

DearMEP Concept Note

Theory of Change: Quality of democratic decisions deteriorate when lawmakers are solely influenced by special interest and they improve with increased public scrutiny and more citizens being involved in the decision making process.

8 May 2023 (v1)

Problem Description

Decisions in the European Union seem far removed from peoples' daily lives and don't receive the public scrutiny they deserve.¹ This leads to a situation where Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are not held to account for their decisions, which in turn leads to a de-prioritization of the public interest in EU decision making. Furthermore, the EU decision making process is opaque to many citizens. They neither know their elected representatives nor the ongoing negotiations or whom to contact when over which channel to make their voices heard.

Proposed Solution

The tool we develop aims to bring citizens closer to their elected representatives. It empowers users to contact MEPs efficiently and with a low-entry barrier. The software takes the burden away from users to understand the EU and which MEPs are best to contact on a particular issue, how best to contact them and potential cost the user otherwise has to incur.

The tool is developed as a white label solution that can be applied to any EU level decision that has to be voted in the plenary of the European Parliament. NGOs that campaign around an EU decision can implement the software to mobilize their constituency efficiently with the goal to influence particular plenary votes.

Application and Strategic Implications

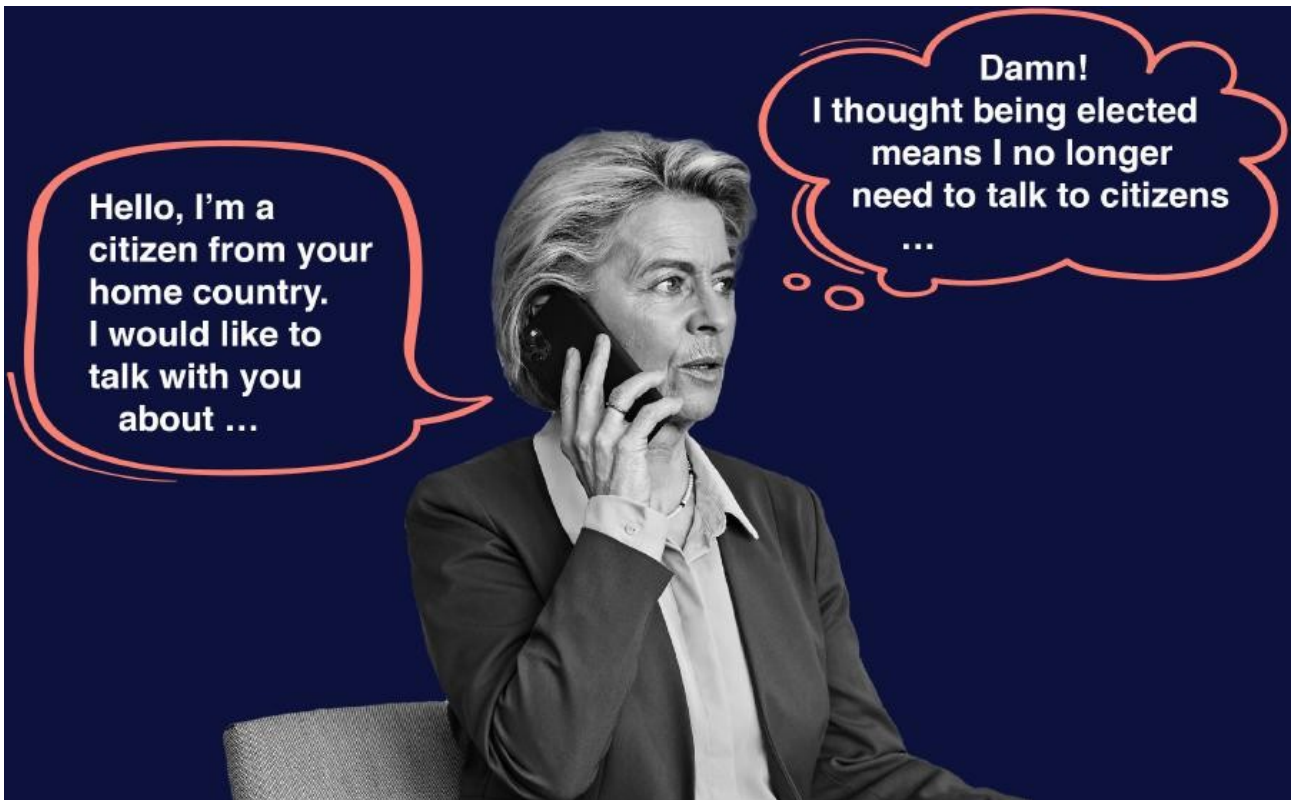
The DearMEP software is currently tailored to address the whole European Parliament and to be used by citizens from all EU countries to contact MEPs from their countries. Therefore, it's best suited for plenary votes. Any mass mobilization tool is also reducing complexity as it frames political decisions as binary choices, e.g. "Are you for or against X?".

