



Working Track 2:  
Reconnecting the people  
with Europe

Outcomes Report

## Contents

About the workshop.....	3
Program.....	4
Session 1: Why is there a growing need to reconnect people with Europe? .....	5
Session 2: Observations on current education/mobility and civil society programmes .....	6
Session 3: The challenge of communicating contested and complex issues .....	8
Session 4: Where can we go from here? .....	9
List of participants .....	11

## About the workshop

There is an urgent need to reconnect the European idea to both political elites and citizens in order to renew a sense of ownership of the European project. A joint European narrative is needed to support the European integration process. Our workshop provided MPs with the chance to explore why and how we need to reconnect people with the EU, what role civil society, education and mobility initiatives and programs can play and how communicating better can help to achieve this purpose.

The goals of the workshop were to explore, reflect and analyze what can be done at EU and national levels to reconnect citizens with the European project with the help of Education, Mobility and Civil Society programs and a better or renewed communication strategy. The group was an optimal size to allow and stimulate an open, deep, profound and trusting conversation. The conversations were facilitated by Peter Woodward.

The 34 MPs gathered in Berlin in September 2015 for the first 'Mercator European Dialogue' agreed to continue working on four strategic lines: EU Global Strategy; Reconnecting the people with Europe; Sustainable Development in Europe; and Refugees and Migration. This workshop developed the working track of **Reconnecting the people with Europe** and was held in Barcelona on March 4, 2016.

## Program

March, 4

- 09.00 **Registration**
- 09.15 **Welcome, session aims, introductions**  
**Pol Morillas**, Research Fellow in European Affairs, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)  
**Peter Woodward**, Lead facilitator, Quest Associates
- 09.30 **Why is there a growing need to reconnect people with the EU?**  
*Overview perspective*  
**Pol Morillas**, Research Fellow in European Affairs, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)  
  
*Participants discussion and perspectives on the need to reconnect*
- 10.20 Refreshments
- 10.40 **Exploring current education and mobility programmes**  
**Annegret Wulff**, Active Citizenship Unit, MitOst  
**Tanja Backherms**, Project Associate, Stiftung Mercator  
**Judit Vallès**, President of the Young European Federalists in Catalonia  
  
*Participants explore different education/mobility programmes and their own experiences highlight key observations on what is working and what is not*  
  
*Feedback of insights to plenary*
- 12.20 Lunch
- 13.10 **The challenge of communicating contested and complex issues**  
**Carne Colomina**, Associate Researcher, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)  
  
*Participants develop key recommendations to achieve more effective communication on EU with citizens*
- 14.40 Refreshments
- 15.00 **Where do we go from here?**  
  
*Groups identify specific ideas/recommendations for actions/programmes and agree next reps from today*
- 16.00 **Close**

## Session 1: Why is there a growing need to reconnect the people with Europe?

### Introduction by Pol Morillas

The **Reconnecting the people with the EU** working track started using the 3 levels of analysis of International Relations to explain which is the problematic regarding the disconnect between the EU and its citizens. The challenge is whether citizens can reconnect with the EU without taking the states in consideration, especially now that the traditional narrative of the EU is in question.

The EU has traditionally based its narrative around two grand ones: On the one hand, the EU has been the guarantor of peace on the continent; since the foundation of the European Economic Community, there have been 59 years of peace between the signatory countries and wars only have been a reality in the states outside of the Union. On the other hand, the EU had also been a synonym of modernity and economic prosperity. Until the economic and financial crisis of 2008, being in the EU meant economic prosperity and membership was certainly a boost for southern economies in the eighties (Greece, Spain and Portugal) and the eastern economies since 2004 (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic States, etc...); however, since the economic crisis began, it is more difficult for the EU to sell this narrative as there is a perception that the young generations are going to have worse life conditions than their parents had. Thus, for the future Europeans, the problem has been that peace is taken for granted and economic prosperity does not provide narratives that are good enough after the crisis.

