

FACTS: From Alternative Narratives to Citizens True EU Stories

Carme Colomina and Héctor Sánchez Margalef (eds.)

CIDOB
BARCELONA CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union

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CONTENTS

FROM ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES TO CITIZENS TRUE EU STORIES: AN INTRODUCTION TO FACTS, BELIEFS AND DEBATES **5**

Carme Colomina

THE RATIONALE BEHIND FACTS: WHY WE SHOULD PROMOTE DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THE EU **7**

George Andreou

FACTS NATIONAL COMPARISONS: SHARED DIVIDES AND NARRATIVES **13**

Federico Castiglioni

FACTS METHODOLOGY: A DIALOGUE DESIGNED TO UNDERSTAND CITIZENS **19**

Adriano Rodari

FACTS FINAL CONFERENCE: AT THE END OF THE ROAD, KEEP GOING **27**

Sophie Borkel and Héctor Sánchez Margalef

FACTS – FROM ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES TO CITIZENS TRUE EU STORIES: A PROJECT LIVING UP TO ITS NAME **33**

Krzysztof Głowacki

ANNEXES **37**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS **73**

FROM ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES TO CITIZENS TRUE EU STORIES: AN INTRODUCTION TO FACTS, BELIEFS AND DEBATES

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Which narratives are defining the European project? How is the European Union perceived by its citizens? Is this perception alike across different divides like gender, age and identity? What are the hopes and fears driving citizens' attitudes towards the EU? All these questions were at the core of the FACTS project, which aimed to test the robustness of the traditional discourse of peace and prosperity that is still evoked as the European Union's main achievement, as well as to identify the rumours and false narratives influencing citizens' perceptions.

The FACTS project was an exercise of listening and engaging; interactive, inclusive, and collaborative; a participative test gathering EU citizens in Germany, Spain, Poland, Greece and Italy during the difficult context of a global pandemic that challenged our societal resilience and European governments' responses, as much as our individual needs for certainty and protection (see Chapters 1 and 2). The methodology behind this project was designed to engage as many citizens as possible in facilitated dialogues, acknowledging that it could not expect to represent the whole vastness of opinions but to offer a process that emphasises the central role citizens play by outlining their own stories on Europe (see Chapters 3 and 5). This qualitative approach ended with a parliamentarians–citizens dialogue designed to connect the narratives, feelings and attitudes that emerged in each country during the first round of focus groups with their political representatives.

Citizens' relationship with the European project has evolved from the old permissive consensus to a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks, 2009) that derived from the polycrisis that affected the EU for more than a decade. This evolution has been also aggravated by exposure to the present information disorder, feeding a polarised clash of narratives in a fragmented European public sphere. The plurality of narratives identified during the FACTS project is a sign of the complex times we are leaving through, but it could also be considered an indication of a growing political salience of EU affairs in the public sphere (Bouza, 2013).

Beyond acknowledging the different narratives, the FACTS project has been an opportunity for dialogue; a chance for deliberative politics; an honest attempt to give citizens a voice, and to test, in a collaborative endeavour, the state of the European project in the eyes of its citizens.

One of the most valuable outcomes of the FACTS project has been to identify how the dissimilarities between countries are less relevant than the divergence within countries. This polarisation may indicate that all the member states are inevitably Europeanising their national debate (see Chapter 2). However, just as much as the final conference, which gathered citizens and politicians from the five partner countries, the national focus groups highlighted how the regional dimension and the perception of geographical divides (North–South and East–West) are still present and shaping citizens' approach to the EU (see Chapter 4). Debates about inequalities between member states, citizens, large sites of globalisation and smaller local identities were present throughout the whole project.

But, beyond acknowledging the different narratives, the FACTS project has been an opportunity for dialogue; a chance for deliberative politics; an honest attempt to give citizens a voice, and to test, in a collaborative endeavour, the state of the European project in the eyes of its citizens.

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THE RATIONALE BEHIND FACTS: WHY WE SHOULD PROMOTE DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THE EU

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Democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are the foundations on which the European Union is based. Democracy allows citizens to shape laws and public policies at European, national and subnational level. Democracy, however, relies on safeguards, checks and balances, and institutions that fulfil their roles and maintain the rules of pluralistic democratic debate. For participation to be meaningful, citizens must also be able to form their own opinions and make electoral choices in a public space where a plurality of views can be expressed freely and where free media, academia and civil society can play their role in fostering open debate free from harmful interference, either domestic or foreign. In sum, democracy flourishes in a climate where *freedom of information* and *freedom of expression* are both supported, allowing everyone to express their views, regardless of how critical they are of governments and those in power.

The digital revolution has transformed democratic politics and provides political actors with new chances to reach out to voters. It also brings new opportunities for civic engagement, making it easier for some groups — mostly young people — to access information and participate in public life and democratic debate. On the other hand, digitalisation has also had several negative effects on political contestation and political communication: facilitating political actors obtaining financing from uncontrolled sources; cyber-attacks that target critical electoral infrastructure; online harassment of journalists; and coordinated disinformation campaigns that rapidly spread hate speech, false information and polarising messages on social media (European Commission, 2020: 1–2).

According to the European Commission, disinformation is a "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm" (European Commission, 2018). Other popular terms for disinformation are "information manipulation" and the incomplete – and perhaps even misleading – term "fake news", both of which are usually associated with the "post-truth" era or the

"hybrid war" framework. Although not a new phenomenon as such, disinformation has mostly profited from the continuous advances in digital technology and AI development. Recent years have shown that, as we become more interconnected in the borderless (and generally unregulated) digital realm, creating and propagating disinformation becomes cheaper and more effective for malign actors, and harder to spot and counter for targeted states and societies. Disinformation also has strong domestic roots, as it is deployed by populist and nationalist politicians with a pronounced anti-European and antiestablishment discourse. By sowing distrust of the EU and painting simple black or white dichotomies, they demote pluralism, fuel toxic polarisation and extremism in their own countries and, at the same time, do the work of those who seek the decline of the EU's global influence and promote European disintegration (Sebe et al., 2020: 338–339).

The debate on populism and disinformation in Europe is closely linked with the debate on the democratic legitimacy of the European Union. In fact, the multiple crises affecting the EU and the member states in recent years – notably those around the eurozone and migration – provided fresh ammunition to nationalist and anti-European politicians and further weakened the EU's credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Legitimacy must be understood not only as citizen consent given to a governing authority in the classical Weberian sense but also as acceptance of such an authority's governing activities. When defined in terms of governing activities, legitimacy is linked to policy effectiveness and performance for the common good (*output legitimacy*); citizen participation and representation, along with political elites' responsiveness to citizens' concerns (*input legitimacy*); and the quality of governance procedures (*throughput legitimacy*), including the efficacy of policymaking processes, the accountability to relevant forums of those engaged in making the decisions, the transparency of their actions and access to information, and their openness and inclusiveness towards civil society (Schmidt, 2021: 3–4).

In an age that is often defined by "polarization, populism, and pessimism" (Taylor, 2019), public actors are increasingly using *representative deliberative processes* to involve citizens more directly in solving some of the most pressing policy challenges. While these processes are not "new" (the first contemporary wave started in the late 1960s), there is a new world-wide trend towards greater experimentation in their purpose, design, combination with other forms of participation, and institutionalisation. Deliberative processes are one of the most innovative methods of citizen participation, reintroducing the ancient Athenian practice of random selection (sortition), updated with modern statistical methods that allow for stratification – a method used to ensure representativeness. These innovations offer the possibility of useful and interesting mechanisms to complement existing representative democratic institutions. Existing literature and studies of representative deliberative processes indicate that, if institutionalised, they have the potential to give voice and agency to a much wider range of citizens; to rebuild trust in government; and to bring about more legitimate and effective public decision-making (OECD 2020).

According to the OECD (2020), deliberative processes have been shown to work well for the following types of problems in particular:

- Values-driven dilemmas: Representative deliberative processes are designed in a way that encourages active listening, critical thinking, and respect between participants. They create an environment in which discussing difficult ethical questions that have no evident or "right" solutions can happen in a civil way, and can enable participants to find common ground.
- Complex problems that require trade-offs: representative deliberative processes are designed to provide participants with time to learn, reflect and deliberate, as well as access to a wide range of evidence and expertise from officials, academics, think tanks, advocacy groups, businesses and other stakeholders. These design characteristics enable citizens to grapple with the complexity of decision-making and to consider problems within their legal, regulatory and/or budgetary constraints.
- Long-term issues that go beyond the short-term incentives of electoral cycles: many public policy issues are difficult decisions to take, as their benefits are often only reaped in the long term, while the costs are incurred in the short term. Deliberative processes help to justify action and spending on such issues, as they are designed in a way that removes the motivated interests of political parties and elections, motivating participants to act in the interests of the public good.

However, deliberative processes are not a panacea. Democratic societies face a wide set of challenges, which require different methods of resolution or participation. For example, deliberative processes are not sufficient to address the problems of political inclusion and collective decision-making. Nor are deliberative processes well-suited to urgent decisions, problems in the late stages of decision-making where possible solutions are limited, issues that involve national security, or resolving binary questions.

Nevertheless, research has demonstrated that deliberative processes benefit politicians, public servants, members of the process itself and the wider public in various ways.

- They contribute to *better policy outcomes* because deliberation results in considered public judgements rather than public opinions. Most public participation processes are not designed to be representative or collaborative. Consequently, they can be adversarial (a chance to air grievances rather than find solutions or common ground). Deliberative processes create the space for learning, discussion and the development of informed recommendations, which are of greater use to policy and decision-makers.
- They provide decision-makers with *greater legitimacy to make hard choices*. These processes help policymakers better understand public priorities and the values and reasons behind them, and identify where consensus is and is not feasible. They are particularly useful in situations where there is a need to overcome political deadlock and weigh trade-offs.
- They *enhance public trust in government and democratic institutions* by giving citizens a significant role in public decision-making. People are more likely to trust a decision that has been influenced by ordinary people than one made solely by government.
- They *promote civic respect and empower people*. Engaging people in deliberation strengthens their political efficacy (the belief that one can understand and influence political affairs).

- They *make governance more inclusive* by opening the door to a much more diverse group of people. Deliberative processes, with their use of civic lotteries, bring in people who would not typically contribute to public policy and decision-making.
- They *strengthen integrity and prevent corruption* (as well as public perception of corruption) by ensuring that those with money and power cannot have undue influence on a public decision.
- They *help counteract polarization and disinformation*. Empirical research has shown that "echo chambers" that focus on culture, identity reaffirmation and polarisation tend not to survive in deliberative conditions, even in groups of like-minded people (OECD, 2020: 7).

In sum, the evidence shows that representative deliberative processes have helped public authorities take difficult decisions on a wide range of policy issues at all levels of government for which there was previously political stalemate or a lack of evident solutions.

Armed with facts, citizens can be expected to inject positive energy into the institutions of democracy, improve their representativeness, insist on constructive deliberation, and thus enhance their legitimacy.

In the recent years of multiple crises, examples of innovative forms of deliberative democracy have emerged in Europe. The most prominent example is of course the Conference on the Future of Europe, which represents a major opportunity for the EU to consider a more proactive strategy to develop new kinds of democratic representation, deliberation and accountability, and to encourage a more far-sighted vision of democracy. Generally speaking, the long-term challenge for European political actors is to weave facts and values into concrete yet flexible strategies for democratic deliberation that lead to policy and social change. It has been suggested that positive and substantive civic engagement via digital media and social networks should go hand in hand with quality journalism and media literacy to foster critical thinking and emotional intelligence among the general public. Armed with facts, citizens can be expected to inject positive energy into the institutions of democracy, improve their representativeness, insist on constructive deliberation, and thus enhance their legitimacy. Fact-based deliberation in representative bodies, direct channels to give voice to citizens' concerns and choices, and supporting mechanisms to hold governments and public officials accountable can save democracy in Europe from the onslaught of populism, nationalism and anti-Europeanism (Blockmans, 2020: 376).

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In the long-lasting debate about the future of the European project one recurring complaint is the lack of a defined common identity. This cultural deficiency is often recognised as one of the European Union's (EU) main weaknesses and brandished to rally support by several Eurosceptic parties across the continent. Yet, when citizens are surveyed directly and involved in real exchange over these issues, the resulting reality is far more complex. FACTS was designed to survey and compare political narratives about Europe in five EU countries: Germany, Spain, Poland, Greece and Italy. From this heterogenous array, the project's institutional partners draw some conclusions about differences and similarities across EU public opinion. This comparative perspective was especially enlightening for the project's central purpose: recognising the sources of dis(information) about the EU and the effect on public opinion.

In all the five countries where the research was conducted, an insufficient level of debate was noted around European cultural issues, along with a perception of inadequate top-down information. Interestingly, this criticism arose spontaneously from the citizens' panels themselves, as they complained that their respective national political systems were failing to deliver this necessary knowledge about European issues and politics in general. At the same time, the different conversations held at national level pinpointed a transversal similarity of perspectives, manifested in common fears and hopes for Europe's present and future. These views were notable across the debate but above all in the discussions about foreign policy and disinformation. Another interesting finding was the presence of a transnational generational divide between younger and older participants that heavily influenced the opinions and positions of groups and individuals. The substantial commonality of many issues may be the starting point for a consciousness of a shared European identity, if not of the identity itself.

United in divergence

The objective of the project was to survey randomly selected – but representative – groups of citizens in five EU countries: Germany, Spain, Poland, Greece and Italy. In each nation, a private institution or research centre affiliated with FACTS suggested to the participants an open

questionnaire to encourage a fair and inclusive exchange around a number of issues connected with the public narrative on European matters, stereotypes and disinformation. Afterwards, each organiser presented a summary of all the roundtables assembled at national level to facilitate transnational comparison[1].

The first note-worthy finding of FACTS was that the perception of a geographical divide within the EU remains strong. In every country, the existence of two distinct areas of integration, namely a richer and more integrated "centre" and a poorer "periphery", is identified as a major issue facing the EU that is likely discouraging further integration. This split was equally recognised and regretted by countries that perceive themselves as members of the core Europe (i.e. Germany) and those feeling they live on the outskirts (i.e. Greece and Spain). Surprisingly, the sensation of being excluded from the "centre" is not always related to an East/West or North/South cleavage but framed in different terms. In Poland, for instance, there was a sensation of being on a less than equal footing with other Europeans, while in Italy the disconnection was between the major sites of globalisation and the smaller local realities.

In some southern countries, this cleavage was felt as a very politically sensitive topic capable of influencing the whole conversation and approach to the European Union, -the Greeks defined it as "a directorate of powerful member states" that "impose their preferences on the weaker ones" in one of their roundtables. In the same line, even the German participants agreed that nowadays Europe is hindered by its inequalities, which go beyond the economic and include the diverging treatment EU citizens enjoy in different member states. The wavering rule of law in Hungary and Poland was particularly stressed as a case in point[2].

Out of this European divide stems FACTS' second important finding: the increasingly difficult association of the EU with the notions of peace and prosperity. Even on this issue, the splintering followed a geographical and historical fracture. From the economic standpoint, the separation is between countries like Germany and Poland where EU membership is seen as a significant opportunity and southern member states like Spain and Greece where there is clear and outspoken dissatisfaction. Many Greek, Spanish and some Italian citizens voiced concern for their economic future and sharply criticised the EU institutions for the harsh (and allegedly unfair) response to the 2008 financial crisis.

According to many citizens of these countries, the EU's past and present mistakes in the economic field are endangering the achievement of long-lasting growth and prosperity Brussels has actively pushed forward. These different feelings are mirrored symbolically by the common currency, which is listed among the best indicators of unification by German participants and by Italians as a sign of a soulless Europe. As far as peace is concerned, all participants across the countries acknowledged that attaining a stable Europe after centuries of wars is one of the EU's greatest accomplishments. Nonetheless, all displayed similar preoccupation about the constant state of emergency at the continental borders and wondered why the bloc seems so incapable of dealing with external crises. Predictably, the issue raising most concern in this field was migration, whose management was defined almost unanimously as a failure.