The tool should therefore not be applied during committee stage when negotiations on concrete text might lead to more meaningful improvements than creating a split in the aisle around an issue. Hence, on legislative files we recommend the application of the tool around 1st and 2nd reading plenary votes.

Risk of Backlash

Any meaningful contact attempt from citizens to their elected lawmakers that gets their attention can be seen as disruption. It highly depends on the understanding of democracy from the lawmaker if they perceive actual inputs from their citizens as desirable. The fact that EU lawmakers are usually not as much in the public eye as national lawmakers contributes to this fact. We believe, that a democratic European Union needs to be accessible and accountable to its citizens. The hesitation around this issue might be due to a cultural understanding of the role of MEPs which is subject to change. We also tried to address this issue with the header image of our tool.

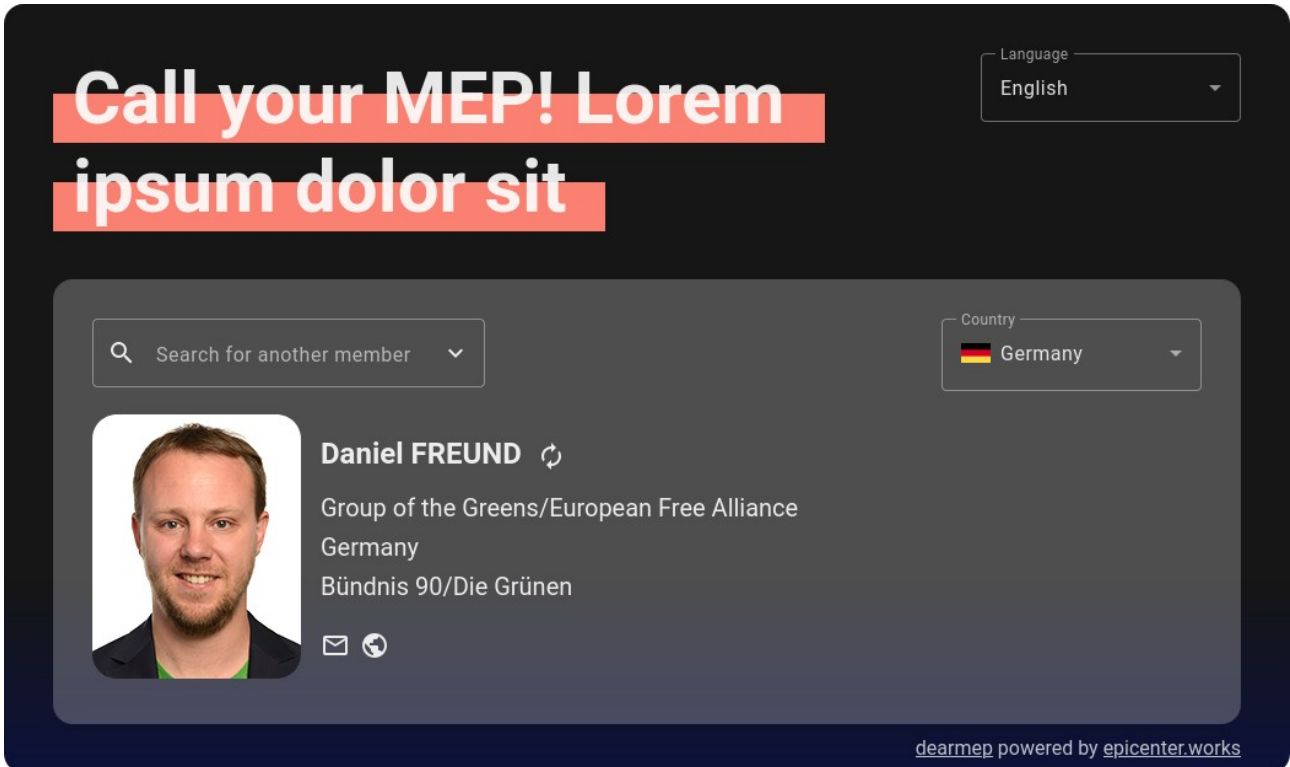
¹ This can be measured in the distribution of media coverage and citizen engagement between national and EU level decisions.



