed:

*'Yes. I think we can talk about an online European civil society. The engagement of online users in debating European problems, from a sociological and juridical perspective, and their commitment in offering real and pertinent answers and to receive advice, denotes the creation of a bond between us, Europeans.'*

Accordingly, Alina (38 y.o., legal adviser) responded in a more detailed manner:

*'The European civil society is flourishing in online environment, contrary to mass media and institutional background. We interact online mainly with European citizens, knowing that this multicultural construct named EU unites us, as citizens. We have the same rights as the English, Spanish, Polish peoples and so on. The level of commitment in*

*communication is higher when discussing with a European fellow than with a non-European.'*

This perspective is basically shared by almost all the subjects (9 out of 12), given the fact that they admit the existence of the online European civil society, without clearly qualifying it as strong or weak. In contrast, three of the respondents said they do not believe in the existence of a strong European civil society in the online environment because, many times, it is all about discrete interventions, episodic involvement stimulated by a personal interest or unclear issue. Once solved the issue, the online user withdraws in his/her shell and the rest is silence.

When asked if digital media may engender European *animus* and if online platforms should be more developed, all interviewees claimed the connection to other Europeans is definitely important and possesses a cohesive incentive. The fact they communicate online, via social media and even e-mail with other European citizens is of prime importance. A more nuanced picture is given by Andra (30 y.o., legal adviser) who states:

*'I feel I belong to the European community thanks to online channels. If I had not owned an Internet connection, I would have never been able to have conversations with other Europeans because I have not had the possibility to travel abroad until now. The online space makes me feel important as I consistently gain European friends and acquaintances. Fortunately, I can visit on my own the European Union official sites and I even subscribed to European Parliament official website for receiving news'.*

Social inclusion via online space was another addressed topic. The respondents' views were, in unanimity, positive to the online environment's role in stimulating citizens' inclusion in different circles and in developing the European civil society. All of the subjects declared that European online debates are more spectacular than ordinary offline debates because everyone feels free to contribute with opinions, ideas, and expectations. On the opposite, in offline debates, few of European citizens are involved (politicians, civil society representatives, administration personnel, etc.). Gabriel (37 y.o., legal adviser) asserted that online debates are more open to contradictory positions and, through a democratic behavior, the participants want to solve issues (be they ideological or practical), having as a final aim the formulation of a common and accepted view. Needless to say, the more citizens engage in networks, the stronger will the European civil society develop through online interactions.

The use of official European websites was pointed out by a lot of participants, but they said they were more likely to engage in informal conversations on social networking sites and other forums than in e-consultations. E-consultations do not have a synchronous feedback as respondents can achieve using informal social sites. Georgian (30 y.o., legal adviser) said:

*'I use the Curia site for seeking European legislation in order to fulfill my job duties. When I want to get a faster feedback, I prefer to enter forums because the answer is almost instantaneously given'.*

Almost all the respondents' opinions ranged in this spectrum. Even so, Diana (30 y.o., lawyer) insisted that it is wiser to consult directly with European institutions than with other colleagues, when having judicial problems. Related to other European issues, economical or social, Diana (30 y.o., lawyer) specified she was open to discuss them in online informal platforms.

Another issue provided a focal reflection of the perception of the European level of enactment. European citizens have rights and obligations, but are they ready and competent to contribute to law formation? The interviewees were asked if they thought that their online implication in debates could bring changes to the European policies. Almost all of them uphold that their contribution could be notable only if politicians would transfer their ideas to the political decision-making realms. As an example, the assertion of Roxana (31 y.o., lawyer) captures the general logic:

*'I doubt that my ideas shared in online medium can bring important changes to European policies. I am just one citizen. Even if I get approval from other Europeans, we are too small for the system. A good idea would be to have a fellow politician among us. If he sees our ideas, maybe he could promote them within European institutions. The access to online services is easy, speaking and chatting to other Europeans is feasible, but influencing policies is of greater difficulty'.*

In this context if reference, Gabriel (37 y.o., legal adviser) revealed another compelling perspective:

*'European legislation is made by people and is superior to national legislations. This means we have to adapt everything to the European level. But every country has its own dimension and course of receiving and implementing legislation. I see it possible to influence European policy-making through online platforms because European citizens have to be fulfilled and satisfied with their policies. European Parliament desires e-participation, recognizing the importance of civic engagement and political concerns. The more we discuss, the brighter is the chance to contribute to policy-making and policy-evaluating in the end'.*

Endeavoring to analyze interviewees' expectations from the European civil society when expressing freely thoughts and personal contributions, the last question addressed the positions of each online participant acting on forums. The heterogeneity of social connections in online

environment explores a new way of treating similar and opposite views, from an equal position. One way to tackle this problem is inferring Andra’s (30 y.o., legal adviser) intervention:

*‘I strongly consider online civil society as an exigency... European citizens have equal rights in showing and describing their opinions and even abilities. We feel free as being a part of a democratic European system and we augment our freedom by being equal in online participation.’*