1. See Chapter 3 – Methodology.
2. While less prominent, other references to this issue were made at the Italian and Spanish roundtables.

Between age and identity

As well as the EU's faltering position as a guarantor of peace and prosperity, other flaws were identified in multiple areas, according to the personal sensitivity of each participant and the national discourse about Europe. In Spain, particular attention was devoted to poor delivery in terms of environmental protection and social policy. In Poland, there was discontent with the policymakers representing national interests in Brussels. The need to cut European red tape surfaced in Spain and Germany, while Italian participants emphasised the painful lack of common defence.

The same nuances were also noticeable when the participants were surveyed on the success and the positive side of Europe, which were mostly associated across countries with different aspects of freedom of movement. In Greece, the visa-free regime was seen as a striking achievement entangled with an upsurge in tourism. In Poland, the right to work abroad was highly appreciated, as were the freedom to travel and the investments in facilities and infrastructure[3]. In Spain and Germany, there was appreciation for the Erasmus student mobility programme and positive remarks about the managing of the pandemic. In Italy, aside from Erasmus and leisure travel, mention was made of the EU's role in ensuring better international stability.

The national positions reappeared over the identity debates. This question always arose spontaneously and revealed contrasting opinions, with euro-affiliation prevailing in Germany and Italy, and Euro-dissociation dominant in Spain and Greece. Especially in the latter there was a feeling of separation between a theoretical European identity and the national one, which was at times too deep to conceal[4]. In Spain, the attendees defined Europe as a "utopia", struggled with the concept of identity, and stressed the trade-off between choosing a career path in Europe and in a member state. Comparably, Greek citizens lamented poor communication with EU officials and claimed that there is little Greek presence in the EU. In almost every case, the debate showed a contradiction between the conceptual idea of Europe with the institutional portray of the European Union.

All the national organisers reported that age influenced the debate to a lesser or greater degree depending on the topic and played a more predominant role in separating groups than categorisations like gender or mobilisation. The first difference between age groups concerned preferred sources of information. A major proportion of the older participants said that they relied on traditional media such as the TV and newspapers and discounted most internet news as untrustworthy. By contrast, the younger generations stated a clear preference for online information, whether news media websites, official communication channels or social media like Twitter and Facebook. Despite these divergences, the almost unanimous opinion was that the EU doesn't communicate enough with its citizens and that national institutions are not keen to acknowledge the problem.

This crosscutting discontent suggests that the information sought by citizens is either unreachable or (more likely) hard to find without individual skills such as language mastery or high political awareness.

Age influenced the debate to a lesser or greater degree depending on the topic and played a more predominant role in separating groups than categorisations like gender or mobilisation.

3. Possessing EU citizenship was controversially defined as "a privilege" at the Polish roundtables; this definition was also occasionally employed by some individuals in other countries.
4. According to the most critical citizens, Europe was and could be an identity that may overlap with the core central nations of the bloc but not with secondary members.

The second difference between age groups matches another divide between mobilised and non-mobilised participants and concerns the individual's relationship with the EU. Some citizens stated that they feel a deep connection with the European project, whereas others displayed a very sceptical attitude. Naturally, knowledge of a foreign language and/or life experiences in other countries are all factors that play a part in the growth of such personal attachment. While age is a relevant element in every country, it is apparently particularly significant in southern/eastern Europe.

In Spain, the younger participants advanced the notion of EU self-interest, wondering if the Union should pursue its own interests more than keeping an open, liberal approach. In Poland, the participants addressed the EU as a powerful tool in the hands of the younger generations, who are allegedly more prepared to grasp its opportunities. In Italy, younger citizens revealed that the EU has been always part of their life and they could never imagine the world without it. In Greece, this cohort of participants was apparently quite positive and optimistic about the future of the EU institutions.

The priority of (in)formation

One of the project's chief goals was to identify the channels providing news on the EU that most impact the formation of citizens' opinions. FACTS was expected to distinguish the main sources of information citizens follow and to understand the general societal awareness of some implausible EU-related information. As mentioned above, one shared feeling on this point – regardless of national identity – was the lack of institutional efforts to feed the European public reliable facts. A second connected and distinctive feature of this discussion was how hard many citizens found grappling with disinformation and spotting possible hidden agendas behind the spread of this fake news. The existence of a real, structural phenomenon aimed at disinforming the European society that specifically targets the EU as an institution was acknowledged.



Several participants said that such disinformation campaigns are intended to favour the political priorities of third countries such as China and Russia. In the view of others, disinformation actually arises from the search for self-identification in online networks, which create unofficial communities that share a comprehensive worldview and a need to agree on common positions (i.e. Euroscepticism, conspiracy theories, COVID, etc.). On the other hand, roughly all the participants stated a deep mistrust toward the media in general – above all those they don't use. Television, newspapers, social media and online networks were all deemed untrustworthy and highly politicised. By contrast, official institutional channels were the only sources named as reliable – albeit neither user-friendly nor well-structured.

Against this backdrop, all the roundtables similarly outlined a growing "Europeanisation" of the national political debate. In some countries, like Italy, this fast change was explicitly introduced as the citizens themselves noted an increasing familiarity with EU-associated terminology (like "Schengen" or "Spread") and/or a better knowledge of the domestic politics of other member states (above all France and Germany). Elderly people in particular observed a shift in the media representation of Europe and the introduction of new, formerly little-known political figures on the landscape, such as the President of the Commission or the ECB. Likewise, in countries like Poland or Greece there is an expanding familiarity with the EU, despite a lack of command of technical matters such as treaties or anything felt to be "high politics" decisions. However, the consciousness of being part of a larger community should not be regarded as a synonym for Europhilia. In fact, getting familiar with these terms can often be associated with troublesome times in some countries' recent history. Several participants felt that the EU's rising popularity had a negative fallout and questioned the democratic process that led to the creation of such a strong institution.

Conclusion

FACTS was designed to address the issue of disinformation by gathering and discussing about the challenge with citizens from five different EU member states. While the main purpose was to understand how heavily so-called "fake news" influences European society, in the end the exchange in each country was livelier and touched upon a wide range of issues. On every matter, there was substantial unity of perception. All the citizens experienced a similar divide within the EU of zones of differentiated integration (a core and a periphery). The most common association was with the divide separating northern and southern countries. Similarly, at every roundtable a certain dissatisfaction surfaced with the EU, either because of specific shortcomings (no foreign policy, austerity measures, bureaucracy) or because of a general lack of democratic accountability (information, confusion over the institutional architecture)[5].

This criticism should not be confused with outright opposition to the European project. Many Europhiles, for instance, praised the EU for its political successes but also criticised the institutions for not delivering enough. Negative assessments of the EU architecture were

Criticism should not be confused with outright opposition to the European project. Many Europhiles, for instance, praised the EU for its political successes but also criticised the institutions for not delivering enough.

5. While no one explicitly mentioned a "democratic deficit", the sensation of poor control over the institutions was nonetheless a recurring area of criticism for citizens across countries.

not uncommon, and notably concerned the veto power held by the Council and/or the excessive clout of the powerful member states. Conversely, every citizen (even the most Euro-critical) appreciated the possibility of travelling visa-free through the Schengen area and working and studying abroad. Furthermore, nearly every participant gave a positive assessment of EU foreign policy and demanded a stronger single voice in world affairs. The substantial unanimity of opinions in many respects brought some participants to question the very definition of "Euroscepticism", as these criticisms were rather framed as a democratic and legitimate exchange with the institutions themselves.

The roundtables also shared the same division in terms of political perception and age divide. In the first case, the researchers observed two different fears about the future. For some, the main preoccupation related to a further cession of national sovereignty to the EU that would deprive their country of any political leverage. This revolution would leave them in the hands of a Brussels-based supernational organisation whose ultimate purposes are obscure. For others, the worst fear was the collapse of globalisation and the prospect of their nation being unable to compete with hostile foreign powers. In this scenario, their personal life would be place in the hands of unaccountable powers. Lastly, as already noted, these fears varied according to a generic age divide, which was in some case the most relevant social data, when compared to other parameters such as gender or mobilisation.

In conclusion, the similarities between the five countries prevail over the differences, which are very few and based on occasional focuses rather than dependent on basic conflicting views. This incredible level of similarity across the five countries suggests that along with the national media bubbles an incipient general EU debate exists which shares the same assumptions, hopes and fears. In addition, the dissimilarities between countries are less relevant than the divergence within countries, and this polarisation may indicate that all the member states are inevitably Europeanising their national debate. The overlapping sources of (dis)information bind together transnational groups of citizens, raising questions and spurring a continental debate that speaks the same political language.

FACTS METHODOLOGY: A DIALOGUE DESIGNED TO UNDERSTAND CITIZENS

Adriano Rodari
Fellow, Apropos; previously Project Associate at the Open European Dialogue, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)

> *"When we talk about Europe, citizens are confused, they feel they don't have enough information - and to be honest I feel the same way. I also don't always know what is going on, we don't receive much information - unless you are in the European Affairs Commission. Personally, I have to ask a mate who works there to update me ... and I regularly just ask him to tell me what is being discussed there"*
> *"Usually, Europe does not come up so much, people don't know that some things that are decided in our capital city are actually being decided at the European level, that's why we need to do more informing."*
> *"It is important for our democracies that we learn to listen to the views of different countries."*

Scrolling through social media posts under the hashtag #EU, one finds a range of results: official information on the European Commission's latest proposal, quotes from European law experts interviewed on the rule of law crisis, as well as tweets harshly criticising the European response to crises, directly followed by a post blatantly spreading disinformation about the European Union. This happens every day. On different communication media. In different languages.

In this perpetual flow of information, we may wonder what actually sticks in citizens' minds, how they think of Europe, and where they assume the EU should be more active. With the aim of discovering this, the FACTS project's methodology was designed to capture the characteristics, expectations and attributes citizens associate with the European Union.

Listening to and recognising the narratives that emerged from citizens involved an organisational and methodological effort that went beyond the simple act of collecting thoughts and perceptions about the European Union and its future trajectory. It meant designing a process that could empower the voices of citizens and increase their ownership over current and new European narratives.

"It is useful to have these exchanges and listen to each other and reflect on the perceptions we have of each other, the stereotypes that are involved in the way we think ... it is a learning for me to be in contact with someone from Germany and speak openly about these issues and learn that the stereotypes are not the truth."

The methodology designed and employed throughout the duration of FACTS started by humbly acknowledging that the project could not aim to represent the entirety of the vast range of opinions citizens held about the European Union. As well as being a virtually impossible task, gathering the plethora of narratives and rumours on the European project would not reveal cross-country synergies (or fault lines), or further increase citizens' shared ownership of new viable stories for the continent. A comprehensive survey would be better suited to that purpose. Instead, this project had the ambition of creating meaningful and deep conversations among citizens at different levels – first within their countries and, later, at international level. The information that emerged is the result of a carefully tuned process that emphasises the central role of citizens in outlining their own stories on Europe.

Given the need to let citizens' knowledge and perception of the European Union emerge, the methodology behind this project was designed to engage as many citizens as possible in facilitated dialogue. The questions and the process followed in both the national focus groups and in the citizens–parliamentarians final conference were researched and designed to favour the creation of dialogue and emergence of information among the participants instead of simple opinion-sharing.

Overall, the methodology employed successfully achieved the objective of exploring narratives about the European Union among mobilised and non-mobilised citizens, creating a space for them to express their views, explore new narratives and share their concerns about the EU directly with policymakers.

"It is useful to have these exchanges and listen to each other and reflect on the perceptions we have of each other, the stereotypes that are involved in the way we think ... it is a learning for me to be in contact with someone from Germany and speak openly about these issues and learn that the stereotypes are not the truth."

Different levels of engagement lead to new insights

The FACTS project is composed of two distinct, though interconnected parts. Combined, they provide the methodological framework at the basis of the project. These two pillars are 1. the focus groups held nationally by CIDOB (Spain), IAI (Italy), ELIAMEP (Greece), WiseEuropa (Poland) and DPZ (Germany); and 2. the political dialogue, designed and hosted in Barcelona by the Open European Dialogue team, associated to the German Marshall Fund of the United States office in Brussels.

These different levels of engagement were the project's unique feature. The exchange between the focus groups of around 60 citizens per country provided key insights into the public perceptions of the EU according to background, political engagement and age. Meanwhile, the final conference was a broader exchange platform in which a group of diverse citizens and parliamentarians engaged for the first time in a cross-country and cross-party dialogue over the present and future narratives around the European project.

"For the younger generations the EU is not even questioned - it just is."

These diverse forms of engagement created the space to explore how the European institutional architecture we share is seen differently from the various corners of Europe. More essentially, engaging at different levels allowed new connections and information to emerge that would not have been evident otherwise.

Given the timeframe, the content emerging from the focus groups and political dialogue was significantly affected by events such as COVID-19 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Yet, with the help of process design, these major topics were singled out and elaborated in specific dialogue sessions.

"It was a dream, it is a dream, based on an experience, that of World War Two, to which we tried to find a pragmatic answer to the problem through the integration of our economic communities. We need to keep the spirit of the dream … the politics comes later."

National focus groups: your voice matters!

The focus groups held in 2021 in Spain, Italy, Greece, Poland and Germany represented the starting point for the research and sessions that followed. They created a comparable set of information across countries and provided a powerful kick-off for the dialogue between citizens and policymakers in Barcelona the following year.

As stated before, the FACTS project aims to identify the existing rumours, false narratives or fake news circulating about the European Union and whether these rumours directly hinder the idea of acquiring European citizenship. It also challenges the solidity of the traditional narrative of peace and prosperity that is still summoned as the EU's main achievement. With these objectives in mind, the focus groups sought to explore how well the traditional narrative withstands the test of time and whether a) it is still a powerful mobilising factor; and b) mobilised and non-mobilised citizens can and actually do think of different narratives. The national-level focus groups were therefore the most appropriate research method to achieve these goals in the first phase of the project.

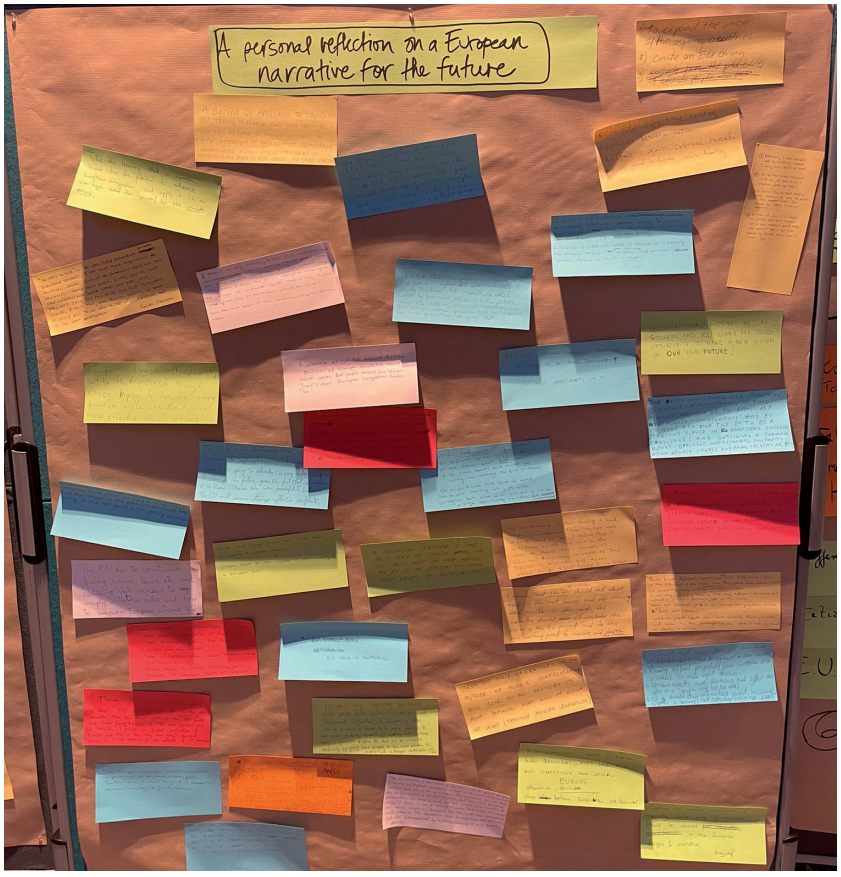
The Social Sciences literature defines focus groups in various ways. The definition provided by Powell and Single (1996:49) applies to the sessions held in this phase of the project: *"A focus group is a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research."*

This qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for the emergence of information from the interaction between participants, differentiating it from other forms of interview (Gibbs, 1997: 2). In fact, key information such as the degree (or lack of) consensus on a specific narrative could only be grasped by the researcher by creating a human interaction within the focus groups.