Minimum Viable Product (MVP)

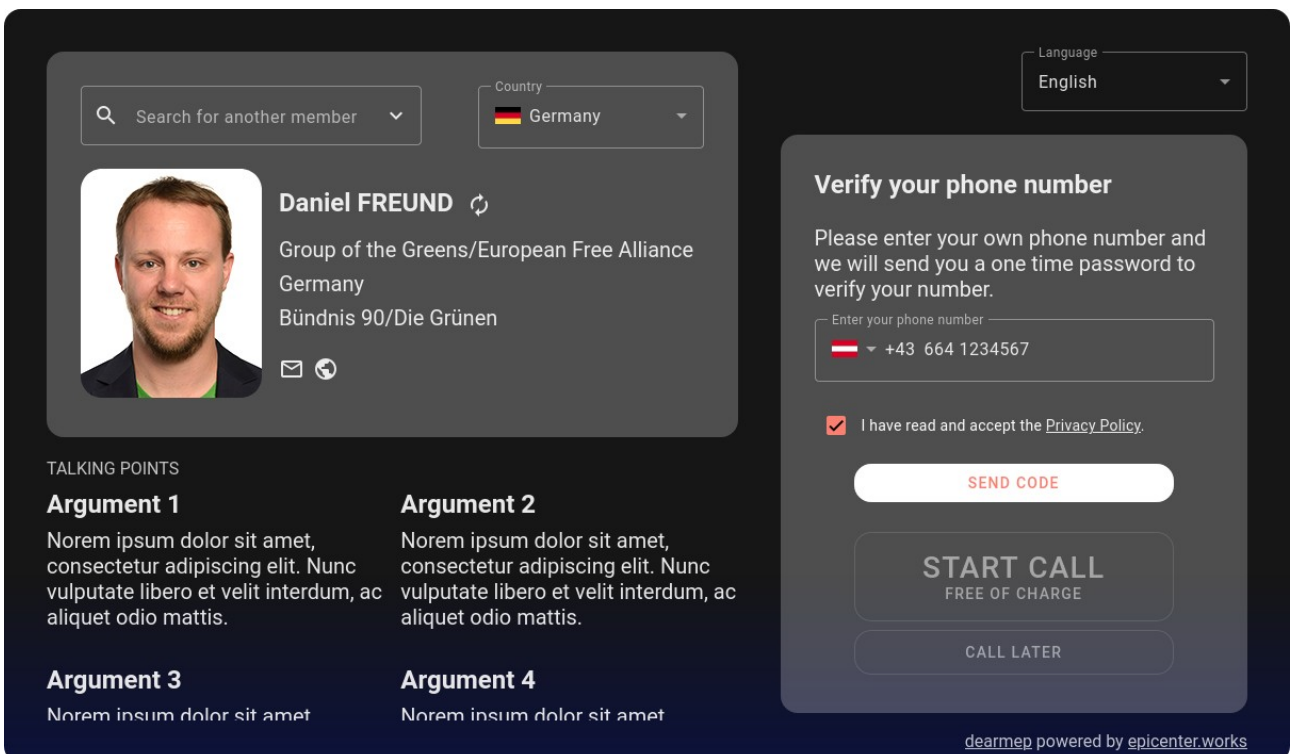
The MVP offers the following functionality:

- 1) The tool has English as the default language but can be fully translated. The tool tries to match the available translations with the browser language of the user. Users can manually choose a different language.
- 2) All MEPs are scraped with their contact information from parltrack.eu. For every MEP a sway-ability score is uploaded how likely they are to vote for (1) or against (0) the issue of the particular campaign. MEPs with score 0.5 have the highest likelihood to be chosen for contact and MEPs with score 0 or 1 are never picked. The tool focuses on the movable middle on any decision.
- 3) The country selection defaults to the EU member state of the geolocation of the IP address of the user. As a result, the user is by default presented with MEPs from the country of their IP address.
- 4) An MEP is chosen and the picture, name, group, party, country and available contact forms (e-mail, twitter, facebook, instagram) are shown. Users can contact that particular MEP or request another one from the selected country. The user can manually change their country at any time, for example in case they have dual citizenship, are traveling or using a VPN. Users can also select any particular MEP, for example if they want to continue a previous conversations. MEPs with a sway-ability score of 0 or 1 are marked as unlikely to be convinced.



