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**THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION.
A CASE STUDY ON FUTURE GOVERNANCE
IN “GLOBAL EUROPE 2050” REPORT**

Abstract:

The case study examines anticipatory assumptions in the European Commission report “Global Europe 2050” to set out potential axes of future evolutions political participation in Europe. A multifold analysis based on Hybrid Strategic Scenarios method and critical reading of the theses are employed to uncover and reframe tacit assumptions of leading European futurists who have contributed to the report and check them against potential scenarios of government/individual relation from now to the year 2050. Nine different assumptions about long term futures of governance and society are identified and tested against three generic scenarios and the Learning Intensive Society Model to provide insights into nine focal points of future political participation evolutions. This method can be replicated for academic and practical analysis of policy papers and strategic documents to optimize their reach and effect, for improved alignment of policies with main social challenges.

Keywords: *participatory governance, political participation, anticipatory systems, futures studies, Global Europe 2050, Hybrid Strategic Scenarios*

Introduction

From futures’ studies’ perspective, political participation is a particularly stimulating subject, as it assembles various emerging social phenomena and practices, both wanted and unwanted. This characteristic of political participation invites to withhold judgment and concentrate on potential future scenarios of political participation developments. Political participation is an ambivalent social fact when seen from different actor’s perspectives and considering its chimeric nature; it exists both within and without institutions and can even turn against them. In consequence, the task of describing and analyzing trends in political participation requires a neutral stance and reserve towards the attempts to arbitrarily make political participation the cure-all and the only way to go in advancing democratic institutions.

The trends influencing socio-economic futures, including the trends in political participation seem to be evolving so quickly that it is hard to grasp the change. "We drive at 240 km/h with reduced visibility and on a slippery road; what will we do, when there is a bend or a boar trotting across the lane?" (Polska Akademia Nauk. Komitet Prognoz "Polska 2000 plus" 2011, p. 16). This question, borrowed from the "Polska 2050" report of the Polska 2000 Plus Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences can be easily read as a warning against crisis of the epistemological foundations of futures' studies. In the economic context, the roots of this crisis could be found either in the growth of human activity, development of ways to track this activity, or both. The question is: is it the increasing complexity or the increasing amount of data that makes it hard for us to follow? Be it the former, we need new methods to make sense of the reality. Be it the latter, we need better methods to see through the available data.

The above mentioned dualism is present in many reports and declarations on the new trends and means for futures' studies. According to the recent and ongoing research carried out by 4CF within UNESCO Scoping Global/Local Anticipatory Capacities sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, most of the communities of practice across the world show awareness of the need for critical interpretation of forecast results. This includes communities *using the futures* for a whole range of different purposes and with various levels of proficiency to reach their goals under uncertainty. It appears, even though the results of this project are currently being assembled, that most of the scoped population believes that future is not to be predicted. It is, nevertheless, only one of many anticipatory systems. There is a lot to be accomplished in this domain.

Methodological considerations

The dichotomy of new and better tools is also one of fundamental assumptions behind Otto Scharmer's "U-theory" (Scharmer 2008). It describes the creation of future visions based on second-degree information, where future scenarios are nowhere close to the final outcome of the futures method. They are merely a stop on the way to uncovering assumptions and values that underlie subject's decisions and their anticipatory system. If we were to ask Scharmer about potential meanings of the abovementioned quote from the *Polska 2050* report, he would maybe lay out a set of underlying assumptions: that there might be bends along the road, that 240 km/h is by subject's standards very fast, or that the presence of a boar is considered to be likely. The subject's stance is what matters to Scharmer because it may have much more impact on the future course of events than the analysis of historic data and attempted trend extrapolation. It is, for instance, often the case in the military, where precision of forecasting is not

in such high regard as understanding the way the enemy makes sense of available information and preparing for whatever they may consequently undertake. In other words, strategic foresight is valued more than precise forecasts because it gives preparedness.

This paper is therefore zeroed-in on the quest for assumptions rather than predicting the unpredictable. The uncovered assumptions are then a basis for reconstruction of the system they form. This in turn, allows for a distinction between endogenous and exogenous drivers of change in the way that societies are governed through the year 2050. Consequently, it is possible to tell self-fulfilling prophecies and declarations from real insights into alternative futures of a given issue. Recent European Commission report *Global Europe 2050* (European Commission 2012, further referred to as GE2050) has been selected as the object for this exercise, presenting multifold scenarios and visions of European development in 6 main domains: Global demographic and societal challenges, energy and natural resource security and efficiency, environment and climate change, economy and technology prospects, geopolitics and governance: EU frontiers, integration and role on the global scale, territorial and mobility dynamics, research, education and innovation. It allowed for a rigorous reconstruction of the concept of the government and governance presented in the report.