Overall, around 300 citizens participated in the focus groups across the five countries. Taking place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the focus groups in most of the countries (Germany, Poland, Greece and Italy) were held online for safety reasons. Meanwhile, the epidemiological situation in Spain at the time allowed events to take place in-person.

> *"I am not sure if I am disappointed (with Europe), I never thought about it from an emotional perspective, I tend to rationalize it, but I guess yes there is an emotional element to it which I don't usually think about … Something changed for me at some point during the round of crises in 2015, when we always spoke so negatively about disastrous scenarios, we were speaking of kicking out Greece at the time".*

A crucial element in the formation of the focus groups was diversity. Each of the five think-tanks selected a group of around 60 participants, split over two focus groups per country. In order to select the citizens, the organisers above all respected three different criteria: gender balance (50% men and 50% women), age balance (1/3 under 30, 1/3 between 30 and 65 years, and 1/3 over 65), and balance between mobilised and non-mobilised citizens. This last category concerned the degree of involvement in politics, which was essential to grasp what non-experts understand about the European Union. Thus, mobilised citizens are considered to be those who show a natural interest in regional, national, or European politics, and those who are more or less aware of the



debates occurring around the world. Meanwhile, non-mobilised citizens are those who have a general knowledge of politics, political activity and political debates, although this does not constitute one of their main daily concerns. Besides these three categories used in the selection of participants, the focus groups organised online also attempted to achieve wider geographical diversity in terms of region and city of origin, while the in-person focus groups gathered participants mostly from neighbouring regions and cities (e.g., Barcelona and Tarragona, and other surrounding cities in the case of Barcelona-based CIDOB).

After selecting around 60 citizens per country, each institution held two focus groups of around 30 participants over a short period of time. During the two sessions, all the researchers in different countries used the same set of questions to guide the conversation. The questions were framed to encourage respondents to express their beliefs, attitudes and feelings towards the European Union and the traditional narratives that surround it. They also explored the respondents' information and media consumption habits. In addition, the researchers gave space to respondents to formulate their own positive narrative on the European Union. Throughout the conversation, researchers were instructed to report some key information on the respondents i.e., age, gender and political status (mobilised or non-mobilised).

The information collected was analysed by each institution and published as separate, though comparable, reports. The data from these reports was then used as a starting point for the MPs–citizens dialogue that took place roughly a year after the focus groups.

> *"I was very disappointed by my own government for not engaging more with the Conference on the Future of Europe … we should have done more."*

The political dialogue: sitting citizens and parliamentarians at the same table

The parliamentarians–citizens dialogue held in Barcelona on May 20th and 21st 2022 was the last activity part of the project. It served to connect the narratives, feelings and attitudes that emerged from the first round of the focus groups in each country and let new information emerge from the interaction between citizens of different nationalities. In addition, it sought to assess how the results collected the year before withstood the test of time, after a major security crisis in Ukraine affected the European continent. The other key ingredient of this session was the participation of elected members of parliaments, acting as a political sounding board.

The Open European Dialogue (OED) used its experience in crafting events for members of its network of over 150+ parliamentarians to design an inclusive dialogue between citizens and select policymakers. The cohort of citizens invited to join the event in Barcelona was selected from the participants in the previous national focus groups, maintaining an even balance in terms of nationality, gender, age and political mobilisation. In total, a cohort of 30 citizens was created, including six Spaniards, seven Italians, five Greeks, five Poles and seven Germans.

As for the political sounding board, the OED invited members of parliaments from different political parties and factions, in order to cover the widest spectrum of political ideologies in Europe. The political sounding board was thus composed of seven members of parliament representing the following parties: Syriza (Greece), the Democratic Party (Italy), the Five Star Movement (Italy), Civic Platform (Poland), the Basque Nationalist Party (Spain), the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Spain) and Together for Catalonia (Spain). Throughout the two days, this political sounding board was occasionally given the opportunity to offer a personal reflection on their work and challenges as policymakers who operate both nationally and within a European political context; why they decided to get into the job of democratic representation; and to provide feedback on the ongoing conversations. These occasional moments of personal reflection saw politicians come up to the stage and engage in a one-on-one conversation with the facilitator. They were also asked to comment on their relationship with the European political agenda and how they navigate their role as mediators between Europe and its citizens.

The dialogue began with a session dedicated to the sharing of personal stories, as participants sat in threes and were asked to share their own background, their influences, roots and perspectives on Europe, all in just under ten minutes per person. This provided citizens and politicians alike with the opportunity to connect, to familiarise themselves with the point of view of people from different perspectives and to try to understand why different people experience Europe and life so differently.

The second day kicked off with the presentation of the results from the previous national focus groups. Once the results from the five countries' focus groups were shared, some observations were offered to prompt further reflection from the participants, who were now given a chance to exchange their views with those of citizens who participated in other focus groups.

> *"I wonder if the economic narrative is intrinsically less tied to identity as there seems to be a stronger sense of European identity in those countries where the prevalent narrative is that of peace and security, such as Germany and Poland."*

Following the reflection on the results of the focus groups and the presentation of highlights to the plenary, participants were organised into national tables, where they discussed in a facilitated dialogue how the crisis in Ukraine had changed their views about Europe. The national roundtable conversations were guided by a facilitator who ensured different voices were heard, and offered citizens and MPs the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in a more natural way, as they were able to speak in their own language.

> *"Europe will be stronger after this war."*

As the second day of dialogue drew to an end, participants were reorganised into mixed tables and invited to reflect on whether any common narratives seemed to emerge across our diverse group of citizens and politicians. The task challenged the groups to exercise active

listening and empathic skills as in a short amount of time they jointly navigated a plurality of perspectives and strongly held beliefs in the search for some meaningful common ground.

The dialogue was meaningfully enriched by creating an opportunity for citizens and politicians to connect and exchange views and opinions with a process designed for citizens and politicians to be equal participants and to overcome the stiffness of pre-scripted speeches in favour of more natural interactions between citizens and their representatives. This allowed not only the humanisation of the policymakers' profession but also helped explore new perspectives. The opportunity was created for citizens and politicians to engage with people from their own countries as well as with people from countries other than their own, offering an opportunity to be exposed to different perspectives and gain insights into what citizens and politicians are like beyond the political realm. Overall, the design of the sessions and the carefully crafted conversation spaces, guiding questions and mixture of sharing human experience as well as opinions on political issues created the space for new interactions and the emergence of key insights which would have been unimaginable in other contexts. Citizens and politicians alike were able to let their guard down and share their views, as well as their fears and frustrations; they were listened to and given the opportunity to learn from people with very different backgrounds and perspectives. In the end, they attempted to give an honest common evaluation of the state of the European project.

> *"Even if I don't agree with you, I have found one thing we can agree on which is that Europe is not written in stone, it is not on an inevitable linear path. It is an open-ended initiative that should always be listening and adapt to the changing reality and needs of its citizens."*
> *"After two days of dialogue I have many insights from other people in other countries and with other jobs that I take with me. I understand that some ideas are widespread across Europe and I take with me the sense that our youngest generations are the most enthusiastic – a sense that they are waiting on Brussels to do something".*

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FACTS FINAL CONFERENCE: AT THE END OF THE ROAD, KEEP GOING

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On May 20th and 21st 2022, the project From Alternative Narratives to Citizens True EU Stories (FACTS[1]) held its final conference in Barcelona, bringing together citizens and elected representatives from different member states. CIDOB (Spain), IAI (Italy), Eliamep (Greece), WiseEuropa (Poland), DPZ (Germany) and the Open European Dialogue team from the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Brussels office) held a two-day focus group that included 30 citizens and seven elected representatives from national parliaments.

The FACTS project aimed to identify the narratives about the European Union held by mobilised and non-mobilised citizens[2] and to clarify if these narratives help or hinder the development of a European citizenship or the sense of collective belonging. After conducting the national focus groups, the final conference, which unfolded over two days and explored narratives and attitudes towards the European Union, was a joint exercise involving citizens of different member states, ages, genders and mobilised or non-mobilised statuses, alongside members of parliament who reflected together on past, present and future EU narratives.

The group of citizens was composed of six Spanish, seven Italian, five Greek, five Polish and seven German citizens, keeping the balance between gender, age and mobilised and non-mobilised citizens. In addition to this, seven members of national parliaments participated, with a balance between origin, gender and political ideology. The citizens who participated in the final conference had previously participated in one of the two focus groups organised in their respective country; therefore, they had prior knowledge of the project and were aware that their fellow citizens were in the same situation. Members of Parliament had previously been briefed about the earlier activities of the project and were well aware of its objectives.

The think tanks working on FACTS acknowledge that the conversations that took place during the conference by no means represent an exact reflection of what European society thinks about the EU and its narratives. Instead, the aim was to paint a picture of the conversation that can result

1. This project has received funding from the European Union's Europe for Citizens programme under grant decision No. 615563 and the acronym FACTS. Since this publication reflects only the authors' views, the European Union and its Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

2. Mobilised citizens are those who show a natural interest for regional, national or European politics, and who are more or less aware of the debates occurring around the world. Non-mobilised citizens are those who have a general knowledge of politics, political activity and political debates, although this does not constitute one of their main daily concerns.

when mixing Europeans from different backgrounds, ages, genders and nationalities with elected representatives at a time when the health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been left behind, but the economic ramifications still persist. At the same time, Europe faces yet another crisis because of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

What motivates participation?

As the final conference would take place over a longer period than the national focus groups, the dynamics used to create the conversation were different (see Chapter 3). Taking advantage of this opportunity, the first session was designed for participants to get to know each other but also for the politicians to be acknowledged as such. Breaking the ice between participants from different countries and backgrounds was key to achieving a more meaningful debate and deeper conversations. This first session was also helpful for the participants to become more comfortable communicating with one another in the only language shared by all – English.

Citizens remarked upon how important those exchanges are, not just to meet people from all around Europe, but to try to understand their backgrounds and societal and political motivations, as well as to share feelings and confirm that some states of mind do not differ so much from one another.

It seems clear that the need to comprehend the motivations of fellow European citizens was one of the main drivers for the participants to join the final FACTS conference. How citizens' nationalities affect their views on the EU was not the only factor brought up by participants. Working experience and environment were also identified as circumstances that can influence how citizens think about the EU. In fact, some of the participants considered that nationality does not imply big differences *per se* and that cultural exchanges may take one away from their roots in a positive way. By contrast, for another group of citizens different views and arguments on Europe depend very much on nationality. However, it was emphasised that this should mean more cooperation across borders to work out the differences.

Citizens remarked upon how important those exchanges are, not just to meet people from all around Europe, but to try to understand their backgrounds and societal and political motivations, as well as to share feelings and confirm that some states of mind do not differ so much from one another. This illustrates once more that mobility and freedom of movement is the EU's most precious treasure, and should therefore be better promoted and protected. For one participant, a very young male, attending the FACTS final conference was his first experience outside his country. Clearly, not every citizen enjoys the benefits and opportunities of mobility equally; this may mean mobility is a privilege more than a right. In fact, one participant noted that cultural exchanges such as FACTS are great, but that when they end the lack of opportunities back home remains. This was also a reminder that the need to move to other countries for better job opportunities makes mobility less a privilege or a right than an obligation that drives citizens away from home, even if it is to live within the EU. The narrative of having to leave home because of lack of opportunities is not one that can work for the EU in the long run.

The citizens' debates also established that the EU's regional dimension remains a factor (North-South and East-West). Logically, then, the EU should consider this when acting in various policy areas. Participants noted that citizens from southern member states felt closer to each

other than to those from northern Europe; but this was probably due to the larger representation of citizens from southern Europe.

What did not differ, regardless of whether the conversation took place between citizens of the same nationality or was the result of different nationals discussing together, was the double-edged perception of the EU. On the one hand, the ideal image of what the EU should be in the eyes of its citizens prevails, reinforcing the positive perception of the European project. In this image, the EU is associated with peace, solidarity and a chance for development (prosperity). Even if people from different countries often have different views on the EU, they share the same needs for security, peace and the dream of a united Europe.

On the other hand, the EU was also perceived as disappointing or hypocritical. For instance, when it came to the differing treatment of refugees depending on their origins; whether the EU really treats all member states equally and fairly; or whether the EU does enough to defend its rights and values at home as well as around the world.

Another recurring topic that came up in the conversation between citizens of different origins and their elected representatives was how distant the EU is perceived as being. Elected representatives reported that the EU and the debates surrounding it are absent among their constituents. However, MPs also suggested that national governments do not always make the effort to keep MPs informed. They argued that as MPs, they were not involved in European debates and decision-making and that governments had given up explaining the complexity of the European decision-making structure to citizens.

The results of the focus groups

The first exercise of the second day was to reflect collectively on what the national focus groups had brought up (the comparative results can be seen in Chapter 2). Some food for thought was put on the table, and citizens were asked to reflect on the following questions:

1. Is the EU ambivalent?
2. Is there a disconnect between citizens and Europe?
3. Economic livelihood
4. Uneven opportunities across Europe
5. Peace vs. economics when it comes to European identity?

Then, citizens of different nationalities, genders, ages and backgrounds engaged in collective reflection. Regardless of their individual characteristics, it seemed clear that it is impossible to count a member state as pro-European or anti-European, although trends do exist. Similarly, the vision of what the EU project entails varies across countries: it can be a peace project or an economic project. The view southern Europeans used to have of the European Union as a means of underpinning their democracies is fading to the extent that younger generations are creating their own narratives. For these generations the EU is a given reality. Some cited the need to include Eurosceptic voices on discussions on the future of Europe and to pay more attention to what happens in each country.

Another recurring topic, given the combination of citizens and MPs present at the conference, was the presence or lack of opportunities in the European Union. At this point it was easy to identify the divisions between countries that remain present, such as the North-South and East-West divides, and the new ones emerging, like the rural–urban divide. The material hardships felt in southern Europe during the economic crisis that started in 2008 are still influencing the perception of the EU to the point that southerners focused more on (the lack of) prosperity than on peace, unlike Germans and Poles. As peace has been a constant within the EU, linking the European project to peace favours its perception as a success story much more than when it is identified with prosperity. This was the picture that emerged in the room. Still, the EU always emerged as the lesser evil; as one group of citizens put it: "we cannot imagine how things would look without the EU".

How will the Russian aggression against Ukraine change Europe?

Given the challenging times the EU was going through, one session was designed specifically to debate the situation in Ukraine. However, and understandably, the conflict was present throughout the whole final conference. As happened in the national focus groups, citizens' visions and demands about the EU were very much shaped by context and origin. The national focus groups were held during the summer of 2021 and at that time attention was on the COVID19 pandemic, vaccines and the need for solidarity. In May 2022, the focus was squarely on how the war against Ukraine would change the EU.

Again, even on this topic, there was a clear geographical/national divide when approaching the EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It was not a surprise to see Polish citizens – driven by history and geography – asking the EU to do more. The same was true for the Polish member of parliament present in the discussion, who was very vocal in asking the European Union and its member states to do more to support Ukraine.

