

“If voting made any difference...”

On the responsibilities of citizens

On 27th January 2012, in an interview with the German daily *Handelsblatt*, Luxembourgian Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker made a comment that caused a minor stir among his fellow country men and women. When being told that Germany was running the highest risk in the gamble for the Euro, Juncker observed that Luxembourgian citizens were paying far more money per capita into the “European Stability Mechanism” than the Germans, adding that he was “happy the citizens of Luxembourg have not realized this yet”¹. Not surprisingly, his comment was not received all too favourably in his home country where he has been accused of taking his own people for fools.² However, the reactions – though understandable – were quite off the mark. For, what Juncker exposed was not so much the intellectual inability of Luxembourgiens to comprehend what is being decided for them but rather their unwillingness to get involved in these affairs that affect their lives so thoroughly. And this, I believe, is a valid point.

Although there is a tiny but slowly growing grassroots movement in Luxembourg which mainly operates on social networks, aboveground manifestations remain rare. Given the relatively high level of prosperity and comfort, this is unlikely to change any time soon. However, the frailty of this prosperity and the dubious and complex system that nourishes it, too often go unquestioned. This civil quietude should not be read as evidence for common consent on national policies but, I think, rather stems from a mixture of disinterest, blind faith and a feeling of

national pride for having a Prime Minister who, in spite of the small size of the country he is governing, counts among the most influential and notorious politicians in Europe.

In light of the upcoming elections and the scandals that have led to the recent governmental crisis one may wonder whether or not these sentiments have waned. “What, if anything, will change in the political landscape of Luxembourg after October?” – that is the question on everyone’s lips. Some are predicting with glee that not much will alter – others are less gleeful about it. However, at the end of the day, one is left wondering how relevant it really is which party emerges victorious. “If voting made any difference, they wouldn’t let us do it”, Mark Twain is believed to once have claimed. Whether one agrees with this reasoning or not, the question of how much influence one really exerts on the ballot boxes remains an interesting one, as does the question of whether the vote constitutes the only or most effective means of participation. If the vote only serves to leave the political deliberations and decisions to a handful of politicians, the sphere of influence a citizen can exert remains limited. Furthermore, the vote may eventually turn into a convenient means to hand over social responsibilities to others. Another quote by Juncker comes to mind. “We decide something, float the idea and wait to see what happens”, he famously proclaimed. “If there is no outcry and no uproar because the majority doesn’t understand what has been decided, we continue – step by step until we reach the point of no return”.³

Representative democracy may thus stymie rather than encourage proactive social involvement and

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voting can turn remarkably inconsistent with the principles of democracy we all claim to support and defend. Though democratic systems rest upon guaranteeing certain freedoms – such as the freedom to inform and educate oneself, the freedom to express oneself, the freedom to organize and campaign – a well-functioning society also depends on how these freedoms are put into practice. The right to exercise these freedoms is certainly an important precondition for a healthy community but without its application it becomes futile. Since being part of a community means living with and being interdependent of one another, presupposing an active involvement and contribution from the members of that community that goes beyond voting seems quite obvious, as everything we do or don't do inevitably leaves a mark on society as a whole. Furthermore, the sphere of influence each of us exerts does not restrict itself to our individual communities – our school, our village, our district, our country – but extends beyond the borders. Thanks to global treaties, economic co-operations, enhanced means of transportation and communication, the world has shrunk into what is now commonly referred to as “global village” and thus the decisions we make in our distinct communities inevitably affect outside ones.

One of the most glaring and disgraceful examples that come to mind to exemplify this, is the Afghanistan war. Luxembourg is one of the participants of the NATO-monitored ISAF operation. Aside from military contribution, the Minister of Defence Jean-Marie Halsdorf has announced the Luxembourgian taxpayer will contribute 5 million dollars annually into the maintenance of the war.⁴ If the invasion which Luxembourg has whole-heartedly supported, was ever intended to “build security for the Afghan people, to protect our citizens and to defend ideals such as liberty, democracy and human rights”,⁵ the war which has lasted over a decade now, has anything but reached its ostensible goals. By sending its troops under the banner of the NATO in order to participate in George Bush's “War On Terror”, Luxembourg has become co-responsible for the blood-bath in Afghanistan.