Moreover, the traditional solutions for previous crises in the EU have been “More Europe”, but always through top-down initiatives that have failed to sufficiently involve citizens; and giving more power to national parliaments to decide about EU matters, so sovereignty transfer can be counterbalanced at the national level. The problem the EU has is that these traditional solutions are no longer enough. Nowadays, there is a bigger awareness about the EU than there ever was and there are new political parties and actors challenging the parties who have traditionally been the engine of the construction of Europe; so traditional solutions do not work anymore. Citizens want to participate because there is a feeling that a technocratic EU is not working and they do not want more EU unless it is a better EU.

### Group exploration

Having this scenario in mind, the participants made observations on the current reality of European citizens and the dynamics emerging in 2016. The commentaries were divided into challenges and opportunities. According to the participants, the challenges the EU faces in reconnecting with its citizens having in mind 2016 dynamics would be:

- **The integration challenge**, as integration for more Europe is not as attractive as it used to be and there is a growing reluctance to transfer more sovereignty to the EU.
- **The emotion vs. rationality** as the EU has been incapable of providing a leitmotiv that touches the emotion of its citizens and, awakes a kind of patriotic feeling; instead, the EU has appealed to rationality to explain and develop the European project.
- **Dealing with national media** is also a challenge because the EU has the handicap of not being of interest for national media (also because citizens are normally more interested in national news), thus contributing to the unfamiliarity with the EU.

- **National interests filter EU matters**, as usually, anything done by the EU goes through a shifting benefits to the national level and blame to the EU, meaning that the Brussels Blame Game is a fact.
- The EU also faces the challenge of its **incapacity to deliver (results)** because, at least in citizen's perception, the EU does not deliver tangible results for citizens so they cannot see benefits coming from membership.
- Yet another perception coming from citizens is that there is **corruption at state level**; meaning that member states may be keeping EU funds for themselves which undermines the EU's credibility.
- At the same time, the **security vs. freedom** debate contradicts the third grand EU narrative of individual freedoms and Human Rights promoter and defender.
- Finally, another consequence of the economic crisis would be the north-south divide and the whole debate around **equality vs solidarity** on the limits of solidarity in the pursuit of equality. This debate has not helped bringing the union together but increasing the divide between net donors and receivers.

The good news for the EU is that the opportunities arise from these challenges. The European project could benefit from **Europeanizing the welfare and social policies** because one way to engage citizens again with the EU would be to let the union take charge of welfare and social policies. This would, on one hand, help the EU deliver tangible results and, on the other hand, engage citizens emotionally with the EU as it would become the guarantor of social policies. To counterbalance the lack of attention given to the EU from national media's side, there is the opportunity for developing a new kind of media without the restrictions of the traditional means to inform about EU developments through **social media** or citizens-driven media. Another opportunity to reconnect people with the EU is through **accountability**. If citizens do not feel they can hold accountable their national governments and politicians, they can hardly have the feeling of holding accountable EU politicians or officials. There is an opportunity here to develop accountability mechanisms that bring citizens closer to the institutions. Finally, another way to address the disenchantment with the EU is to include adopt a form of **participative politics** for the decision-making processes. The EU should develop mechanisms to provide channels of participation for the increasingly well-informed citizens.

## Session 2: Observations on current education/mobility and civil society programmes

Introduction by Judit Vallès, Tanja Backherms and Annegret Wulff

After analysing the current and future scenarios for the connection between the EU and its citizens, the participants looked at what is being done today in the fields of education, mobility and civil society to foster Europeanness and reconnect citizens with the EU.

In the fields of education and mobility, the EU works with a wide concept of education, meaning that education is not only what it is done in the schools but informal education is also fundamental. In this regard, the EU addresses recommendations to member states on education issues and allocates money to improve Education in member states. The star of the show for education is the Erasmus programme which should include not only higher education but teachers, school staff, associations and joint projects

between schools because Erasmus is the best tool for feeling ownership of the European project and because people who have done an Erasmus have a lower unemployment rate. There are three musts that the EU should accomplish to encourage people to go abroad and take part in education and mobility programmes: funds to allow everybody to take part in such programmes; support to fill in applications because sometimes applications are long, heavy and not understandable; and facilities for language learning to encourage mobility.