However, every country had its own approach based on its own past and experiences. For instance, in southern European member states – but also in Germany – some anti-Americanism feeling still co-exists at different levels of society and to different degrees. While the United States is not directly involved in this war, any movement made by NATO or the Western allies was viewed with suspicion, as the contributions of some participants showed. In Greece the reasons were twofold. On the one hand, Greeks are still having to cope with material difficulties and economic shortages, and the war started by Russia will add extra pressure to their society. On the other hand, there is a feeling of double standards about the solidarity shown to the Ukrainian refugees compared to what happened during the summer of 2015. The solidarity shown towards the EU countries taking in those refugees was also seen as significantly different.

Germans are aware that this is a crucial moment for their country and the EU, as the debate has completely shifted to focus on values and questioning the usefulness of the foreign policy strategy followed

throughout the Merkel era of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade). The German citizens present in the room were aware that Germany is facing a *Zeitenwende*, a turning point.

The Spanish citizens were somewhere in the middle. On one hand, they felt more involved with the EU, more protected by the EU umbrella and more appreciative of how the idea of solidarity, unity and a potential European identity have been strengthened by the war and the EU's response to it. One participant stated that the invasion of Ukraine was in fact an attack on European values. On the other hand, the double standards in the attitudes towards refugees were also mentioned.

The Italian citizens claimed that the situation in Ukraine is an opportunity to strengthen EU foreign and security policy, but also an opportunity for the EU as a whole. In their opinion, the EU must remodel a project conceived for peace in a time marked by war.

Citizens want a say

Regardless of citizens' country of origin and background, or whether they were mobilised or non-mobilised, they all agreed on one thing: let us have a say. The feeling of being disconnected from what is happening at a European level was omnipresent. Participants felt uninformed about the EU's functioning, structure and decision-making. They did not feel heard or acknowledged by far-off Brussels.

Participants wanted more dialogue between citizens and policymakers on a national as well as European level. They wanted to be better informed and for their input and ideas to be taken into account in policymaking.

Regardless of citizens' country of origin and background, or whether they were mobilised or non-mobilised, they all agreed on one thing: let us have a say. The feeling of being disconnected from what is happening at a European level was omnipresent.



As one citizen put it: "Europe should engage citizens more in the process of creating a common narrative. Citizens should be more involved in policy-making at the European level".

On this note, an alarming sign might be that almost none of the participants had heard of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and certainly not the results and proposals made.

There is work to be done and the project is far from over. However, time and time again, it has been proven that when facing a crisis, we can work together and get results.

Towards a future narrative?

Undelivered promise continues to be the story told about Europe. For example, in some areas the EU is perceived as working well but participants doubted whether it has delivered the hoped-for equality of opportunities for everyone.

The war in Ukraine puts the spotlight on values again. Political leaders speak of the Russian aggression also being an attack on European values and some citizens picked up on this idea as well. But many participants in the final conference, as well as some in the national focus groups, could not help but wonder about the extent to which the EU will defend those values. It was noted that this has not always happened in the past. Citizens wonder whether values that are neither always defended nor always shared can result in new and better narratives. In a similar fashion, joint narratives cannot be built if the perception remains that powerful states lead and the rest follow.

The idea that permeated the conference's final session, on future narratives, was that Europe is a space of permanent debate. Thus, while the narrative of peace and prosperity remains present, other visions also favour a European Union that is stronger than its present capabilities. The EU acts more slowly than people hope for. According to the citizens, every country acts separately when they should be acting together.

More importantly, they highlighted the need to be (pro-)active, instead of reacting to events, which also makes it more difficult to find a powerful narrative like the one on peace and prosperity.

A participant summed it up as follows: "There are many narratives on the future of Europe. Confrontation [between narratives] will bring to an equilibrium point defining what kind of Europe we want (especially [for] younger generations)".

One thought that emerged from the conversation was that a pragmatic approach should be adopted, taking advantage of the current momentum. This reflects what Robert Schuman said – that Europe will not be made all at once nor according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.

There is work to be done and the project is far from over. However, time and time again, it has been proven that when facing a crisis, we can work together and get results.

FACTS – FROM ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES TO CITIZENS TRUE EU STORIES: A PROJECT LIVING UP TO ITS NAME

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Analyst, WiseEuropa

FACTS – *From Alternative Narratives to Citizens True EU Stories* – has been an exploration into the narratives that shape the European Union in the eyes of its citizens, into how information and misinformation may underlie such narratives, and how civic participation might neutralise disinformation within an inclusive model of democratic deliberation. Five member states were selected for examination: Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain.

The project has been a collaborative effort between six European think tanks recognised for their expertise in the area of EU studies and solid track record of engagement with civil society. In their everyday work, these NGOs combine the analytical job of delivering stateoftheart scientific evidence to policymakers with a social responsibility to discuss their findings and to promote factbased public debate. As such, they have been suitably positioned to connect policymakers with representatives of wider society in the context of key societal challenges. These partner institutions, in an alphabetical order, are:

- CIDOB – based in Barcelona, specialised in international affairs and civic engagement, was responsible for the overall management of the project as well as the project's Spanish national component;
- Das Progressive Zentrum – based in Berlin, focused on researching and framing solutions for a sustainable society, coordinated the project's German national component;
- ELIAMEP – based in Athens, active in the area of EU studies, international affairs and governance, conducted the project's Greek national component;
- Istituto Affari Internazionali – based in Rome, dedicated to the study of international affairs and the promotion of European integration, was responsible for the project's Italian national component;
- The Transatlantic Foundation – based in Brussels, it is the European entity of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), and

through the Open European Dialogue (OED) was responsible for preparing the project's final conference, including the involvement of members of parliament (MPs);

- WiseEuropa – based in Warsaw, combining expertise in economic and European affairs with engagement in pressing societal issues such as green transformation, led the project's Polish national component.

The participants agreed that the European Union develops through crisis, although they expressed a need for a more proactive, rather than reactive approach.

With two highly interactive techniques at its core, the project's methodological design was made to fit its aims. First, focus groups with citizens were held at national level, with two sessions of around 30 participants each conducted in each of the five member states. The focus groups revealed a number of differences in the narratives surrounding the EU across the member states. The nationals of the southern member states were more reserved about the EU's promise of prosperity than those in the northern countries. In some countries, the citizens also felt as if their region was a mere periphery subject to outside forces rather than a member state in its own right. On the other hand, the citizens of all the countries associated the European Union with the achievement of peace, even if this association was partly tarnished by the EU's vulnerability to crises.

The project's second and crowning stage, the final conference in Barcelona, took the form of a series of dynamic workshops. The event brought together seven Members of Parliament and 30 citizens, who were selected from among the participants in the focus groups. Proportionality with respect to nationality and other demographic features was maintained across both groups. The sessions were dedicated to pressing issues around the European integration project and the challenges it has encountered in recent years. The sessions, moderated by a professional facilitator, were intertwined with reflections shared by the representatives of the partner institutions and, notably, by the MPs. The former presented the conclusions from the focus groups, while the latter discussed the life and job of a political representative and the interplay of national and European politics.

During the Final Conference, the participants' diverse backgrounds and walks of life formed a mixture that was very well shaken indeed. The working groups cut across nationalities, ages and professions, with the only constant being the presence of a facilitator from one of the partner institutions in each group. Moreover, the groups changed every other task or so, which gradually turned collaboration into a habit and made it possible to make acquaintance with the majority of the debaters. Informal observation suggested that even individuals unaccustomed to intense socialisation or uncertain about their language skills were fairly quick to pick up the routine.

Deliberating on the most challenging moments of the recent years – the financial and economic crisis, the migrant crisis, the COVID19 pandemic, the Russian aggression against Ukraine – the participants agreed that the European Union develops through crisis, although they expressed a need for a more proactive, rather than reactive approach. They embraced the gains in prosperity and peace the EU is usually associated with, but not without pointing out some deficiencies, including persisting inequalities of opportunity. They also noticed that the Russian

war in Ukraine had once again made the realm of values – democracy, human rights, rule of law – the community's very centrepiece.

The debate, while respectful, was far from a courtesy. Difficult issues were raised, and differences – whether between individuals or nationalities – were acknowledged and examined. For instance, the ongoing Ukraine refugee crisis was contrasted with the migrant crisis of 2015, which affected the EU's southern countries especially hard and is felt not to have elicited an adequate response from all the countries in the north. The representatives of the southern countries were also more vocal about the financial and economic crisis, whose fallout was longer and harsher than the nationals in the north might have realised.

The diversity of historical experience that is characteristic of our continent, combined with other compelling factors such as geography, are guaranteed to generate new divergences of interest and opinion in the future. Similarly, there will be a diversity of preferences regarding the depth of European integration, a phenomenon that we were able to observe *in vivo* during the final conference. Rather than insist on universality and unanimity, however, we may embark on a quest for the largest common denominator, searching for solutions that will ensure a congenial coexistence of our respective differences. The differences, after all, are what make us worthwhile as individuals and societies, and many of them can be accommodated within equitable, general norms. As the EU's founding father Robert Schuman once said – and our participants quoted – there has never been a single plan for Europe.

There will be a diversity of preferences regarding the depth of European integration, a phenomenon that we were able to observe in vivo during the final conference. Rather than insist on universality and unanimity, however, we may embark on a quest for the largest common denominator, searching for solutions that will ensure a congenial coexistence of our respective differences.

While we collected plenty of insights concerning how the EU is perceived across several member states, we have actually been able to gain much more. During the final conference, we witnessed dynamics that are not easily conceptualised and are therefore usually missing from academic literature, but which are nonetheless essential to understanding and shaping a deliberative, inclusive democracy. We witnessed sheer enthusiasm on the side of the citizens to engage with their representatives and peers from other countries. We saw a readiness to debate problems that impact on – but reach beyond – the local affairs of their communities, social groups and occupations. We could also experience a rare occasion of highlevel policymakers engaging with citizens outside of an electoral context and showing themselves to be very successful moderators. Our impressions were confirmed in the course of informal conversations we held with the participants – citizens and MPs alike – during and after the official events.

To be sure, no scientifically conclusive evidence can be drawn from the project. Neither the citizens nor the MPs who took part constituted a random, representative sample. In initiatives such as ours, which rely closely on voluntary participation, selfselection bias can only be mitigated but can never quite be eliminated. Instead, the study has had an exploratory angle, probing for perceptions, constructs and associations that individuals across Europe may relate to the European Union, the role of information and misinformation in shaping such perspectives, and any differences in them that may emerge across the member states.

Beyond its role in exploring civic perceptions of the European Union, the study has also served as a laboratory of deliberative citizenship. The

project activities were structured toward stimulating the practice and not only shaping the theory. Organising the debate at two levels – both national and European one – mimicked the actual dynamics of European policy as it is forged.

The results of the experiment are encouraging. The methodological caveats notwithstanding, it has proved possible to gather individuals from a number of EU countries – from diverse cultural backgrounds and pursuing different ways of life – and have them debate and reach conclusions on matters of paramount importance for the entire European project.

The results of the experiment are encouraging. The methodological caveats notwithstanding, it has proved possible to gather individuals from a number of EU countries – from diverse cultural backgrounds and pursuing different ways of life – and have them debate and reach conclusions on matters of paramount importance for the entire European project.

A key conclusion is that much remains to be done. While deliberative politics have been a popular theoretical subject since at least the time of Habermas, further academic work is needed to stitch together the theory with practice, fleshing out reallife conditions necessary for effective and equitable deliberation. For instance, how should one balance the breadth of participation with the efficiency of the proceedings? What kind of institutions could help systematise civic participation without at the same time disabling its spontaneous pull? What kind of mandate could be granted to the body of deliberating citizens? If a deliberative model like this could be worked out at the level of the European Union, it might well inspire similar solutions at the national, traditionally more entrenched, level.

At present, however, our project is still more of an exception than a rule across the roster of EU oriented initiatives, as far as its interactive, inclusive and collaborative design is concerned. The benefits we have been able to observe in our group of participants are at the same time losses for those stakeholders who have not yet been able to avail themselves of similar initiatives. This is especially urgent, as the citizens who participated in our projects admitted that they felt disconnected from and largely unaware of the EU's everyday mechanics and dynamics.

On other hand, our conclusions lend extra support to those programmes that *have* been available, for instance the Conference on the Future of Europe. Unfortunately, few of the participants of the FACTS project were actually aware of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and this share can be expected to be even lower among audiences who have never partaken in an EU project. To make this and similar initiatives more popular and therefore more meaningful, additional effort should be channelled into promoting them.

Despite the necessary constraints and caveats, we feel entitled to claim that our project, FACTS – *From Alternative Narratives to Citizens True EU Stories* – has lived up to its name. We began by probing for narratives that (co)determine the thinking about the European Union across individual member states – narratives which may or may not be aligned with the best available knowledge. We conclude with reasonable conviction that such knowledge – facts and the reasoning applied to them – can indeed be deployed at the civil society level. Moreover, we believe that level has a larger role to play in the European project than is sometimes assumed.

ANNEXES

- FROM STORYTELLING TO ACTION: VISIONS AND PROPOSALS FROM EUROPEAN CITIZENS

  CIDOB, Barcelona Centre for Internacional Affairs

- FACTS – REAL INFORMATION FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

  IAI, Instituto Affairi Internazionali

- CITIZENS' VIEWS ON FAKE NEWS AND FALSE NARRATIVES ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

  ELIAMEP, Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy

- FACTS AND FAKE NEWS IN EUROPEAN NARRATIVES

  Das Progressive Zentrum

- FACTS PROJECT – RESULTS OF TWO FOCUS GROUPS MEETINGS

  WiseEuropa

CIDOB briefings

ISSN 2564-8713

32
OCTOBER
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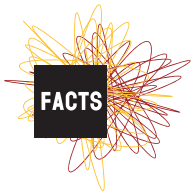
FROM STORYTELLING TO ACTION: Visions and Proposals from European Citizens

Carme Colomina, Research Fellow, CIDOB
Héctor Sánchez Margalef, Researcher, CIDOB

Within the framework of the FACTS project[1] (From Alternative Narratives to Citizens' True EU Stories), CIDOB hosted two focus groups, with a total of nearly 60 participants,[2] to learn more about citizens' perceptions of the European Union, and to identify the narratives, rumours, and disinformation circulating about the European project. The aim is to document how these perceptions and mediated visions can affect construction of the idea of a European citizenship. The project also aims to examine the solidity of the traditional narrative that evokes peace and prosperity as the EU's main achievement.

[1] This project has received funding from the European Union's Europe for Citizens programme under grant decision No. 615563 and the acronym FACTS. Since this publication reflects only the authors' views, the European Union and its Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

[2] The focus groups, organized on July 8 and 12, 2021, respected gender balance (50% men and 50% women), age balance (1/3 under 30, 1/3 between 30 and 65 years, and 1/3 over 65), and balance between mobilized and non-mobilized citizens, that is, between those who show a natural interest for regional, national, or European politics, and those who are more or less aware of the debates occurring around the world. They may be affiliated with organizations like political parties, civil society organizations, or NGOs but this is not a necessary condition, while other participants may have a general knowledge of politics, political activity, and political debates, although this does not constitute one of their main daily occupations and concerns. We also achieved a certain geographical balance between citizens living in Barcelona and citizens from other towns in the Barcelona and Tarragona regions. Since we are aware that the sample of citizens is not sufficiently representative of Catalan society, we never aimed to achieve such representation with the focus groups.





Co-funded by the
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The European Union enjoys a good reputation among the citizens that participated in the FACTS focus groups. The most widely shared vision associates the European Union with an organization that is trying to build teamwork among its members in order to better face present and future challenges. Unfortunately, EU countries are not always of like mind. Hence, the idea of Europe also evokes an image of ("sad") disunion because, according to citizens' perception, the member states do not collaborate as much as they could or should. This undermines the legitimacy of the EU's work and its effectiveness. Awareness of this weakness led some participants to express the view that the EU has disproportionate power.

