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FROM STORYTELLING TO ACTION: Visions and Proposals from European Citizens

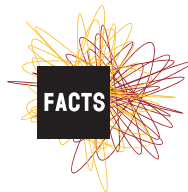
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Within the framework of the FACTS project¹ (From Alternative Narratives to Citizens' True EU Stories), CIDOB hosted two focus groups, with a total of nearly 60 participants,² to learn more about citizens' perceptions of the European Union, and to identify 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.



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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.

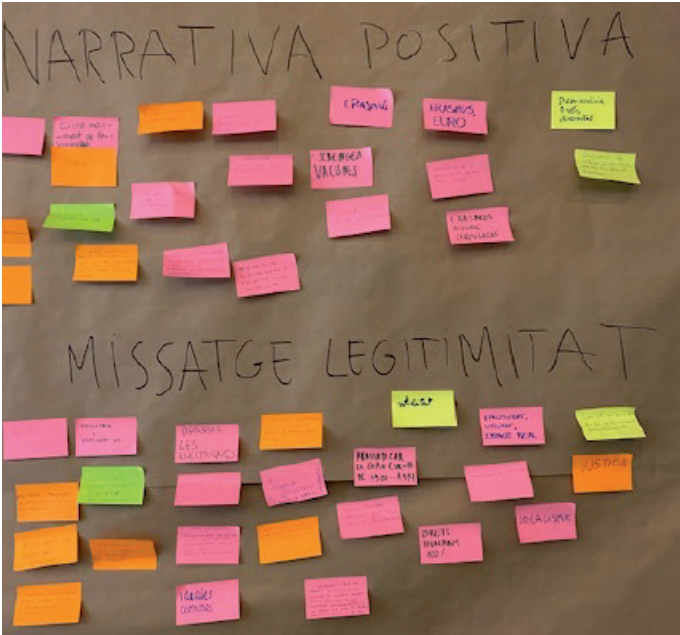
When participants were asked if they believe that Spain’s voice counts within the EU and what they would say if they had the chance to be face-to-face with policy makers, many showed some scepticism while the most mobilized citizens expressed the conviction that the North-South divide persists in the 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

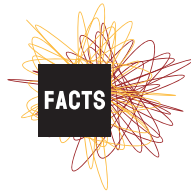
narrative around policies to combat climate change, which would consolidate the EU as a beacon, both for Europeans and for the rest of the world. More equality between member states and promotion of common education policies are also called for to reinforce the idea of a shared identity but, at the same 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)



FACTS – Real Information for a Brighter Future

by Federico Castiglioni



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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

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 significant 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.

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 shallow 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

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 – connoted 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.

Updated 28 October 2021

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

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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

“...non-mobilized citizens focus more on the negative aspects of the EU-Greece relationship.”

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

“...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.”

“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.”

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.

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.

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.

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

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 “directorship” 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 “directorship” 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 directorship”, 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.”

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

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 in 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 its 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.

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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FACTS project – results of two focus groups meetings

WiseEuropa is one of the partners of the project FACTS¹, 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 life. 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 demystify 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.