

Krzysztof Głowacki

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

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

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.

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.

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

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 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.

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.

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 real-life 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.