Nevertheless, it may be considered that the EU maintains its capacity to provide hope, since "utopia" was one of the most repeated words when the citizens were asked to link the Union with a specific idea. This "utopia" is identified as worthwhile, even if participants acknowledged that it has been impossible to attain. In general, citizens see the founding principles and values of the EU as positive and desirable. The EU also clearly evokes human rights and democracy, although members of both focus groups were fairly unanimous in their criticism of its lack of specificity and its hypocrisy. Some participants challenged the idea that the European Union could really be a guarantor of human rights and democracy when there are violations within its borders, and when the EU maintains relationships with third countries that systematically ignore these principles. One of these shared perceptions is that trade agreements and financial relations are favoured over human rights and democracy in any action taken by the EU or its member states.

In the two debates held in Barcelona, there is a clear generational dividing line with a more positive view of the EU being expressed by those who lived through Spain's transition to democracy and who therefore tend to see the EU as a guarantee of stability. However, both Euroscepticism—understood as manifest hostility to the European project—and federalism were clearly minority positions in the two focus groups.

Despite the fact that participants know that Spain is not a Eurosceptic country, and that support for the EU remains stable (and is even growing), the concept of sovereignty emerged when trying to define the nature of the Union. Some non-mobilized participants expressed their doubts about whether ceding sovereignty benefited the interests of the citizens, but without reaching a clear conclusion. On the other hand, the idea of solidarity related to the EU was clearly invoked, especially to demand more of it, both among the member states and with third countries, appealing in particular to the material wealth of the EU. In fact, one participant observed that the EU is a contradictory privilege: it is a privilege if you are a European citizen but also an often-unattainable privilege if you are a citizen of a third country. At this point in the debate, some mobilized citizens mentioned the *Next Generation EU* instrument as a token of solidarity, but most participants could not identify exactly what approval of these post-pandemic funds might mean for European integration. However, the joint purchase of vaccines also served as an example for those who argue that ceding sovereignty in some or all cases could help to meet current challenges. Those who supported transfer of sovereignty were mostly mobilized citizens, regardless of gender or age.

"The person pays for it has the right to ask how money is being spent."

"This implies paternalism of some countries over others and goes against the idea of equality between nations."

Citizens' perceptions of the European Union are strongly marked by context and the closest experiences. This explains why Covid-19 and vaccines were among the first images evoked by participants in the initial interventions, and why other words such as "crisis" or "austerity", which marked previous narratives about the EU, no longer appear early in the discussion. However, when participants were asked about the concept of crisis, they expressed agreement with Jean Monnet's quote that "Europe will be forged in crises", as they acknowledged that the EU is under permanent construction. Some participants also emphasized the influence on European stability of large member states, noting that, "if France or Germany are destabilised by a political crisis, the EU can be really affected".

Paradoxically, Brexit was only mentioned in relation to the pandemic vaccination process. While someone considered that the British had come out better in terms of managing the acquisition of vaccines, a mobilized citizen over the age of 65 considered that, by comparison with the EU, the UK had acted out of lack of solidarity. In this regard, the younger participants wondered whether, given some of the challenges facing the EU, the time had come to act according to self-interest, as other countries do (which alludes to the debate on whether or not there is a European interest or interests).

In general, and regardless of the participant's profile, it was recognized that the EU deserves praise for having acted in solidarity during the management of the Covid-19 crisis, and also for helping third countries to gain access to the vaccine. Participants attributed this to the dominance of the EU's large states in making important decisions at a time when they would have reacted more decisively, and also to explicit recognition of mistakes made with the financial crisis. The response to the crisis arising from the Covid-19 pandemic is therefore perceived as more supportive and, precisely for this reason, it was suggested that maybe a better communication campaign might be needed to explain what the EU is doing.

However, and despite the context, neither the word "sustainability" nor the debate on climate change and environmental crises appeared spontaneously among the participants when they were asked for a first image, idea or concept related to the EU. This absence of identification between the EU and climate-related issues could be interpreted as a signal to European institutions that citizens may not yet assign to the EU the leadership in climate issues that the European Commission's Green Agenda for the coming years hopes to consolidate.

"The EU is a guarantee of peace but it lacks operability. It needs to be more agile."

"(The EU) is a source of peace for those inside. For those who are outside, it is not."

For older participants, stability is one of the concepts most associated with the EU. The Union is peace and economic liberalism. It is the framework that has provided well-being and peace and it has done so with remarkable success within its borders, although its neighbouring states have not always been either stable or prosperous. The EU is a source of economic and financial strength, and democratic values. However, there is also a perception that the ability to export these conditions outside the continent has been low or non-existent.

Participants were asked if, today, the peace discourse, as conveyed by the European Union—conceived as a contribution to prosperity and wealth creation for its inhabitants in the last 64 years—is still sufficient as a legitimizing narrative of the European project. Mobilized participants aged under 30 replied that "the absence of war is not enough to justify the existence of the EU" if other elements of violence such as inequality, racism, gender violence, or threats deriving from climate change persist. In addition, some participants also associated the EU with concepts such as inequality, especially between countries. Accordingly, some participants,

especially young people, demanded—as an alternative and/or complement to economic liberalism—more social justice as an ideal to which the EU should aspire, considering that the EU is far from achieving this goal at present.

However, it was also lamented that the EU's role as a global player is less prominent than it should theoretically be. This fact was attributed by some mobilized young citizens to the lack of a European army that could defend the EU's interests around the world.

Nevertheless, at the end of the debate, when participants were asked to identify positive narratives about the European Union, the story of peace was clearly superseded by strong impressions of mobility and a new conception of the European space, especially among the younger generations. The success stories that were most repeated by participants and the easiest elements to identify with the Union were mainly concerned with presenting the EU as an opportunity for free movement, labour and student mobility, and the euro. Hence, both the group of those aged under 30 and that of those aged between 30 and 65 considered that, while the peace offered by the EU is the necessary basis for building a common project, other elements such as the Erasmus Programme, shared university degrees, or the facility of moving within the EU are steps forward in quality. Nevertheless, citizens demand even more from the EU.

There was strong emphasis on the idea that any political decision and action taken by the Union should be accompanied by communication and transparency. At the same time, there was almost total ignorance among participants about the possibilities of accessing most of the decisions and documents, which are public. Similarly, non-mobilized citizens, regardless of age or gender, claimed to know that the EU legislates on matters of daily impact although they do not know which.

For many participants, the EU is also synonymous with consensus. But, whether mobilized or non-mobilized, they concurred in concluding that not all consensus is necessarily positive. The mobilized participants lamented the difficulties involved in reaching consensus, while non-mobilized participants pointed out that the idea of consensus somehow undermines sovereignty of member states both individually and of the Union as a whole if it is to move forward and be more ambitious in areas where unanimity is needed and where it still applies.

"I don't have the feeling that there is disinformation about the EU but, rather, a lack of trust in the media in general."

"The EU cannot indulge in frivolity of communication."

The debate on the importance of communication was the liveliest in both focus groups. In general, participants of all ages expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of the traditional media and the information they receive about the EU. "I find it very difficult to rely on the news", admitted one of the non-mobilized young participants. A non-mobilized woman over the age of 65 explained that, from her point of view, the nature of information about the EU had evolved as it moved towards increasingly political integration. In her opinion, the information received from the EU 20 years ago referred to directives and regulations that affected the daily lives of citizens while, nowadays, the EU is engaged in "high politics" and, in her opinion, this distances it from citizenship. This statement opened the debate on what the EU should do. Is it worth pursuing a political union or should the EU focus on the things it knows how to do which is mainly systematizing and standardizing the regulatory frameworks of its member states? Participants' views on this were divided with no differences in age, gender, or between mobilized and non-mobilized citizens.

However, there is a tacit recognition of citizens' responsibility to find out about the EU, as most admit that they wait for information to reach them rather than looking for it. There are differences between the sources of information used by those aged under 30 and by some members of the cohort aged between 30 and 65, and those used by the rest of the latter cohort and that of people aged over 65. The former group are decreasingly using traditional media and turning more to social and digital media, while the latter still use traditional media. However, they reiterate that one of the problems with the EU's information deficit is the lack of general international information provided by the media. In addition, a mobilized citizen lamented that citizens trying to find out what is happening in the EU are consuming "the version of the events favouring the interests of each capital" instead of a unified account of Union's reality. A mobilized citizen over the age of 65 expressed the view that the EU "needs to be more active and less reactive" when explaining itself.

Analysis of the media reality was closely linked with the perception of a loss of credibility. According to the non-mobilized citizens, political representatives and the EU in general have lost credibility over the years. There is a persistent view in Spain that to pursue a career in the European institutions is to "retire", and it was argued that the images of a half-empty European Parliament affect the perception of this institution and generate apathy towards the EU. To overcome this, EU awareness-raising campaigns are called for, so that citizens can both understand the debates and learn how the EU works (a petition that was supported by both mobilized and non-mobilized citizens). On the other hand, there are discrepancies between participants when it comes to making the EU responsible for better provision of information and improved institutional dissemination because, according to the mobilized group,

this information already exists and EU citizens should be more active in seeking to obtain it.

Regardless of their profile, participants stated that they are aware of the existence of the phenomenon of disinformation and the infodemic that has accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic. However, they failed to identify possible sources of disinformation and the geopolitical motives behind them, although they said that the media and political representatives who spread disinformation should be held accountable.

Most non-mobilized citizens acknowledged that they are mostly informed through a single channel of information, even while claiming that journalism has little credibility. They consider that the media are as polarized as the society, and that the whirlwind of immediacy prevents them from checking sources. The discussion ended with some participants appealing to individual responsibility to check facts and to try to be properly informed. There is an "individual responsibility to create your own speech", claimed a woman in the group of people aged between 30 and 65.

Regardless of gender, age, and mobilization status, participants know that a polarized society is an easy victim of disinformation. They see the need for public responsibility with regard to information and also that of the media when acting as intermediaries. While it is true that participants admitted to not knowing how to combat disinformation, they believe in education and fostering a critical mind to be able to identify it. Yet they all acknowledge that they look at the information they receive differently depending on the source.

"I am very sceptical about politicians in my own country. How could I talk to 'Europe'?"

"I would distinguish between Euroscepticism and the desire to change the EU."

When asked to formulate demands to contribute to strengthening the legitimacy of the European project, citizens presented a wide range of ideas and proposals with a notable social character: "fiscal equality so that there are not first- and second-class countries"; "efforts to end poverty and social exclusion"; "stop seeing the migration crisis as a problem and see it as a human rights issue"; "intolerance cannot be tolerated"; "do not underestimate what is happening in Poland and Hungary"; "making everyone feel part of the EU to reduce identity politics"; "better inclusion of young people in policy-making processes", etcetera.

Without clear distinctions of age, gender, or degree of mobilization, focus group participants indirectly mentioned the debate around the European demos in line with the identity debates that abound in the global market of ideas. There was consensus on the difficulty the EU has to legitimate itself without building a European identity. Some participants went so far as to say that they did not feel they belonged to the European Union, while others, without any significant differences between profiles, did identify as Europeans. However, there was no consensus on what this European identity should look like, or according to what references, or on what bases it should be built. Some participants pointed out that perhaps the foundations of this European identity under construction could be based on the experience of the joint purchase of vaccines, where it has been shown that "by acting together we are stronger". In any case, this identity is yet to be built and there are doubts as to whether it can really materialize.

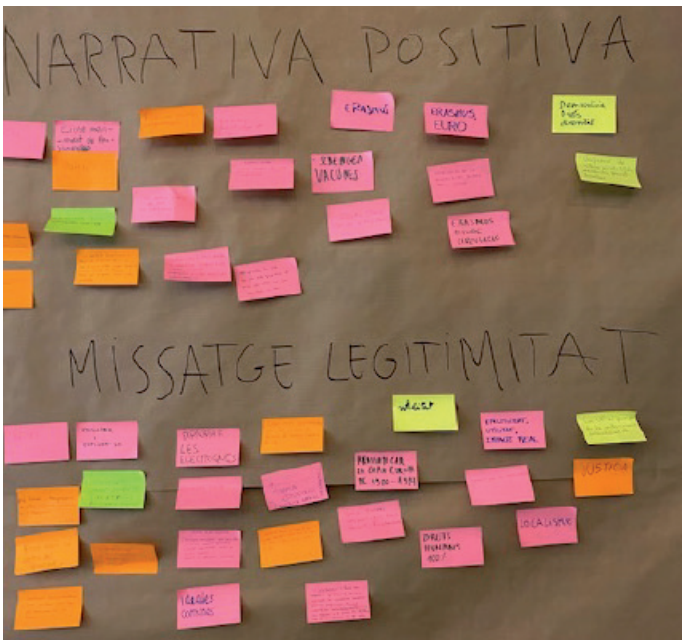
When participants were asked if they believe that Spain's voice counts within the EU and what they would say if they had the chance to be face-to-face with policy makers, many showed some scepticism while the most mobilized citizens expressed the conviction that the North-South divide persists in the European Union. In this regard, France and Germany were identified as the states that have a real influence in the EU. On the other hand, messages to political leaders translated, above all, into demands for honesty; a willingness to work for the general interest; criticisms of corruption; and a demand for applying treaties correctly if some member states attempt to violate European values. Equality and social justice and an effort to integrate migrants and refugees were also demanded. In short, it was said that political decision-makers, European and national, should "come out of the bubble". One scenario in which these participants could articulate their demands is, of course, the Conference on the Future of Europe but only 21.6% of the participants were aware, at the time, of the existence and implementation of the Conference. However, participants agreed on the need to take European debates to national and local levels.

The participants acknowledged that Euroscepticism is a minority view in Spanish society and claimed that any criticisms should be understood as a desire to improve the EU. Collective memory, especially of the older participants, who value the role played by the European Union in the modernization of Spain, weighs heavily in this debate. In fact, the mobilized participants also advocated strengthening the European Parliament's role in the event that the states ceded more sovereignty to the EU, but this reinforcement should be accompanied by better accountability.

The two focus groups were an exercise in direct listening to the public, an opportunity to identify positive narratives and proposals that could strengthen the EU's legitimacy vis-à-vis its citizens. In addition to the need to explain itself better, it is demanded that the European Union should take more decisive action in the fields of sustainability and common fiscality, as well as in producing a positive

narrative around policies to combat climate change, which would consolidate the EU as a beacon, both for Europeans and for the rest of the world. More equality between member states and promotion of common education policies are also called for to reinforce the idea of a shared identity but, at the same time, strengthening the local dimension of the project, so primary identities are not lost or replaced. "We want them to make us feel involved," says a woman aged under 30. In CIDOB's hall, dozens of colourful Post-it Notes form a mural of proposals, which emerged from the debate to attest to this will.

What is the European Union? (ideas and concepts)

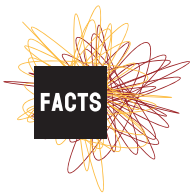




Istituto Affari Internazionali

FACTS – Real Information for a Brighter Future

by Federico Castiglioni



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
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ABSTRACT

FACTS (From Alternative Narratives to Citizens' True EU Stories) is a project addressed to European citizens and aimed at involving them directly in the recognition of fake or biased news about the European Union. The project's chief objective is to survey public opinion, gather praise and criticism surrounding EU policies or institutions, and detect the role that fake news plays in shaping these perceptions. The Istituto Affari Internazionali hosted two FACTS roundtables, involving roughly 50 citizens of different genders and ages. According to the project guidelines, the participants were balanced between those who were politically engaged and disengaged, more and less informed, in order to achieve a selection that was as representative as possible of Italian society.