When the phone functionality is not disabled the following functions are also available

5) When the user is not registered in the system they are asked to provide a telephone number and accept the privacy policy. If the phone number is valid², an SMS verification code is sent.




2 Only non-premium rate, mobile phone numbers of EU countries are deemed valid.

Search for another member

Country: Germany

Language: English



Daniel FREUND

Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
Germany
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen

TALKING POINTS

Argument 1
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Argument 2
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Argument 3
Norem insum dolor sit amet

Argument 4
Norem insum dolor sit amet

Verify your phone number

Please check you phone. We've sent a code to .

If this is not your number click [here](#).

Enter your Code
123456

VERIFY

START CALL
FREE OF CHARGE


CALL LATER

dearmep powered by [epicenter.works](#)

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Argument 3
Norem insum dolor sit amet

Argument 4
Norem insum dolor sit amet

Verify your phone number




Succesfully verified with the number:

START CALL
FREE OF CHARGE

CALL LATER

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6) The user has the option to initiate a call with the particular MEP that has been selected right now.



Daniel FREUND
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
Germany
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen

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TALKING POINTS

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Argument 3

Norem insum dolor sit amet


Argument 4

Norem insum dolor sit amet

Language
English

Your call is being set up

Please have your mobile phone ready. We will call you right away and connect you with Daniel FREUND.



dearmep powered by [epicenter.works](#)

7) The user can also schedule a call with MEPs from the selected country at a later time. Weekday(s) and time for that weekday³ can be chosen. The system then calls the user and puts them in an audio menu where they can press buttons on their phone to execute particular commands. Those functions are a) connect now to MEP <name of MEP spoken> b) listen to arguments in preparation of your call. c) cancel your call subscription.

Call your MEP! Lorem ipsum dolor sit

TALKING POINTS

Argument 1

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Argument 4

Norem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nunc vulputate libero et velit interdum, ac aliquet odio mattis.

Language
English

Schedule a call

Country

🇦🇹 Austria

Plan now to talk to a politician later! Select a day and time:

Mo

Tu

We

Th

Fr

Wednesday

16:30
 ✕

Time: Asia/Tbilisi

We will give you a ring every **Monday around 17:00** and **Wednesday around 16:30** at your number to connect you with a politician from Austria.

CONFIRM
FREE OF CHARGE

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³ Options are limited to office hours of the European Parliament matched towards the current timezone of the user.

8) Whenever a call above a certain threshold duration has been executed the system sends the user a link for a feedback form in which they can provide information about their experience, if they have the impression that they have convinced the MEP and if they experienced technical problems.

The screenshot displays the DearMEP interface. On the left, there is a profile card for Daniel FREUND, a member of the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance in Germany (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen). Below the profile are four talking points, each with a title and a paragraph of placeholder text. On the right, there is a feedback form titled 'Feedback' with the question 'Were you able to convince the person?'. The form includes four radio buttons for 'Yes', 'likeley yes', 'likeley no', and 'No'. There is also a checkbox for 'There were technical problems' and a text area for 'Additional feedback'. A 'SUBMIT' button is at the bottom of the form. The footer of the interface reads 'dearmep powered by epicenter.works'.

9) The tool can be embedded in any online campaign as web component⁴ with adaptations to styling so to match the host website, configurations like disabling of the call tool and other parameters like a string to attribute statistics to that particular campaign.

10) The tool can be configured to self-learn and adapt the sway-ability score based on the call feedback received by users. The data of the MEPs and their sway-ability scores can be exported and imported. Anonymised Call feedback can also be exported. Exports are behind an access control and it's assumed that the campaigns that host the same instance of the DearMEP tool are given access.

Terminology, Hosting, Data Protection and Cost

The DearMEP tool is a white label solution that can be applied to any issue on EU level. Application on national level or around other decision making bodies is possible, but require additional development.

When the DearMEP Tool is applied for a particular campaign it needs to be centrally hosted and configured. Texts and audio files have to be adapted for that issue. MEPs of the current legislative term have to be uploaded with their sway-ability value. We call such a running version of DearMEP an **"instance"**.