Methodology

Political evolutions are inherently unpredictable because they are largely the effect of networked agent-principal events occurring massively across time and space, as well as acts (even irrational or ineffective) enforced within this agent-principal relation. It is thus easy to point out potential inconsistencies and gaps in reasoning, the more so as the government tries to predict its own future. But these easy victories are not necessarily the way to go to discover and challenge the assumptions underlying those predictions, when, devoid of a reference, they aim at looking for loopholes. Even more so, they sum up to utter absurdity. That is why, the analysis of GE2050 was carried out according to a rigorous structure of Riel Miller's Hybrid Strategic Scenarios method (Miller 2006), commonly used to identify and describe assumptions about the preferred futures through a three-phase reframing process. The "Learning Intensive Society Model" (further referred to as the LIS model) elaborated at OECD in the late 1990s (OECD 2001) and recently updated at UNESCO Knowledge Laboratories was used for reference in the reframing process. In addition, three artificial models generated with scenario methods by internal collective intelligence session at 4CF were used as reference. Those reductionist scenarios, based on single trends were given evocative names: "Google.gov", "Rosa Parks on Twitter" and "New Institutions". The components of these scenarios and of the LIS model

are purely technical and have no claims to predictive accuracy or desirability, or even deep consistency. Contradicting trends can develop on different levels of administration-individual relation, that accounts for the notion of government and some of the planes on which this relation takes place are out of grasp or even inexistent. Applying this specific method serves best the aim to reconstruct anticipatory systems specific to the collective author of GE2050. This mainstream in futures studies is currently represented e.g. by UNESCO Chair in Anticipatory Systems at the University of Trento.

The challenge of telling the past from the future

It is appropriate to start the analysis with an inventory of past trends that have brought European policies to the current state of political participation, if only not to confuse past trends with future scenarios. Three important trends should be noted: the evolution of government tasks, the erosion of sovereign state, and the significant increase in the areas in which legal regulation is created in the international sphere. However the notion of international political participation may sound false at first, individual and corporate claims to participation in the international relations are on the raise. The available means of dispute settlement between the individual and the state on international grounds, e.g. the rise in compulsory international jurisdiction following the supra-national model of The Court of Justice have already given grounds for an evolution towards empowerment of citizens globally. This example is also evocative of the attempts to make up for democracy deficit in the supra-national organizations (e.g. EU, ASEAN, CARICOM), by developing political participation mechanisms. This trend is an important driver of change in government, but not the only one. Decentralization is also in favor of political participation: territorial government and forms of self-governance account for this tendency, eagerly using traditional political participation tools both to improve decision making and increase own legitimacy. This trend is already apparent in Poland, where local government introduces participatory methods to improve budgeting, zoning, and master-planning, to name just a few examples. On state level the discrepancies in participatory methods are so big that they may only offer an opportunity for a comparative analysis which is out of the scope of this paper. Meanwhile, GE2050 quotes an increase in lobbyist activity as a challenge to participation. In authors' words, "*the control exerted by private interests on policy making (lobbycracy) and the corresponding loss of prestige and influence of traditional political parties, particularly noticeable in the US but significant across Europe too, undermines an open public debate and the definition of collective preferences.*" (European Commission 2012, p. 16) This viewpoint should be noted for the insights into the assumptions that it offers: namely, that public debate is only effective,

when it abides the rules of representative democracy defined by the government. As such, it should serve as the opening to the analytic part of this paper.

Google.gov scenario reframing

The first scenario, aptly named “Google.gov” is characterized by the introduction of passive political participation. Existing technical potential for collecting data on citizens’ decisions and preferences are widely used by big corporations for marketing purposes. The only obstacle to wide implementation of these methods in government is the traditional and legal notion of privacy protection, reclaimed by the civic society on numerous occasions of unfavorable legislation or breaches of privacy by government agencies. The state could equally use data on citizen behavior, collected with active and passive participation of the citizens to improve policy-making. Participation would no longer require activity on citizen’s part, except for the citizen’s a priori consent for registering their life to improve public decision-making. Such form of political participation could even constitute an alternative source of legitimization, along the lines of the “new agora” concept. This would allow for direct decision-making, outside traditional agency, not by direct vote or representative mandate, but by inference from actual behavior of the citizens. It would not, on the other hand, improve democratic supervision over government that is attained through institutions (such as access to public information). How does this scenario relate to the visions of the collective author of GE2050? Three assumptions can be identified.