Of course, this criticism does not apply solely to Luxembourg and its inhabitants but rather to the entire “coalition of the willing”. Nonetheless, special mention should be made of Luxembourg as it hosts several of the major institutions of the European Union. Some of the most far-reaching decisions have been made here without much public ado – and to be frank, without many people knowing nor really caring to know. To continue with the example of Afghanistan: On 8th of October 2001 – the day following the series of bombings launched by the US

and the UK to initiate the war – the General Affairs Council which had assembled in Luxembourg, issued a statement of support confirming its intention to partake in the invasion of Afghanistan.⁶ The same pledge of allegiance was once more uttered on 17th of October by the Council of the European Union – again in Luxembourg.⁷ Two months later, ISAF came into force. If so much power can derive from one place, then the influence civil society can exert on these decision-making bodies can and should be of considerable magnitude. However, this potential influence remains wanting.

A further example to illustrate how national policies can and do have global repercussions would be the favourable tax environment of Luxembourg's financial centre. Indeed, more and more foreign companies decide to settle down in Luxembourg so as to capitalize on the low tax rates. Now that the Eurozone is hit by a wave of privatization and austerity measures aimed at reducing national budget deficits, the issue of tax evasion has drawn international attention to the inner workings of Luxembourg's financial market. Accusations of being a tax haven have been growing since the beginning of the financial crisis, even prompting the OECD to put Luxembourg on an admittedly questionable grey list in 2009. Facing such scathing accusations, Luxembourgian politicians have taken a defensive stance. Minister of Finance Luc Frieden has for instance stated in an interview with forum that he sees no tangible alternatives if Luxembourg wants to remain a welfare state. The government of Luxembourg therefore welcomes these foreign companies with open arms as its economy increasingly relies upon their investments. However, it takes pains to defend a welfare state that is only lingering at the expense of other states – regardless of whether the procedures that enable it to do so are lawful or not.

The case of Greek dairy producer *Fage* is a case in point.⁸ Citing tax-related advantages as crucial criterion, *Fage* moved its headquarters to the Grand-Duchy in order to avoid paying the levies the Greek state needs more than ever. This is certainly beneficial to Luxembourg's economy. However, as Greece is struggling to keep its head above water, Greek citizens are being burdened with the crushing national debt which they are being forced to settle. *Fage* is far from being an exceptional case. In fact, examples abound. British companies for instance, have drawn the ire of citizens and media for off-shoring their funds at a time when the government is enforcing public sector cuts. Probably the most contentious and drastic measure taken by the British government consists in reforming the public healthcare system so as to eventually pave the way for privatizing large

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parts of the National Health Service (NHS). Ironically, as the NHS is being undermined under the pretext of reducing the budget deficit, GlaxoSmith-Kline – a leading private pharmaceutical company from the United Kingdom – has been able to circumvent millions of pounds in UK corporation tax by using the Luxembourgian financial centre as a tax loophole.⁸

In spite of the devastating repercussions and persisting protestations, governments all over Europe have been pushing for a similar liberalization of public services from healthcare to housing, from water services to education. All over the continent, citizens have been taking the streets to express their disapproval, most notably in the UK, Spain, Portugal and Greece. Fears are growing among the citizens of Europe that the most fundamental services may turn into commodities as private companies are mainly concerned about maximizing their profits even if this comes at the expense of the customers.

Similar developments of liberalization can be witnessed in Luxembourg. Numerous areas have already been privatized other areas are in the process of following suit. These include, but are not limited to, railway services⁹, gas and electricity¹⁰, water¹¹ as well as the postal services. Opposition has mainly come from trade unionists and workers who are affected instantly by these changes. So far the resistance has remained scarce despite the fact that these developments concern us all. The enduring prosperity and comfort we are still enjoying in Luxembourg may be the reason for this prevailing insouciance. Perhaps the momentum for public outrage and proac-

tive participation will only gather once the crisis hits harder onto the households and thus directly affects a larger number of citizens. Political participation will then however be prompted by self-interest rather than a sense for social responsibilities. And by then we may well have reached Juncker's famous point of no return. ♦

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3 <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-15317086.html>

4 <http://www.wort.lu/de/view/luxemburg-bleibt-in-afghanistan-4fbbdd9e4b03aac600d4652>

5 <http://www.mae.lu/Site-MAE/Politique-etrangere-et-europeenne/Le-Luxembourg-dans-les-Organisations-internationales/L-OTAN>

6 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/eu_005.asp

7 http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/gena/00069-R1.pdf

8 See also *forum* Nr. 323 p. 3.

9 <http://www.landesverband.lu/de/eisenbahnen/fiche-blog-eisenbahnen/2012/04/aktionstag-der-etf-in-schengen-solidarisch-gegen-eu-liberalisierungswahn/>

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