Every instance can be embedded in multiple campaign websites, which might do further configuration for their particular use case. We call such an embed of an instance a **"campaign"**.

The DearMEP tool processes personal data (phone numbers, IP addresses) and comes with a template privacy policy. This policy needs to be adapted by whoever hosts the tool, as this entity is most likely the data controller. Any changes to the functioning of the tool need to be reflected in the

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_Components

privacy policy. We give no guarantee and hold no liability for the instances or implementations of this tool. The instance that operates the DearMEP tool also needs to connect it to a phone provider and thereby cover the costs of the phone calls and SMS for users.

Current Development Stage

Development is scheduled to conclude by autumn. We have scheduled UI/UX and penetration testing before the launch in October.

Development was financed out of the Core of Epicenter.works and the software will be released under a free license once the CSAR legislation⁵ is concluded. In our understanding of democracy all avenues to connect citizens to lawmakers should be equally accessible to everyone.

Future Development Ideas

Undecided ideas for future development include:

Enhance e-mail functionality

A minority of users is willing to have conversations on the phone with decision makers. While this is the most authentic communication channel, it is also the one with the lowest conversion rate. This is why we offer a call subscription to multiply contact attempts from this smaller pool of people willing to pick up the phone.

E-mail seems the second best option to reach politicians, as neither all lawmakers or users are on matching social media platforms. But E-mails that all come from the same address, have the same subject or have similarities in their text bodies are filtered as spam by the European Parliament and will probably never be seen.

Subsequently, as e-mails can't be sent out centrally by one mail server, but need to come from the citizens and their personal e-mail addresses directly, we need to handover the composed email to their webmail or e-mail program. Mailto links fall under the same length limitation of any URL and mailto configuration in most web browsers might not be properly linked to mail programs or webmail. Hence, a solution might be to offer copy paste functions to bring the composed e-mail to the right user interface of the users e-mail program or webmail.

A clever e-mail functionality would circumvent the shortcomings of email composing by helping the user create a unique e-mail with their own words based on the answers of a questionnaire that needs to be tailored to the particular campaign (e.g. "Why do you care about this issue?", "What risks do you see if this law is adopted?"). It will be tricky to still convey to the MEP the concrete ask (e.g. "please vote for amendment A on the plenary vote on file B on day C") without providing a marker by which all emails coming from the tool can be filtered. Even if a user creates such a unique e-mail for themselves the question remains how many times that e-mail can be sent to an MEP before its filtered away.

LLM functions like ChatGPT are **not** solutions for us and should be avoided as our purpose is to connect real citizens to their elected representatives. We try to make it easier for people and authenticity is the deciding factor to our advantage.

5 See [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022/0155\(COD\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022/0155(COD)&l=en) and future <https://dearmep.eu/>

Statistics Dashboard

Exports are right now available from the backend and created with cron jobs. They can be accessed either under a .htaccess login protected endpoint or a Nextcloud. A multi-user dashboard that offers statistics, exports and imports would be advantageous for empowering not-so-digitally-savvy organisation to use more of the functionality of the tool.

Pledge Functionality

In our 2019 attempt to implement such a tool with pledge2019.eu we had a functionality that would exclude politicians from the contact functionality if they pledged to not vote for a particular law in 2nd reading. Such a pledge functionality by which an e-mail from the accredited offices of an MEP can exclude a politician from being contacted by citizens might be desired by some instances/campaigns.

Disable Call-Functionality fine-granularly

Debates between member states vary and it might be desirable to have certain contact functionality disabled for particular groups of MEPs or countries. Technically, this is easy. The question is how to argue such a two class system that takes functionalities away from certain groups of citizens.

Tailor towards Committee decisions

Potentially the tool could also follow the whole legislative trajectory of a dossier moving through committees towards plenary. Such a functionality would require removing the focus on country and citizenship as most users won't have at most a handful of MEPs from their country in any particular committee.

Such an adapted focus would need to be reflected – at least – in the choosing of MEPs and the call subscription functionality.

Pilot use-case for the CSAR dossier

To help bring this tool into the world, Epicenter.works will host the first instance of DearMEP for the CSAR legislation. We are offering the tool to all campaigns focussing on this issue, cooperate with them and learn from their experience.