Towards a Virtual Constituency?
– Dimensions of MEPs' Offline-Online Constituency Orientations

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Abstract

European Union institutions have been notoriously criticized for their lack of day-to-day linkage with European citizenry. The European Parliament, as the only directly elected EU institution, is logically one of the 'closest' linkage institutions to the European electorate. However, little is known about how its representatives – Members of the European Parliament (MEP) – connect, service and cultivate relations with their constituencies between two elections points. This thesis attempts to fill in this missing link.

Using original data from the author's self-administered 2009 MEP survey (N=145), this thesis empirically traces MEP's constituency orientations in three steps. It first maps out MEP constituency orientations in terms of MEP's attitudes – how they think about their constituencies, the importance they attach to constituency work and the types of activities they pursue in their constituency work. Given that MEP function in an ICT era, in addition to mapping MEP's constituency outreach offline, as part of the second step, the thesis also evaluates how MEP incorporate ICTs and Internet platforms in their constituency outreach. Could it be that the various interactive, transactional and asynchronous features that the Internet provides prompt MEP to use their websites, blogs or social networking sites as quasi virtual constituency offices? In view that a fair degree of variation was found in MEP's constituency outreach, the third last step looks at the determinant of this variation.

Overall, the thesis' findings demonstrate that in spite the low institutional and electoral incentives for them to engage in constituency work, MEP conduct a wide range of constituency outreach activities both offline and online. Moreover, citizens contact MEP with diverse types of casework. At the same time, data also showed that majority of MEP still prioritize and attach more importance to their legislative duties, as opposed to their constituency work. With respect to MEP's Internet usage, the thesis findings further suggest that it is yet premature to conclude that the 'virtual constituency office' is replacing the conventional constituency (offline).

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Bio

Jordanka Tomkova holds a MA in International Relations from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, and a MRes from the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. During her doctoral studies, in addition to her own research, Jordanka participated in several research projects, including the European University Institute's trans-European Europrofiler; Tomorrow's Europe (2007) and Europolis (2009) - the first transnational deliberative polls ever held. She has also completed a research stay at the European Parliament.

Jordanka's interests include finding solutions to the democratic deficit(s) of European Union institutions and political representation in the EU context; participatory, deliberative and direct democracy; tools for civic engagement - public consultations, deliberative polling, petitions; the value of contemporary virtual political spaces, as well as the use of information and communication technologies in political constituency building and outreach.