Regarding civil society programmes, the European civil society is still under construction and it is basically formed by local civil societies. The EU should promote programmes for individuals to become citizens. In order to foster a European civil society, there are three things that the EU should do. In the first place, it should burst the Brussels bubble and try to connect with the local levels fostering the idea that citizenship can be exercised in every face of life. Secondly, the growing local civil society is developing new structures that do not have leaders and the EU has to do an effort to understand them. Finally the EU should have into account that civil societies from outside Europe can also help European civil society to shape the EU.

### Group exploration

After the presentations by the experts, the participants reacted to what was said with positive comments, as well as shortcomings of the whole situation. The good news for the European Union is that there is a growing, more active informal society; European citizens responded with civil society initiatives to the different problems (the refugee crisis for example); social media is an enabler to bring the EU closer to citizens; there is an increasing demand to participate in the decision making processes, so the EU should enable formal public consultations at the EU-level and facilitate citizens' initiatives and there is a new leadership coming from civil society. To help fostering this European civil society there are a series of initiatives that would certainly have citizens' support: continue the funding and support of the program Erasmus+; the possibility of starting Erasmus programs earlier; rethink and envision effective participation mechanisms and promote more informal education.

However, there are also shortcomings that hinder a better development of these programmes and future would-be programmes. First of all, there is a lack of flexibility when applying for these programmes; not all Europeans have the same resources to access and apply for them because they are mostly oriented to the EU-elites or professionals. Secondly, there is an inefficient and heterogeneous use of resources that makes the EU-funded programmes lack effective control mechanisms. In the third place, normally these programmes are designed with a top-down strategy without consultation mechanisms or using fake mechanisms, and are unknown to the wider public. Then, there is also a lack of European opinion leaders and lack of specific programs fighting against Euroscepticism. The last shortcoming detected was that current education systems are not flexible enough to deal with present issues when they happen and fail to provide children with the general picture and the meaning of the EU

## Session 3: The challenge of communicating contested and complex issues

### Introduction by Carme Colomina

In the third session, Carme Colomina exposed that there is no a single clear message that works for everybody and there is no one who speaks on behalf of the EU. For this reason, the EU should be very careful not only on what it wants to say but on what is going to be perceived in order to adapt the message better.

In any case, to know does not mean to love. This means that even if the EU were capable of delivering the best messages equally perceived by all citizens in member states, citizens might not like what the EU is selling. Communication is a good solution but it can't produce miracles. One example would be that the European public sphere has been strengthened but still it is referred as something foreigner which is not trustworthy.

Should the European Commission become more political, it would want to control the messages; but at the same time, it should do two things: First, speak before the national governments do in order to avoid the Brussels Blame Game from the capitals; and second, keep talking to achieve a greater impact of its communication strategy even if capital cities have their say in any issue.

Finally, two other challenges that the EU should take into account when trying to communicate are, on the one hand, transparency, which means that they have to make a greater effort to approach the decision making processes to EU citizens; and on the other hand, the EU should be aware that, despite the multiple forms of communication that exist nowadays, the most used way to communicate and get information from is traditional media (newspaper and television); so maybe, the EU should also aim its communication strategy at national television audiences.

### Group exploration

After the presentation, the participants made 12 proposals to improve EU communication

1. **High quality marketing to promote EU messages well.** Using marketing in its whole dimension would result in a better awareness of what the EU does for citizens and what is it worth.
2. **Product placement.** Clarifying the origin of solutions with messages such as 'This is thanks to European solidarity'
3. **Short and clear messages.** Adapt the language so that all citizens can get the information and understand the messages.
4. **Reveal real responsibilities.** The EU should play an active role in communicating ownership for merits and for mistakes
5. **Understand people's needs and respond appropriately.** This also has to do with bursting the Brussels Bubble. If the EU took into account EU citizens when making the decisions, communicating its projects and goals would be a lot easier.
6. **Fight the European myths** by reacting to bad publicity.
7. **Two-way communication.** On the one hand, the EU has to accept and deal with criticism; while at the same time, it has to undertake some self-criticism to gain more credibility.