Public opinion | European Union | Italian European policy | Euroscepticism

keywords

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FACTS – Real Information for a Brighter Future

by Federico Castiglioni*

Introduction

The fabrication of news and misrepresentation of reality is hardly a novelty in the world political landscape. For centuries such false narratives have been termed "propaganda" and, even today, this kind of misrepresentation is a distinctive mark of many regimes. Ranks of politicians across all the continents and latitudes exploited this biased source of information to master the political discourse, often pandering to basic emotional instincts to turn the political tide in their favour. Arguably, the liberal democracy was the first system of governance in human history to restrain this abuse of power (and trust) over the public opinion. The first correctives that the liberals put in place to curb the unduly influence of governments were the separation of powers and the pluralism of sources. In this new institutional frame, many actors were allowed to spread information besides the State media. Such actors could include agency presses close to the opposition or even independent journals, and the veracity of their reports ultimately lay in the evidence they provided to support their claims. Ideally, a liberal government had to staunchly defend the independence of the media and resist the temptation to interfere. The second pillar of this liberal system – coming as a natural completion of the first – was the singular accountability of all stakeholders involved in the process. This accountability smoothed the democratic dialogue and eradicated unplausible realities, thus narrowing the range between facts and opinions. Ordinarily, this fact checking would have been ethically rooted and would come naturally to an end when there was a clear misinterpretation of truth, but on occasion specific laws or set of rules were garrisoned to protect groups and individuals from defamation. Bound together, the two pillars of pluralism and accountability kept democracy and freedom in balance, focusing the debate more on the interpretation of reality than on its substance.

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Today, this liberal system of information is under pressure. On the one side, many governments channel their national community sentiment in directions that comply with their agenda, showing a worrying tendency towards interference. On the other side, the main actors providing information (namely social media and other online agents) are increasingly unaccountable for their actions, whether they decide to give or deny access to their platforms. It is in fact the very nature of contemporary (dis)information, almost undistinguishable from individual opinions shared with a broader community, that gives rise to most of the confusion that our societies are currently witnessing. Among the victims of this puzzling system of communication are some national institutions (e.g., the judicial power) and many supranational organisms, such as the UN and the European Union. The EU has been targeted by defamation campaigns since the economic crisis of 2008, when a number of responsibilities associated with the financial mismanagement of international funds and national budgets were ascribed to European faults. Since then, the EU has been weakened by the departure of the UK and flustered by other internal disputes, nearly resulting in a collapse of the common currency. Every attempt to invert this trend needs to retrace the origin of this political turmoil and thus face the sensitive matter of pluralism and its relationship with what is dubbed "fake news". Against this complicated picture, FACTS is a project designed to spot the source of contemporary information regarding the European Union by surveying heterogenous groups of citizens and listening to their opinions. The originality of this project rests in its bottom-up methodology which invites policy makers to audit common citizens and refrain from easy judgements or solutions. The investigation concerns both the structure of contemporary information and its outcome and could offer a significant contribution to the ongoing debate on an overall reform of social media.

IAI roundtables

Paradoxically, the present time is an age marked by global interconnections as well as local or microlocal dynamics; in this framework the domestic debate, either national or sub-national, is widely considered by both citizens and national politicians more important than any international issue. However, this internal preference does not imply that each national bubble is secluded from the others or that there is an absence of local offshoots for global issues. Rather, what is demonstrated is a national filter sorting out international topics, understandable if we consider the different fallouts that the same problem could have on different territories.[1] FACTS moves along the lines of this public discourse, framing European topics according to a national perspective. IAI is the project's partner responsible for Italy, a country where the wind of Euroscepticism has blown strongly in the past years. The Institute organised two roundtables involving more than 50 citizens of varying age, gender and profession. The two events – each attended by

[1] Barbara Pfetsch, "Agents of Transnational Debate Across Europe. The Press in Emerging European Public Sphere", in *Javnost - The Public*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2008), p. 21-40.

25 citizens – were organised online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and used the Zoom platform. In order to ease the conversation, make the participants feel more comfortable and better manage the debate, each roundtable was divided into sub-roundtables where 5 or 6 attendees discussed a set of proposed topics. IAI appointed a trusted facilitator for every sub-roundtable. The topics submitted to the citizens concerned mainly: perceptions toward the European institutions and the process of European integration; familiarity with EU politics and the related agenda; and recognition of fake news about the EU or its policies. At the end of these mini-sessions, the facilitators gathered the participants' opinions, summarising the main points of discussion. The same questions were then repeated in the course of the plenary meeting. Each group, represented by a spokesperson, contributed to the plenary advancing the viewpoint of his/her subgroup on the submitted topics, and in so doing enriching the exchange.

Remarkably, both the roundtables, organised with different citizens and several months apart, touched on the same points and highlighted the same problems. First of all, the organisers acknowledged a significative difference in perception between younger and older people. As one of the participants underlined, the new generations were born in a socio-cultural environment "deeply influenced by the presence of Europe in their lives", and this presence was felt in many fields. From a political perspective, a visible impact of the EU is the constant mentioning of Europe-related topics in media headlines, and likewise the growing notoriety of some institutions such as the ECB or the Commission. The older citizens seemed less familiar with this recurring appearance of European names and were more inclined to feel it as an innovation (either positive or negative). Another divergence was spotted in conceptions of travel and leisure, as well as in the familiarity with other EU cultures and languages. Unsurprisingly, the younger attendees stressed the importance of the Erasmus programme and the great opportunities offered by a better knowledge of other European countries, while the over-65 group didn't share the same enthusiasm. Similarly, the political opinions expressed regarding both the EU's achievements and the Union's future seemed to mirror the age divide. In this regard, the organisers and the facilitators noticed on the one hand an insufficient proclivity among the younger participants to express strong opinions during the discussion, and on the other a better critical attitude developed by the elders. The lack of assertiveness on the part of the young participants was balanced by a stronger belief in their stance (i.e., the role of the EU in assuring peace and softening conflicts), whereas those who were more critical prefaced their statements with doubtful openings (i.e., "if" – "I wonder" – "probably"). With regard to the participants' knowledge, there was not a great difference according to age classes but rather between those who were educated and engaged and those who remained distant from politics. In addition, no difference of attitude or opinions along gender lines was observed. During the first roundtable, some participants lamented also a global disconnect for small Italian towns and their struggle to keep up with the EU debate, but the second meeting neglected to comment on this aspect.

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Main findings

In the course of the two roundtables there surfaced a common belief, shared by the vast majority of the attendees, that in Italy the debate around European topics is usually swallow and often biased. The unanimous solution offered was the rolling out of a campaign of information concerning European policies, whose goal would be to educate citizens (and thus the electorate) on the complicated structure of the EU policy-making process. A better education is also, according to the participants, the key to being able to detect and therefore debunk fake news and misleading information. As for the sources of such fake news, all the attendees agreed on the role of social media in its spread, sometimes with the tacit support of TV commentators, journals or other broadcasters. In the words of a plenary panellist, the traditional media would just echo such misleading information, reflecting an inaccurate portrayal of reality. Some participants advanced the hypothesis that this disinformation is caused not just by the ignorance of many journalists, but even determined by hidden political purposes. On the flip side of this mistrust toward the official and unofficial media there is a strong perceived reliability of the official channels of communication (websites, official statements, etc.).

As was foreseeable, a major divergence of opinions was detected on hot political issues regarding migration and economic matters. Although not central in the IAI's questionnaire, these topics were naturally raised during the debate and were connected with the perception of Europe. Tellingly, the conversation on the economy was entangled with the symbols that most identify the EU project; many participants contended that it is the common currency that is the supreme symbol of integration, and only a minority stated a feeling for the EU flag. This lack of symbols was not perceived as an obstacle by the most euro-enthusiastic, whereas the Eurosceptics presented it as an example of cold bureaucratic integration. Some citizens harshly criticised the common currency, contending that its creation was devised by the commercial banks as main beneficiaries of the integration process. The debate on migration was by contrast spurred by the question of the role of the European Union in assuring peace and prosperity for its members. In this regard, all participants seemed to accept that the EU is determinant in fostering peace inside its borders, although they wondered if this accomplishment is equally successful for its neighbours and the associated countries. All of these citizens felt that the current waves of migration are somehow an EU failure and a signal of international instability, but they were deeply divided about ways to tackle the problem.

Conclusions

Even though the debate was channelled around the "fake news" issue, and therefore in line with the IAI's initial setting, it soon translated into a political exchange about the project of European integration and its future. A common consensus was found by the groups' representatives and spokespersons concerning the next

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steps ahead, which should involve aspects of security and defence. Given the focus of this meeting, security was particularly emphasised, especially embracing the digital dimension. In this regard, the participants mentioned possible threats coming from Russia and China and their interest in destabilisation of the EU and/or its member states, and proposed a common European strategy to deter cyber-attacks as a solution. By contrast, different views emerged about a possible institutional change. For many participants, the EU is like an unfinished puzzle or a half-done cathedral, marvellous but incomplete. According to others, the common institutions have already assumed a clear and visible shape – connotated by binding laws and intergovernmentalism – and this configuration could well be definitive. For these participants, there is no sign that the nature of the EU will be changing in the near future, nor indications suggesting that the citizens want (or ever wanted) something different, and thus there is nothing "unfinished". In other words, for these citizens the creation of a "European Federation" is not a natural outcome of this Union but just a path that some would advocate for.

In conclusion, the plenary roundtable raised a fundamental question, revolving around Euroscepticism and its distinctive character. Even on this issue different viewpoints were registered. Some contended that Euroscepticism as such does not exist, being a common word exploited for political ends whose significance remains foggy. A Eurosceptic person could be someone who just doesn't agree with the Commission's guidelines, a political party against further European integration, or whoever questions the current state of the Union. In this sense, those who oppose the existence of a European identity and those standing for a deeper integration could be equally dubbed "Eurosceptics". Other participants strongly disagreed with this stance, affirming that the only true Euroscepticism is the one advanced by nationalist political parties and targeting the EU for any failure. These actors would defy any kind of supranational integration and thus their positions are intertwined with nationalist claims. Although controversial, this last topic excellently summarised the prolific exchange that came out of the IAI's roundtables, closing the gap between a specialist dialogue often believed distant from common citizens and the real opinions of the latter, which often coincided more than expected with the current institutional debate.

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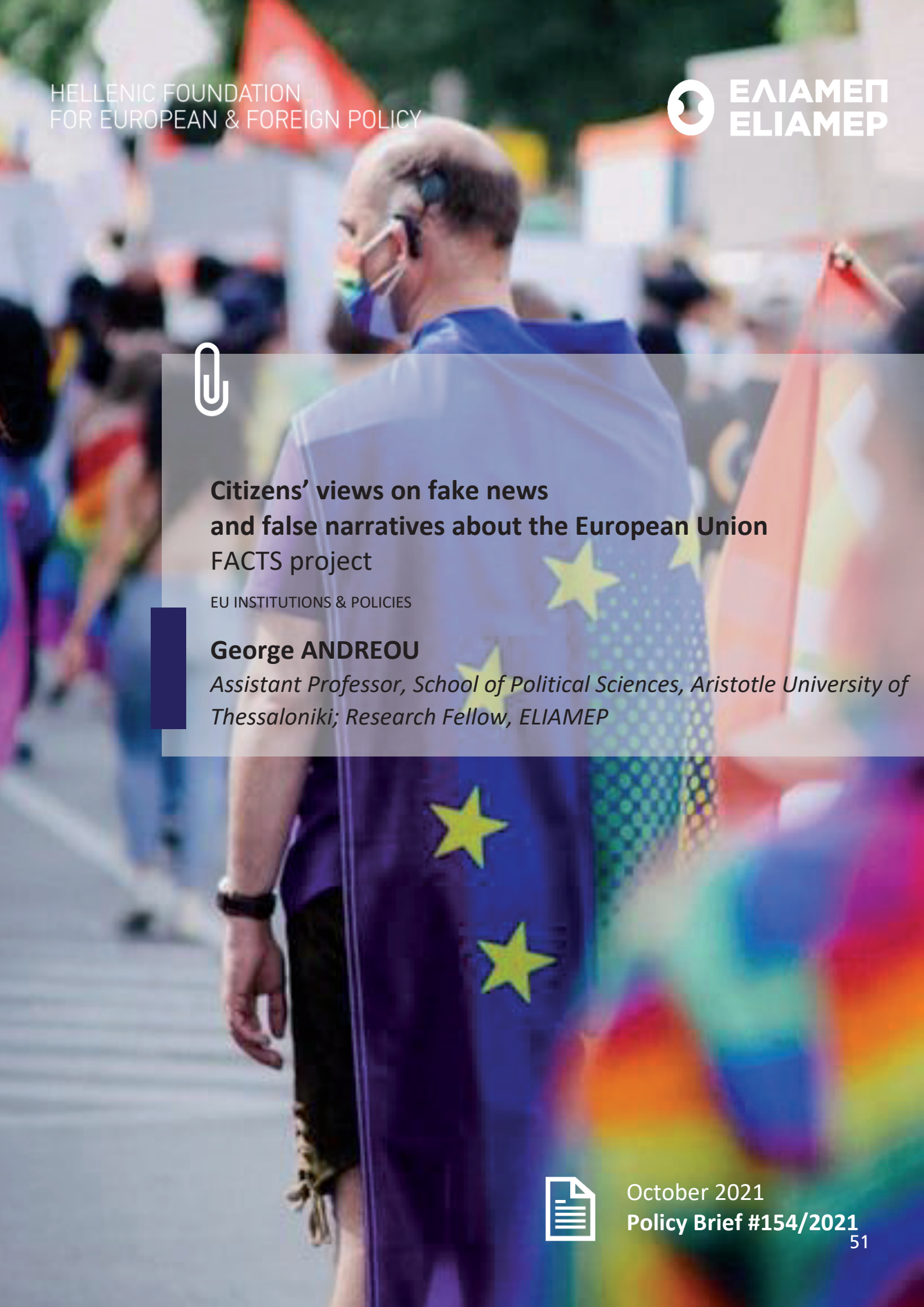
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Citizens' views on fake news and false narratives about the European Union

FACTS project

EU INSTITUTIONS & POLICIES

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Citizens' views on fake news and false narratives about the European Union

FACTS project

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Summary

- There is more unison than discrepancy in Greek citizens' perceptions regarding the European Union.
- National identity continues to shape and frame the way most Greeks perceive the EU, interpret its activities, and evaluate its role.
- Participants have a positive image of the EU. However, there is a widespread feeling of disappointment towards an EU that "does not function on equal terms for all".
- The general public lacks basic knowledge about the EU and what it stands for, about the respective roles of the Union and its member states, as well as about the ways EU and national officials engage in policy-making.
- Greeks are very vulnerable to disinformation about the EU, as relevant and reliable information is scarce in the domestic media.
- Many mobilized citizens feel that information from EU sources is not addressed to all, but only to those who have a strong personal and/or professional motivation.
- Non-mobilized citizens appear quite distant from information regarding the EU.
- Lack of solidarity between member states breeds apathy and a lack of interest in the EU among EU citizens.
- The most effective strategy against disinformation is improving communication between the EU and its citizens, and cultivating trust.

Introduction

In June and July 2021, ELIAMEP organized two citizens' forums in Greece in the context of the *FACTS - From Alternative Narratives to Citizens True EU Stories* project. FACTS aims to identify the existing rumours, false narratives or fake news about the European Union circulating among mobilized and non-mobilized citizens, and to ascertain whether these rumours directly hinder the idea of acquiring a European citizenship. It also seeks to contrast such narratives with the solidity of the traditional narrative of peace and prosperity that it is still viewed as the main achievement of the EU. We will test how well this narrative has stood the test of time, and whether a) it is still a powerful mobilizing factor; and b) mobilized and non-mobilized citizens can, and actually do, think of a different narrative. The project will also compare the perspectives of different citizens from different member states in order to locate possible convergences and divergences, explore their causes and origins, and assess their significance.

"National identity continues to shape and frame the way participants perceive the European Union."

During the two abovementioned events, ELIAMEP researchers had the opportunity to listen to citizens' reflections with regards to their perception of the successes and failures of the European project. Discussions were interactive, encouraging dialogue among participants, and were structured around three thematic pillars: a) citizens' understanding of the European Union and its role; b) citizens' views on information sources and fake news about the EU; and c) citizens' expectations towards EU and national officials. This report summarizes the main conclusions drawn from the minutes of the two citizens' forums.