Firstly, GE2050 predicts an increase in the use of new technology to improve traditional forms of politics and participation. According to the report, e-vote, social action coordination using new technologies and virtual protest can alter the role of political class and thus redefine the relation between the government and citizens. The change in this relation, initiated by the government itself is therefore largely out of GE2050 focus. It is a strong assumption, that can be attributed to fainting leadership and that will probably have an impact on policy at EU level in the years to come. Yet, the contrary trend is apparent in states with traditionally strong leadership (e.g. in the Persian Gulf) which nowadays introduce e-governance and participatory tools to consolidate their grip on the society.

Secondly, the report addresses volatility of public opinion as an important challenge to democracy. The impression of a strong cleavage between the government and the society that transpires from that statement is hard to resist and seems to be irrefutable assumption. There is however no evidence to this claim, especially given that institutions evolve through reform and governance, while opinion of the individuals and social groups are built in a lengthy and complex process of socialization and education. The grounds for supposed volatility are also firm and not likely to change in the near future. This volatility

is, at the same time, easier to measure thanks to new technologies and could be embraced through passive participation, although this challenge is not of the petty kind. Passive participation could bridge opinion and political cycles.

The third assumption is related to how globalization affects public affairs and democracy. GE2050 does not, however, indicate why globalization would really advance. It is the case of a tacit extrapolation of a trend, where the raising BRICS copy the social change pattern from Western Europe. In fact, the relative influence of liberal values may weaken and the imported solutions to social problems may lose their apparent attractiveness, once they are not backed with firm financial commitment from the EU or the USA. The business-as-usual exchange of financial assistance for westernization of the political institutions may no longer work. The economic change could foster birth of the new forms instead of copying the old remedies to address new challenges. This window of opportunity for passive participation offers potential synergies with technologically enforced authoritarianism and the shifting scope of popular demand for democracy. However, neither is to be considered more likely or more desirable.

Rosa Parks on Twitter scenario reframing

The next scenario to be confronted with GE2050 report to uncover additional assumptions about the future was nicknamed “*Rosa Parks on Twitter*”. It assumes the advancement of a trend that inspired public opinion in the rise of the Arab Spring: the use of new technologies for disruptive action against the government, either as a symbol or as a real threat. Civil disobedience is by no means preferred by the government, but it is a form of political participation nevertheless. Increasing networking and access to the digital realm, could (in a model situation) lead to an increase in illegal or unregulated online activities. These include cyber-attacks, virtual sit-ins, but also citizens’ self-governance outside of their political representation: a vivid form of postmodern heterarchic government, not accounted for in the old codes.

It is interesting to notice, at this point, that the collective author of GE2050 claims firmly, how unemployment will “*undoubtedly facilitate social exclusion, vulnerability and poverty among younger generation leading to certain types of risky behavior*” (European Commission 2012, p. 72). At the same time, the report points out how a lifelong job ceases to be a paramount value for the young generation of Europeans and how the level of satisfaction of basic needs even among those suffering from exclusion allows them to move towards self fulfilment in the traditional Maslow pyramid of needs. Why is then the unemployment such an important challenge? Maybe the trend of using civil disobedience to express political views is no longer considered relevant or probable from the perspective of the European Commission, or maybe we are facing

a shift in priorities, where the classical pyramid design evolves towards a more complex mix. Anyway, the long term perspective of 2050 should inspire a more open approach toward anti-institutional means of expression, which will cater for the individual need of participation in political life, and will not be associated with the dregs of society.

Besides, another dimension of exclusion should be taken note of in reference to GE2050. It relies on the assumption that good education favors political participation. Neither Polish statistics of voter turnout over the last 25 years, nor the traditional Swiss direct democracy evolution do support such a claim, to say the least. But still, this assumption is tacitly repeated in GE2050, and the evolving global benchmarks of education are not taken into account. Given the current split between research and higher education and the new ways to measure human capital outside of the formal education, new forms of participation and new ways to use them may also be transferred informally, outside of classroom.

