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FROM STORYTELLING TO ACTION: Visions and Proposals from European Citizens

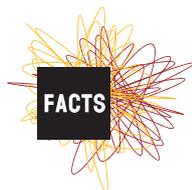
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Within the framework of the FACTS project¹ (From Alternative Narratives to Citizens' True EU Stories), CIDOB hosted two focus groups, with a total of nearly 60 participants,² to learn more about citizens' perceptions of the European Union, and to identify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

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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)