8. **Icons as EU Ambassadors.** Use well-known people (not politicians) to promote and spread the EU message, values and worth.
9. **Transparency of the media owners.**
10. **Involving national media in EU communication** by getting national media to inform more about the EU and thus connecting citizens with the structure (EU).
11. **Buy ads in local newspapers** so even the smallest village will know that what is being done in their village is thanks to the European Union.
12. **Tangible and measurable goals.** Commitment on funding related to outcomes and follow-up processes.

### The Bumper Stickers contest

A humorous proposal to improve EU's communication came up and was developed. The proposal was to make bumper stickers with catchy phrases to increase and promote the Europeanist feeling. What follows is a list with some ideas for bumper stickers:

- 'EU – not just straight bananas'
- 'EU protects you from your politicians (all for one and one for all)'
- I am European, so what?
- EU is better than ice-cream
- EU does it for you
- EU – only Francisco does it better

### Session 4: Where can we go from here?

During the last session, we discussed possible actions to undertake in the future either at EU-level, at national level endorsed by the MPs or within the framework of the Mercator European Dialogue. What follows is a list of potential actions to take at any of the indicated levels.

- EU ambassadors → Use famous people (not politicians) to promote the European project among citizens
- Defining EU success story → explaining through short videos how the EU changed our lives
- EU interactive map showing EU projects → These maps will show what the EU has done in terms of projects all over Europe and show before and after the project was over
- Fast track: small grants to informal groups (seeding) → extent and normalise the use of microcredits
- Promoting sub-regional and cross border organizations → tool to achieve sub-regional EU goals
- Senior guarantee (50+) → As the youth guarantee, the Senior guarantee would be a new approach to tackling unemployment for people older than 45-50 years old
- Promoting the EU on a local level → with local journalists and citizens
- MP Manifesto.

The participants in the working track, including MPs and think tankers voted on these eight proposals to see on which one we would put the focus to make it real. The most voted proposal was the **MP manifesto**. According to what was discussed in the last session of the workshop, CIDOB will write a draft proposal that will be discussed with GMF, IAI and ELIAMEP; the final version will be presented in Athens

during the second Mercator European Dialogue and it should be signed by as many MPs as possible. What was agreed regarding the Manifesto was:

- To target individual MPs
- To deliver it at the European Summit of June (Pre-UK Referendum)
- To request the European leaders to stop the Brussels Blame Game, to be more positive and more transparent.
- Not to be constrained by political parties
- To be only one page in length manifesto
- To be presented to the MPs the 15 and 16 of April in Athens

## List of participants

**Lydia Avrami**, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, ELIAMEP

**Tanja Backherms**, Project Associate, Stiftung Mercator

**Carne Colomina**, Associate Researcher, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)

**Ansgar Gessner**, Europe Program, Senior Program Officer, German Marshall Fund of the United States

**Thea Greve**, Program Assistant, Europe Program, German Marshall Fund of the United States

**Duarte Marques**, PSD, Partido Social Democrata, Portugal

**Luis Alberto Orellana**, Independent, Italy

**Marta Pascal**, CDC, Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, Spain

**Agnieszka Pomaska**, PO, Platforma Obywatelska, Poland

**Philip Popov**, CP, Coalition for Bulgaria (Bulgarian Socialist Party), Bulgaria

**Pol Morillas**, Research Fellow in European Affairs, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs

**Chiara Rosselli**, Project Manager, Istituto Affari Internazionali

**Héctor Sánchez Margalef**, researcher, CIDOB

**Judit Vallès**, President of the Young European Federalists in Catalonia

**Peter Woodward**, Lead facilitator, Quest Associates

**Annegret Wulff**, Active Citizenship Unit, MitOst