New Institutions scenario reframing

The third scenario, considered as a reference to the report is modelled by the erosion of sovereign state trend and was nicknamed “New Institutions”. Within this trend, it is not evident how to tackle the assumptions of GE2050, without deconstructing them from the inside. If the collective author of GE2050 professes faith in democratization linked to the raise of supranational institutions and suggest a general election to the General Assembly of the UN, it is useful to inverse the question and ask about whatever is left on the national level. Political participation may fill the blank by receding government, through self-governance rather than through traditional referenda. Taking this into consideration, the reference to expanding liberal democracy from the early '90 seems arbitrary and awkwardly out of place in a foresight study such as GE2050. A new global crisis could probably favor rise of new institutions rather than diffusion of the old. We would face a change in the conditions of change and not a spreading of the change as we know it. However, it is not to be taken for granted and could just as likely happen or not before 2050.

It is also relevant to signal another demographic assumption of GE2050 and a risk factor to the development of new institutions, namely the readiness of an aging society to get involved in the process of deep changes for the future. According to recent research on a large sample nearing twenty thousand individuals (Quoidbach, Gilbert, Wilson 2013), humans are not likely to expect changes in the future and asked about themselves tend to believe they have already changed in the past. This is why they would allocate their resources according to current preference, rather than anticipate their future needs and tastes. It is an inherent threat to development of new institutions on national level that would be supposed to fill in the gaps left by the eroding state. It may be so that the old,

inefficient institutions will still try to address the challenges with their ever decreasing potential. But it is not necessarily worse, since the perception of the problems may still be the same. Demography, even though it offers a relatively viable forecast, does not give any clues regarding the developing trend. Moreover, it is hard to keep a clean demographic approach and take into account the immigration factor.

LIS final reframing

Finally, the interim conclusions need to be confronted with another model for validation. LIS can be summarized as an antithesis of the modern economy, which was based on industrial production. It underlines the value of individual creativity and productivity, offering a vision of the future in which unique creation accounts for more than 30% of the general wealth generation. It is therefore strongly related to the concept of human capital and therefore compatible with EU policies. If we use the LIS as a frame to replace the assumptions of the collective author of GE2050, we could get the following picture:

Demographic changes do not alter political participation, because inter-generational communication is no longer a major issue, once the traditional system of social transfers is replaced with models of value creation appropriate for the silver generation. In managing energy and resources, governance is based on traditional, non-participatory systems of allocation, given the need to tackle climate change and a decrease of interest in other-than-state forms of organization. The economic and technological perspectives allow for a more efficient participation than it may be seen in the report. As far as territorial dynamics and mobility are concerned, participation is used to enhance the choice in localization process of a mobile individual. This way, another assumption is uncovered: how the participation serves the government first and how the citizens benefit in consequence from the optimized choices of the government. In the domain of research and innovation this would probably mean a participatory model of learning and autonomous research by empowering self-governance of the scientists.

The model, in which knowledge and human capital are the prevailing characteristic of the society in 2050, invites to rethink the traditional pyramid of needs by adding a new level – fulfilment of the needs of the society. In such a society, especially at current state of the technology, a scenario in which the traditional parliament is replaced by a direct participation of all the members of society seems possible. A total merger of government and society makes political participation an irrelevant notion.

Conclusions

The change in future model; the reframing; the replacement of one, native system of assumptions with another, artificial one does not only alter the perspective in which future scenarios are perceived, but also allows the subject to grasp the assumptions that are unconsciously taken for constant parameters of given problem. But as the time horizon lengthens, fewer and fewer of these apparently constant parameters stand the test of time, because of the disruptive events that turn the tables around and change the conditions of change.

In conclusion, a summary of abovementioned assumptions adopted by the collective author of GE2050 gives an insight into the potential blind spots that may have blurred the visions of the future described in the report. These are: it's the government that sets the rules of public debate, there is a consistency between ICT development and traditional forms of political participation, the public opinion is inherently volatile and thus incompatible with institutional framework, the globalization will deepen over the next 25 years, there is a significant correlation between unemployment and exclusion, there is also a significant correlation between formal education and participatory practices, the erosion of nation state will continue, the aging societies will still care about the global challenges, and last but not least, political participation is instrumental to the survival of traditional top-down governance. However this list may look like an indictment, it is not the intention of this paper to give a negative note to these assumptions. The research in anticipatory systems proves that those weak spots in futures visioning, supported by strong institutional foundations may in fact be the limits of anticipatory system and potentially the sweet spots of institutional change in the context of 2050. According to the exploratory, novelty oriented futures studies mainstream, these are the topics that require our particular attention in designing reform and managing social change.

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