Citizens' perceptions of the European Union

National identity continues to shape and frame the way participants perceive the European Union, interpret its activities, and evaluate its role. Firstly, the "Us and Them" mentality is dominant, as all participants view "Europe" and "the European Union" as something distinct from "Greece" and "Greeks". Moreover, during the discussion of the EU's performance in different policy areas, participants focused on the EU's role in relation to Greece and the Greeks – and not in relation to individual citizens or other societal groups and organizations.

"…it was argued that 'the EU is not a real union, because there are no common interests, objectives, equality, polyphony or solidarity'."

In general, participants have a positive image of the European union. The EU has been associated with the idea of "mutual aid, collaboration, support, solidarity in good and bad times", "a sense of safety, security and freedom", "a link between countries that share common values", "feeling as citizen of a wider union", but also "economic support". Some mobilized citizens also associate the EU with cross-border mobility and travelling, tourism, commerce, studies, cultural exchanges, and employment opportunities. At the same time, there was a widespread feeling of disappointment with the EU. Most participants spontaneously juxtaposed the above-mentioned "ideal" or "theoretical" image of a European Union with a more sober "reality" that is composed of various "failures". Many feel that the EU does not function on the basis of equality and is, in fact, divided between the powerful and the powerless, the North and the South, while it is guided by politics and financial interests. In fact, the EU's *lack of solidarity* with its weaker member states was identified as its most serious failure to date. More specifically, it was noted that the EU tolerates and/or perpetuates economic and political inequalities between its member states; there were also references to a two-speed or multiple-speed Europe, with Germany in the centre and Greece and the other Southern member states on the periphery. Moreover, it was argued that, "the EU is not a real union because there are no common interests, objectives, equality, polyphony or

solidarity"; Brexit was mentioned as one more example of EU failure. Still, several participants stressed the positive aspects of the EU and Greece's participation in it; open borders and EU funding have contributed to improvements in living standards, while openness and freedom in several sectors (i.e., commerce, travel, civilization, environment, human rights etc.) comprise positive elements for the European Union to build upon.

"…non-mobilized citizens focus more on the negative aspects of the EU-Greece relationship."

There is more unison than discrepancy in citizens' perceptions of the EU, regardless of demographics and mobilization. However, non-mobilized citizens focus more on the negative aspects of the EU-Greece relationship, and particularly on the negative impact of the Economic Adjustment Programmes of the last decade. On top of that, they tend to attach more importance to national identities, and to regard cultural differences as important obstacles to further integration in Europe. Mobilized citizens, on the other hand, appear to bring more balance to the discussion and to practice more self-criticism. Citizens living closer to Greece's Eastern border attach greater importance to the stance of the EU towards Turkey and irregular migration, arguing that the EU is not providing sufficient support to Greece on these two issues. Younger citizens appear more optimistic and open to discuss the positive aspects of the EU and how to build on them.

"Mobilized citizens, on the other hand, appear to bring more balance to the discussion and to practice more self-criticism."

Citizens' views on information sources and fake news about the EU

Participants shared the view that the general public lacks basic knowledge about the EU and what it stands for, about the role of the Union and the role of its member states, as well as about the role of EU and national officials in policy-making. It was argued that "misinformation and fake news are all around us, but they are very hard to identify"; participants exhibited a high degree of mistrust towards the more conventional channels of information (TV, radio and newspapers). The Greek media are considered manipulative and misinformative (and as even taking bribes from governments in order to portray the latter in a more favourable light). Most participants use the Internet as their main information source, taking advantage of any digital source available (e.g. FB newsfeed, newspaper titles, blogs, newspaper sites, FB users' comments, photos). Non-mobilized citizens tend to view the Internet as an independent and pluralistic source for information of every kind (EU news included), while mobilized citizens usually approach the Internet with greater caution and try more often to combine different information sources, including EU sites and non-Greek media. In fact, many mobilized citizens recognized that the inclusion of non-Greek sources is the key to less biased information.

"…the Greek public is very vulnerable to disinformation about the EU, as news and information about the EU and other member states is scarce in the Greek media."

Many participants claimed that the Greek public is very vulnerable to disinformation about the EU, as news and information about the EU and other member states is scarce in the Greek media. It was also mentioned that, over the last decade, the EU has appeared in the Greek news almost exclusively in connection with the economic crisis and the Economic Adjustment Programmes, a fact that has given increased impetus to anti-EU narratives. Mobilized citizens in particular pointed out that, more generally, the information flow about the EU is fragmented and "radial": each national public is informed about the issues that concern its own country (mostly through the filter of local media that serve the agenda of the given member state), while there is lack of general and cross-country information about EU affairs. Various EU sites and information sources do exist, but locating and visiting these sources regularly is a demanding process that requires a high level of effort and commitment. As a result, many mobilized citizens feel that information by EU sources is not addressed to all, but only to those who have a strong personal or professional motivation. Finally, a lack of access to information can also be a result of a low educational level (the language barrier being an important

"Various EU sites and information sources do exist, but locating and visiting these sources regularly is a demanding process that requires a high level of effort and commitment."

factor), low living standards, older age, and/or technological illiteracy. Non-mobilized citizens, on the other hand, appear quite distant from information regarding the EU. While they recognize that disinformation campaigns and fake news have become a big issue, they prefer to receive information about politics (and, occasionally, about the EU) from the Internet and via direct contacts with friends and acquaintances. On several occasions, the difficulty of filtering information about the EU, and/or the fear of disinformation, caused these citizens to become apathetic.

"…the most effective strategy against disinformation is to improve communication between the EU and its citizens and to cultivate the latter's trust of the former."

When the discussion shifted to the possible sources of disinformation, several participants argued that disinformation campaigns may be orchestrated by political parties or governments seeking to impact on public opinion and to promote their own agenda. It was mentioned that fake news spreads quickly, but does not last long. On the other hand, most participants emphasized that the most effective strategy against disinformation is to improve communication between the EU and its citizens and to cultivate the latter's trust of the former. More specifically, the need for developing official and two-way communication channels between public actors and citizens was stressed. Official EU information sources must become more direct, easy to access and comprehend, and user friendly; the official website of the European Union must become more accessible and integrated, and include more information about member state. In this context, a couple of participants promoted the idea of the EU broadcasting and disseminating its own official TV news bulletin on a daily basis. As mobilized participants argued, national offices of the European Parliament should become more active, disseminating information about the EU in every European language and establishing forums where MEPs and citizens can debate. In this context, positive experiences of EU activity - i.e. freedom of transportation, travelling and commerce, education programmes (ERASMUS), support for agriculture, the environmental and green transition initiatives, cultural exchanges, EU-funded development programmes – could be used as building blocks for developing a more positive image of the EU and, consequently, for cultivating more positive expectations on the part of EU citizens. Finally, the EU must promote its actions and values more actively through the national educational systems.

"There is a strong belief that the EU institutions are led by a "directorate" of the most powerful member states, with Germany at the helm."

Citizens' expectations of national and EU officials

There is a strong belief that the EU institutions are led by a "directorate" of the most powerful member states, with Germany at the helm. Drawing on their experiences of the last decade, most participants assume that the stronger EU countries impose their preferences on the weaker, and that policy-making in Greece (and every country on the European "periphery") is therefore dictated by the interests of the "Brussels directorate", leaving national voices unheard. The role of national representatives in the EU is not well understood, especially by non-mobilized citizens; there is a widespread impression that they are "living the good life in Brussels", while most participants are unsure whether they act in the interests of their country and/or seek to promote the interests of the Union as a whole. Following on from the above, participants argued that they need more information about the internal workings of the EU and its different organs. At the same time, they are highly critical of the role of the officials who represent Greece in the EU, stressing that they could have had a greater impact if they had taken their role more seriously and worked harder. Citizens also demand clarity and ask that their national representatives improve their performance as mediators between Greece and the EU, ensuring that: a) Greek national concerns are heard in Europe; b) Greek citizens are informed about what happens in the EU; and c) new ideas and proposals developed in the EU are communicated effectively to the Greek public.

"…more "democracy in action" is needed at the European level through direct citizen access and participation in various activities."

When discussing the role of EU officials, mobilized citizens believe that, as long as the EU continues to fail to address inequalities and differences in living standards between member states, citizens of the weaker member states will remain apathetic and uninterested in EU matters: "The more bridges for equality are built, the more opportunities for citizen participation will be created". Moreover, it is argued that Members of the European Parliament do not have much power, and that it is therefore imperative that the latter is upgraded into an actual decision-making centre. On top of that, more "democracy in action" is needed at the European level through direct citizen access and participation in various activities (European Parliament elections, referenda, citizens' forums). The EU should also become more active is the fields of education and culture.



Facts and Fake News in European Narratives

Results from the research project FACTS

Paulina Fröhlich, Sophie Borkel, Christian Mieß | 1. November 2021

300 people from five European countries were interviewed about their image of the European Union. Among the interview participants in Germany, the peace narrative still takes hold, although inequalities in the distribution of wealth are strongly criticized. Concerns about the rule of law among eastern neighbors can be found, as well as concerns about 'too much Europe'. For the future, most wish for a Europe of justice.

In the pan-European research project FACTS, think tanks in five different countries conducted roundtable discussions with citizens. The aim was to find out what the citizens' image of the EU is: What do they associate with the EU? Is the European narrative of peace and prosperity still alive? Where do citizens get their information about the EU and have they ever encountered disinformation?

The 60 people who took part in the discussion rounds in Germany were selected on the basis of various categories such as age, gender, or place of residence. The selection criteria also included a self-assessment: do you actively inform yourself about political events and do you participate politically, or are you rather marginally interested in political events and do not participate politically? Only one question showed conspicuities along the lines of this attribution.

Peace achieved only internally, prosperity only for some.

Peace and prosperity are part of the founding mission of the European Union. It is not uncommon for the EU to be referred to as a "peace project". The clear majority of the participants in the discussion agreed when asked whether the EU has actually ensured peace and prosperity. Here one can speak of a successful European narrative.

Although the Union has ensured peace among its member countries, its success in contributing to peaceful conditions in other parts of the world has been qualified as being very modest. In some cases, conflicts or wars – such as the Bosnian war – are explicitly mentioned, but overall the fundamental achievement of peaceful coexistence is gratefully emphasized.

The ideal of peace and pacified living conditions, however, could not end at the borders of the EU. Universal values and goals of the EU must also be a mandate for it's external relations.

However, the participants find it more difficult to describe the goal of prosperity as being achieved than peace. Although they agree that the EU is to a large extent a prosperous community, they always point to the unequal distribution of prosperity. In particular, the difference between richer countries such as Germany and Central Eastern and South-Eastern Europe is emphasized at this point. Economic dissatisfaction (and inequality) is thought by some to be the main reason for Euroscepticism.

"When I stand at monuments or former battlefields, I am full of gratitude

for Europe's peace. But I also often travel in the Balkans and see extreme inequality along the borders. The further east or south, the less respected are Europeans."

"That [peace and prosperity] was, after all, always the founding story, which was unquestioned (...) in recent years, on the other hand, there's a counter-narrative that claims that the EU is not the solution, it's the problem. And that has to do with the fact (...) that different people and different regions have benefited to different degrees, from the overall prosperity."

Freedom of movement and rule of law: only with limitations.

Asked about their first associations with the European Union, the vast majority of participants reference freedom of movement, travel, and open borders as first associations. The Euro, bureaucracy, and a common system of values are mentioned by only a few. Many other associations (languages, diversity, ECB, flag, opportunities, tough processes, etc.) show that thoughts about Europe are very broad.

However, due to the Corona pandemic, the advantages of the EU – such as the freedom to travel and the cultural diversity – could not be experienced in the past years. Some participants emphasize that especially the situation of border controls and lack of freedom of movement reminds them of old unpleasant times.

The EU as a community of values also comes up frequently in the discussion rounds. Yet, some participants doubt whether the Union deserves to be associated with these values at all. For example, the treatment of refugees at the EU's external borders is mentioned as a point of criticism. Concerns about European values such as the rule of law and human rights also come up frequently. Every time this is the case, some protagonists for these concerns are clearly named: "Poland and Hungary". The critical situation is seen as a European challenge and not thought of

in a detached national way, as statements like this show:

"There are fields of activity where the EU as such does not really function that well. Let's go to the issue of human rights in Poland and in Hungary. "

"The values are clear. Actually, the concepts are too. But how that is filled with life, that is very questionable. Just look at Hungary and Poland, how they behave."

While the majority of participants believes that countries that abuse European values and rights should be sanctioned, a few caution that even countries like Germany would not abide by everything. Therefore, they should not always "point the finger at Poland."

Some would like to see the European Republic, while others still need basic information about the EU.

What is striking is that both, in all associations and in the formulated expectations for a future Union, that major crises are hardly mentioned. Neither the financial crisis nor the climate crisis seem to explicitly shape the current or the future view of the citizens on the image of the European Union. Certainly, the necessity of climate protection or the role of fiscal policies are discussed, but not to any significant extent.

Instead, different perspectives on the EU's ability to act and its claim to be able to act are discussed lively. While many participants would like to see a more active EU, others see European slowness as excessive. They would therefore like to see more national sovereignty. Exemplary of these discussions is the question about support for or rejection of the idea of striving for a European republic:

"Sure, a lot of time has been frittered away, but in my eyes it's still not too late. (...) One has to go and create some kind of visions and try to pursue them, so that one can achieve something at all. If I would say from the outset 'I can't do it,' that's not possible."

"I don't want to have a gigantic superstate. I want it [the EU] to work, and that's why, frankly, I'd like to say goodbye to unrealistic ideas. Which, after all, aims to have something like 400 or 450 million people living in a state at some point, where I ask myself: where's the democracy in that?"

Other expressed expectations of the EU include the desire to receive more information. Either the interview participants have the impression that the majority of the population is told far too little about the achievements of the EU, or they admit that they personally know too little to feel connected to the Union at all:

"My big problem is that I have the feeling that I don't really understand all these things. (...) Why do we need this resolution now? And what is difficult about it? And why is it important now that we decide this on a European level and not somehow on another level? (...) So I don't feel really mature as an EU citizen, because I don't really understand the phenomenon."

"Younger people have the internet, after all. But for older people, TV and newspapers are still very important sources. And since they are also taxpayers and voters, it is important that the EU shows 'We are doing something for you. We are thinking of you and you can count on us.'"

Furthermore, the topic of solidarity provides an occasion for lively exchanges in the groups, often discussed in a very exemplary way, based on the events during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. Other expectations of the EU are sometimes very

concrete – such as those for more laws against discrimination. In particular, it is discussed that the equality of women and men is still far from reaching a satisfactory level throughout Europe.

Information about the EU comes along, occasionally.

Asked about the sources from which the participants obtain their information about the EU, most of the people mention various media, but also private conversations as well as exchanges with co-workers. Strikingly, but unsurprisingly, it is the younger participants who tend to indicate social media and/or online media as their main sources of information.

Libraries, brochures, conferences, or information events are also mentioned occasionally. In addition to those mentioned, however, there are also people who emphasize that they do not inform themselves at all. Several people mention that they deliberately decided against having a television or newspaper subscription.

"I have a lot to do with France, so we sometimes talk about EU politics in general and also in the family circle."

"And then I always have Facebook, Instagram directly, always ready to call up.(...) because certain things are also easier for me to explain. So I find there are certain newspapers that are just very complicated and articles are also very pompously formulated that I think to myself okay, could it not have been conveyed more simply?"

"I also don't inform myself at all. And as I said, only when I'm traveling. I always see project signs where EU money is flowing in somewhere. Sorry, that's all I have to say about that."

Those participants who categorized themselves to be actively involved and politically informed, more often actively use podcasts, newsletters, and other information material (pull media) in addition to newspapers and television (push media) in order to form their opinions about the EU than those participants who describe themselves as more distant from politics. The latter tend to restrict themselves to television and media on the Internet and, if they are younger, to social media such as Instagram and especially Facebook.