Adhering to Andra’s standpoint, Ioana (41 y.o., lawyer) expressed her content about online participation, as many other respondents:

*‘I assume an equal position to all the participants when using the online forums because everybody has access to the EU information and everybody has an equal voice, being able to sustain a certain idea. Every person who takes part into a debate is on equal positions, having a way to express himself.’*

By corroborating the answers, credit is due to Georgian (30 y.o., legal adviser) who conceptualized mediated communication as part of a new world *where the power to replicate is bigger than the censorship of others.*

Following the major lines of the research, six main themes derive from the subjects’ approaches, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Main themes derived from the research**

From a bird's eye view, the research elaborates on Europeanization and on the existence of an online European civil society which is trustworthy to a great extent for most of the respondents in the judicial field. The online informal aggregations are social spaces where European community thrives, at least at the level of discussion and practical implementation of European legislation. Social aspects are also put into light, revealing the manifestation of the instrumental European identity, seen through the eyes of online users.

Almost all the respondents believe in the online European civil society which may eventually contribute as incentive to European policy-making, being able to signal major concerns and preoccupation for specific issues. A challenge of the European project is to offer the possibility of being a part of the system, but in the same time, to gain citizens' engagement and content in being a part of the regulatory area. People have to understand and to accept the reasons of creating certain rules and to develop a critical spirit in order to permanently evolve in complying with the rules and contributing to their formation or modification.

Although the societal dimensions and transnational networks can be contributors to the Europeanization process, the civic engagement and dynamics are still in an incipient stage. Despite the fact that respondents acknowledge that transnational dialogue is inevitable for citizens' mobilization, solidarity and loyalty among Europeans, the European public sphere is not completely fostered for public debates or consensus, as Nanz (2007) and Knutsen (2014) also posit.

Civic engagement implies resolving conflicts and reveals collective efficacy and civic actions have the particularity of bringing people together for common targets, fostering solidarity and citizens' connectivity, as many other authors have illustrated in prior research (Sampson, McAdam, MacIndoe and Weffer-Elizondo, 2005; Kostanyan, 2014; Mendelson, 2015).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

By corroborating the aforementioned findings, several baseline perspectives have emerged as far as the European civil society is concerned.

Firstly, most of the respondents are aware of the existence of the European civil society in the online space, although they do not perceive it as an active public sphere. Secondly, the participants in the legal field are reluctant to assert the strength of the actual European civil society due to the fact that the online discussions and debates lack consistency and engagement. Informal channels are more preferred to the formal channels, although for important matters, the official position is still the cornerstone. Thirdly, the interviewees are not consistently interested in debating Europe or the Europeanization process in virtual aggregations. Their objectives are more practical, as the legal advisers and lawyers are predominantly looking for quicker answers

for their daily legal challenges. The European identity is more obvious when comparing themselves with non-European peoples, when delineating between them and the others. Moreover, they believe that online debates may provide some insights for policy-making, on the condition that politicians are open to the online discursive dynamics.

In line with these considerations, the present research adds to the extant literature by providing a thorough outlook on the approach of online users in the judicial field on the primacy of the European civil society. As any other research, the study may be improved by conducting adjective surveys (qualitative or quantitative) on connected issues.

On the one hand, a compelling research direction would be the connections between civil society groups and the professionalization of civil society organizations which may ensure the right dialogue with political representatives and enhance networking amongst European partners. Online debates can develop a new relationship between citizens and politicians especially if those active participants are able to share knowledge and acquire new knowledge. Civil society organizations have the power to influence their members, to observe and qualify the cognitive attitudes of their members, acting as a mediator between people and European representatives.

On the other hand, the analysis of multilingual forums versus English-based forums in supporting transnational activities and relationships would provide a clearer insight on the foundations of the online civil society. A proper policy has to be specifically thought in each Member State and politicians ought to find a way to enforce citizens and other actors (enterprises and so on) to express their opinions. The next step would be trying to engage different social actors to debate their own future.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview guide**

1. How would you define Europeanization with your own words?
2. Is information about European issues important to you? If yes, how?
3. What do you think is the main path to promote European ideas: socialization, learning environments, adaptation or assimilation? Why?
4. What is the main driver of your European discussions?
5. At present, what do you understand from the words construct *We Europeans*? In what context would you use these words?
6. Do you consider yourself as an agent of European values diffusion? If yes, why?
7. To what extent do you believe your national culture should change in order to Europeanize?
8. Do you believe in a strong European civil society in the online environment?
9. Has a sense of belonging to Europe developed through the use of online environments?
10. Some say European online debates are a key to social inclusion. Do you agree?
11. Do you often visit the EU's official website? Do you resort to e-consultations?
12. Do you think you have the power to bring changes in the European policy-making through online channels?
13. Do you feel you have an equal position as all the participants when using online forums? Why?