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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 comparison¹.

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 point².

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 infrastructure³. 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 conceal⁴. 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.

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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

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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 placed in the hands of unaccountable powers. Lastly, as already noted, these fears varied according to a generic age divide, which was in some cases 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.