What particularly stood out in this discussion was that most of the participants demonstrated a high level of media competence in that, regardless of which channels they used, they always critically scrutinized sources and compared them with second and third-party information. In isolated cases, the view on media content already appears skeptical and fundamentally distrustful.

> "So I already look at where the information comes from. For example, I wouldn't get information from the Bild newspaper, because I don't think it's serious."

> "I basically look at the news and see how controlled certain media are. But I also look at them critically."

Receptivity to fake news is explained in different ways.

Most participants are aware of disinformation. However, only after they have thought about it for a while. By far the most frequently cited source of fake news they are aware of is the television station Russia Today (RT). Participants describe it as increasingly difficult to identify fake news as such – especially when it occurs on social media.

They generally attribute more fake news to social media channels than to the print press or television stations, for example. Missing source citations radiate less

seriousness for them. Not all participants have already consciously encountered disinformation. If they have, they have encountered it among acquaintances or friends (links to dubious blogs or videos were forwarded via chat message) or they hear reports about fake news from media they trust.

The most common example here is fake news about the coronavirus. Participants in the discussion groups point out that they considered "obvious fake news," such as the claim that dairy products would protect against the virus, to be less dangerous than news whose truthfulness was harder to determine. Even before far-right social circles are suspected of fake news other countries were suspected of being the actors behind those.

> "It's difficult to say where the origin is. But I actually have the feeling that above all, I'll say, states perhaps have an interest in destabilizing the EU."

> "I noticed that very often somehow something comes from Russia Today, that is, from state broadcasters in the direction of Russia."

Furthermore, the attempts to explain why citizens tend to believe alternative narratives or fake news were very remarkable. There are clear differences here between those participants who actively inform themselves about political events and also participate politically and those who are interested in political events on the sidelines and also tend not to participate in general: While the former group tends to look for the reasons in socioeconomic factors (education, economic position, age), the latter group sees the reasons more in people's search for cohesion and solidarity. At the same time, supposedly non-mobilized citizens express great understanding for this way of receiving information. It was argued that, similar to a religious community, people were looking for security in a complex world.

> "Such beliefs [fake news] do not usually stand alone, and such people somewhere do not either. Subgroups, then form that spread such news and also believe in this news, and that also forms a group feeling, a sense of

belonging."

"I think that those in charge [in the media] pay more attention to profit than to enlightenment, and especially in media that are consumed by people with lower education and in poverty. That is, they have no education or less education and they are more vulnerable to misinformation. And that, above all, is very dangerous. In Media, for example, on private television, where there can be a lot of misinformation."

A narrative of justice.

The participants' concrete wishes for Europe are manifold. However, a striking frequency emerges in the desire for more justice and more specifically, a shared commitment to social policy issues. In the words of one participant, Europe should be a "home, based on solidarity".

Among the enumerations are, for example, the desire for joint efforts in the fight against poverty, youth unemployment, and more cohesion – especially between Western and Eastern Europe. After, as explained above, the narrative of peace and prosperity has carried for a long time, it could be assumed many people now wish for a narrative of justice.

"I do think that Europe desperately needs a narrative of justice. A narrative of an actor who wants to help ensure global justice, at least starts with that approach and with that imperative."

The desire for co-creation opportunities was also mentioned. A wide variety of people emphasized that they would like to see more formats like these roundtables, but also participatory tools from the European Union itself. The conference on the future of Europe was mentioned conspicuously seldom, which suggests that it is not

widely known among the participants.

In conclusion, it is noticeable that there is a great desire for exchange on European issues. Especially among those who have very rarely participated in comparable formats state that they know little about the topic but there is a great interest. The differences in the level of information about the European Union (its topics, functioning, institutions, and territories) are striking. However, the degree of information has little to do with sympathy or antipathy toward the EU.

The advantages of the Union that are perceived as particularly personal, such as the freedom to travel, could hardly be experienced recently due to the Corona restrictions. Here, there is certainly a great need to catch up in order to make the EU a positive experience again in everyday life. The topic, which nearly all participants articulated most clearly in the European framework is: justice. A big word, which the EU may only adopt as a big, new narrative if the results of this bold claim are also visible in everyday politics.

> "Progress can only be achieved through debate, and democracy means that people have to debate with each other and move forward. The only question is: How are the actors involved in this debate? And there I would agree: We are not involved enough. If we had more of a voice, it would move forward differently."

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WiseEuropa

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FACTS project – results of two focus groups meetings

WiseEuropa is one of the partners of the project FACTS[1] , co-financed by the European Union within the framework of the Europe for Citizens programme. Its aim is to analyze current narratives, fake news and citizens' perception of the European Union. Two focus groups took place on 20th and 22nd of July during which the participants shared their thoughts on the above mentioned topics.

The majority of associations with the European Union are positive. Most of the participants associate the European Union itself with the opening of development perspectives for the member country. The prevailing conviction is that without this community, Poland would not be at the same stage of economic and social development today.

In this context, participants of the focus groups mentioned mainly financial help in various economic and social areas and development in general. Various investments in Poland's infrastructure, especially roads, freeways, bicycle paths, sports facilities for children, or building renovations, were often given as examples. They feel that such facilities are being built very quickly and effectively. In addition, the EU funds are subject to strict control, which ensures that the money is spent as intended.

Apart from that, the participants paid attention to funding in the academic and scientific lifee. Thanks to grants from the EU, students can take part in international exchanges (e.g. Erasmus). This is a great opportunity to acquire knowledge at renowned universities, gain new life experiences and learn about other cultures. In addition, European funds finance a variety of additional activities and scholarships for students and trainings for adults, helping them, for example, to acquire skills and certificates necessary for a particular profession.

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This development also has an economic dimension. Participants mentioned e.g. farmers in this respect – they also noticed that farmers with large farms benefit most, while those with smaller farms do not receive as much support from the EU. Financial aid from the EU is also associated with an opportunity for young people, because thanks to the EU smaller entrepreneurs who often need financial support to start up their business also receive aid.

The European Union is first of all a community - opening to other nationalities, a common strong currency which is the Euro, etc. In addition, accession to the EU is seen as a kind of ennoblement, distinction, because not everyone can be in this community. It was also emphasized that the EU puts ecology on an important place and sets standards in this area. For participants, the European Union is also a freedom, with its many dimensions - freedom of trade and economic circulation (many people associated the beginning of the very concept of the European Union with a community in trade), freedom of movement without the need for a passport, membership in the Schengen area, etc. Participants greatly appreciated the simplified procedures in taking up employment outside Poland. It was also pointed out that since joining the European Union it has been easier for Polish citizens to take up specialized, better paid jobs. It is also easier to receive opportunity for internships in foreign companies. The above mentioned positive associations with the European Union are seen as its strengths. It influences broadly understood development and increase of living standards in Poland. Security is also a strong point of the Union. Participants noted that although the Union does not have its own army, they believe that being a part of a certain collective provides security. Mutual assistance of member states in crises and natural disasters is also important. The recent natural disasters in the Czech Republic and Germany were set as examples, where other European countries provided support to those countries affected by natural disasters. The European Union also cares about important values - it stands watch the human rights and observes democratic values. Since Poland became the member state of the European Union, its importance in the international arena has increased and Poles are perceived differently and better by inhabitants of other member states. This concerns not only citizens but also Polish export products. Positive, personal experiences with the European Union largely coincide with the spontaneous associations and strengths of the EU that were presented earlier. These experiences are based primarily on the freedom of movement (both for tourism and business purposes) and the daily use of modernized infrastructure, among other things. The European Union has also influenced the development and establishment of e.g. more photovoltaic farms and the increase in the use of renewable energy sources.

Although participants had mostly positive associations with the EU, there were also some negative ones. These include, above all, bureaucracy and all kinds of rigid norms concerning, for example, agriculture. Excessive formalities, exceptional scrupulosity and rigid evaluations of e.g. projects are discouraging. The most frequently mentioned weakness of the

European Union by most participants (both mobilized and non-mobilized) is its bureaucracy. Respondents noticed it mainly in the process of submitting grant applications on their own and during their participation in various projects financed or co-financed from European funds. The number of documents necessary to be filled in and rigid time frames for their submission often discouraged participants from taking advantage of the programmes offered by the EU. Some regulations are also too complicated, unclearly formulated and may lead to errors. The downside of joining the community is for some participants (especially the non-mobilized) a partial loss of sovereignty. They believe that in such situation Poland is politically dependent on an organization that is above the state. Some participants also believe that the European Union is poorly handling the influx of immigrants into member states, the lack of a coherent policy on accepting refugees was highlighted. Many non-mobilized participants pointed out that decisions made by the EU are not always adapted to local circumstances. Unification was shown as a value and an advantage of the EU, but on the other hand participants feel that before introducing different kinds of laws or regulations there should be a detailed analysis to show whether this is possible in each country. Focus groups participants also have a feeling that they are not quite on an equal footing with the citizens of other EU countries. The main differences here are finances and wages. The possibility of working abroad is also associated with the outflow of specialists from various industries to foreign countries.

The participants agreed with the statement that the European Union is a guarantor of peace - a possible external aggressor may be afraid of assistance provided to each other by the community countries. It was also stressed out that being aware that we belong to some kind of community gives a sense of security and a certain psychological comfort. However, the participants are aware that the security provided by this community does not have a military dimension and concerns primarily the internal relations of the member states. The responsibility for external and military support is primarily attributed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

As for the guarantee of prosperity, the vast majority of workshop participants believe that the EU is able to provide it. Since Poland joined the European community, they noticed the improved living conditions, easier and wider access to products, and cooperation between nations (e.g. in the context of pandemics). What should be also mentioned is a huge development and leveling of opportunities. A higher standard of living can be seen in many Polish towns and villages - it is not only about the improvement of roads, modernization of infrastructure or financial support for business, but also about the development of society, broadening of minds.

The mobilized participants emphasize that unity and solidarity are the basic principles of the European Union. However, unity does not mean uniformity, which allows the member

states to retain a certain amount of individuality. On the main and most important issues, the Union has similar opinions and acts together. On the other hand, the non-mobilized participants were somewhat more critical of EU unity and solidarity. They believe that it is impossible to talk about these values when each country is primarily concerned with its own interests and fights for money. Unity and solidarity are rather seen as slogans that are not trusted and do not have a bearing on practice. In their opinion, this is influenced not only by struggles for influence and finances, but also by cultural differences between nations and the past. Nevertheless, both groups (mobilized and non-mobilized) gave similar examples of unity (e.g., position on the situation in Ukraine, fight against COVID-19) and lack of it in the European Union (e.g., refugee relocation issue, Nord Stream 2).

One of the main sources of information about the European Union (both for mobilized and non-mobilized citizens) is the Internet - they mainly use various types of information services and web portals, social media, check through the Internet search engine, enter the websites of institutions, check out the formal sources. The following sites were also mentioned: www.reddit.com, www.discord.com, www.pap.pl, www.europa.eu. Other media, which play a large role in obtaining information, are mainly television (domestic and foreign) and the press. Other sources of information in this field are also schools, universities, workplaces - this refers mainly to obtaining information and using various types of European programmes (e.g. Erasmus), trainings, educational materials about the EU. Valuable sources of knowledge are also travelling and exchanging experiences.

Most participants, regardless of their level of social engagement, believe that misinformation campaigns exist and we can see them in everyday life. A great deal of false narratives, especially in the opinion of the non-mobilized citizens, can be found in social media, especially on Facebook. Some participants, both mobilized and non- mobilized, were of the opinion that the main source of false information about the European Union, especially on the Internet, is Russia. According to the participants, the authors of Eurosceptic and anti-EU narratives are often representatives of political parties in the parliament and the ruling coalition, and more recently, public television. They promote a Eurosceptic narrative according to which the EU strikes at Polish traditions, faith and sovereignty. Especially the elderly are susceptible to such narratives, they distance themselves from the European Union and are more likely to speak critically about it. Recently, the most fake news concern the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines (specifically their health effects) and the allegations that the whole situation is some kind of medical experiment or exaggerated problem used by the authorities to use direct coercive measures and maintain a sense of insecurity among the public. It was also stressed that sometimes false information is not given intentionally, but due to lack of knowledge or fear. The main sources of disinformation campaigns are countries that could care about weakening the position of the European Union and expanding their

influence. Participants also pointed to the existence of a certain phenomenon, namely troll farms, where a specific influence with a specific overtone is dictated and published.

It is easy to believe fake news because it is simple and easily available. It takes much less time to accept a piece of information found without analyzing it than it does to verify each and every piece, especially in the current abundance (and sometimes chaos) of information and draw conclusions from it. Proper education in critical thinking and inference is also very often lacking. Fake news also often capitalizes on the public's fears and concerns, and if it confirms someone's beliefs then the willingness to verify them is less common. The main way to recognize and protect yourself from fake news is to use several sources of information - even if the original source seems extremely reliable, it is worth comparing it with others. Reaching out to official institutional websites allows you to verify information summarized in various articles on news portals. Comparing information can also be done by using foreign media, as translations can sometimes distort the original message or even deliberately misinterpret the message. You can also check different narratives and the presentation of similar facts by media associated with extremely different political or worldview backgrounds. We should also be careful with the information we find through social media - it is extremely easy to spread fake news there. A very important filter in catching fake news is our own knowledge and experience - we can see when the information we come across is too far from reality to be true. It is also important to remember about fact-checking organizations, whose aim is to dementia different kinds of fake news.

If given the opportunity, the focus groups participants would like to convey to the representatives of the EU authorities the need to reduce bureaucracy, simplify procedures and introduce more flexible approach to individual projects. They would also like to convey the need for a more thorough analysis of the feasibility of certain projects so that they respond to the real needs of local communities. Great emphasis was also placed on leveling the playing field, also in financial terms. Important issues they would like to raise with the EU authorities include climate change (more courageous implementation of changes in this respect), environmental protection and moving away from coal-based energy generation, although in this last matter greater flexibility of the EU would be expected (especially in the case of Poland, whose energy is based mostly on coal).

Opinions were divided on the importance of Polish politicians in the European arena. There were some opinions that the European Union imposes its decisions on individual member states and Polish politicians do not have much say in the European Parliament. However, this is not due to lack of opportunities, but to excessive internal conflicts and lack of one common narrative abroad. Others emphasized that there are situations in which the European law has primacy over the Polish law and this should be respected, but in general it is Polish politicians who have an influence on the decisions made in the European Union.

The consensus was that Euroscepticism exists and is a phenomenon present in Polish society. It is also perceived by non-mobilized people who are not interested in political life. One of the reasons for Euroscepticism is old habits, fear of the new and lack of personal benefits. The prevailing belief is that the European Union is first and foremost an opportunity for the young or people who can find their way in the complicated rules of EU programs. Euroscepticism also stems from a desire for reform and for the EU itself to work properly. Eurosceptics fear a loss of sovereignty and react negatively to attempts to impose certain regulations or courses of action on them. Interestingly, it has been recognized that the presence of Eurosceptic voices is needed in public discourse. This allows many improvements and reforms to be made and discussions to take place.

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The project FACTS (From Alternative Narratives to Citizens True EU Stories) aimed to test the robustness of the traditional narrative of peace and prosperity that is still evoked as the main achievement of the European Union. FACTS tried to contrast if time has made a dent in this narrative; if it continues to be a powerful mobilizing factor; or if mobilized and non-mobilized citizens think of a different narrative than that of peace and prosperity. The project compared the perspectives of citizens in different member states exploring whether the divergences, if any, are geographic; if the narratives remain just as strong as in different times; and whether age or gender play a decisive role in citizen's position regarding the EU. The aim was to answer questions such as what makes citizens more inclined to believe alternative narratives, rumours or fake news and if there were common trends in all these false narratives about the European Union. Finally, FACTS brought together citizens from each member state that had participated in the project with national parliamentarians to discuss the main findings of the project and encourage the exchange of ideas. The ultimate goal was that mobilized and non-mobilized citizens could speak directly with their democratically elected political representatives and could convey to them their positions and vision regarding the European Union, especially those related to narratives and disinformation

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