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“When we talk about Europe, citizens are confused, they feel they don’t have enough information - and to be honest I feel the same way. I also don’t always know what is going on, we don’t receive much information - unless you are in the European Affairs Commission. Personally, I have to ask a mate who works there to update me ... and I regularly just ask him to tell me what is being discussed there”

“Usually, Europe does not come up so much, people don’t know that some things that are decided in our capital city are actually being decided at the European level, that’s why we need to do more informing.”

“It is important for our democracies that we learn to listen to the views of different countries.”

Scrolling through social media posts under the hashtag #EU, one finds a range of results: official information on the European Commission’s latest proposal, quotes from European law experts interviewed on the rule of law crisis, as well as tweets harshly criticising the European response to crises, directly followed by a post blatantly spreading disinformation about the European Union. This happens every day. On different communication media. In different languages.

In this perpetual flow of information, we may wonder what actually sticks in citizens’ minds, how they think of Europe, and where they assume the EU should be more active. With the aim of discovering this, the FACTS project’s methodology was designed to capture the characteristics, expectations and attributes citizens associate with the European Union.

Listening to and recognising the narratives that emerged from citizens involved an organisational and methodological effort that went beyond the simple act of collecting thoughts and perceptions about the European Union and its future trajectory. It meant designing a process that could empower the voices of citizens and increase their ownership over current and new European narratives.

"It is useful to have these exchanges and listen to each other and reflect on the perceptions we have of each other, the stereotypes that are involved in the way we think ... it is a learning for me to be in contact with someone from Germany and speak openly about these issues and learn that the stereotypes are not the truth."

The methodology designed and employed throughout the duration of FACTS started by humbly acknowledging that the project could not aim to represent the entirety of the vast range of opinions citizens held about the European Union. As well as being a virtually impossible task, gathering the plethora of narratives and rumours on the European project would not reveal cross-country synergies (or fault lines), or further increase citizens' shared ownership of new viable stories for the continent. A comprehensive survey would be better suited to that purpose. Instead, this project had the ambition of creating meaningful and deep conversations among citizens at different levels – first within their countries and, later, at international level. The information that emerged is the result of a carefully tuned process that emphasises the central role of citizens in outlining their own stories on Europe.

Given the need to let citizens' knowledge and perception of the European Union emerge, the methodology behind this project was designed to engage as many citizens as possible in facilitated dialogue. The questions and the process followed in both the national focus groups and in the citizens-parliamentarians final conference were researched and designed to favour the creation of dialogue and emergence of information among the participants instead of simple opinion-sharing.

Overall, the methodology employed successfully achieved the objective of exploring narratives about the European Union among mobilised and non-mobilised citizens, creating a space for them to express their views, explore new narratives and share their concerns about the EU directly with policymakers.

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Different levels of engagement lead to new insights

The FACTS project is composed of two distinct, though interconnected parts. Combined, they provide the methodological framework at the basis of the project. These two pillars are 1. the focus groups held nationally by CIDOB (Spain), IAI (Italy), ELIAMEP (Greece), WiseEuropa (Poland) and DPZ (Germany); and 2. the political dialogue, designed and hosted in Barcelona by the Open European Dialogue team, associated to the German Marshall Fund of the United States office in Brussels.

These different levels of engagement were the project's unique feature. The exchange between the focus groups of around 60 citizens per country provided key insights into the public perceptions of the EU according to background, political engagement and age. Meanwhile, the final conference was a broader exchange platform in which a group of diverse citizens and parliamentarians engaged for the first time in a cross-country and cross-party dialogue over the present and future narratives around the European project.

“For the younger generations the EU is not even questioned - it just is.”

These diverse forms of engagement created the space to explore how the European institutional architecture we share is seen differently from the various corners of Europe. More essentially, engaging at different levels allowed new connections and information to emerge that would not have been evident otherwise.

Given the timeframe, the content emerging from the focus groups and political dialogue was significantly affected by events such as COVID-19 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Yet, with the help of process design, these major topics were singled out and elaborated in specific dialogue sessions.

“It was a dream, it is a dream, based on an experience, that of World War Two, to which we tried to find a pragmatic answer to the problem through the integration of our economic communities. We need to keep the spirit of the dream ... the politics comes later.”

National focus groups: your voice matters!

The focus groups held in 2021 in Spain, Italy, Greece, Poland and Germany represented the starting point for the research and sessions that followed. They created a comparable set of information across countries and provided a powerful kick-off for the dialogue between citizens and policymakers in Barcelona the following year.

As stated before, the FACTS project aims to identify the existing rumours, false narratives or fake news circulating about the European Union and whether these rumours directly hinder the idea of acquiring European citizenship. It also challenges the solidity of the traditional narrative of peace and prosperity that is still summoned as the EU's main achievement. With these objectives in mind, the focus groups sought to explore how well the traditional narrative withstands the test of time and whether a) it is still a powerful mobilising factor; and b) mobilised and non-mobilised citizens can and actually do think of different narratives. The national-level focus groups were therefore the most appropriate research method to achieve these goals in the first phase of the project.

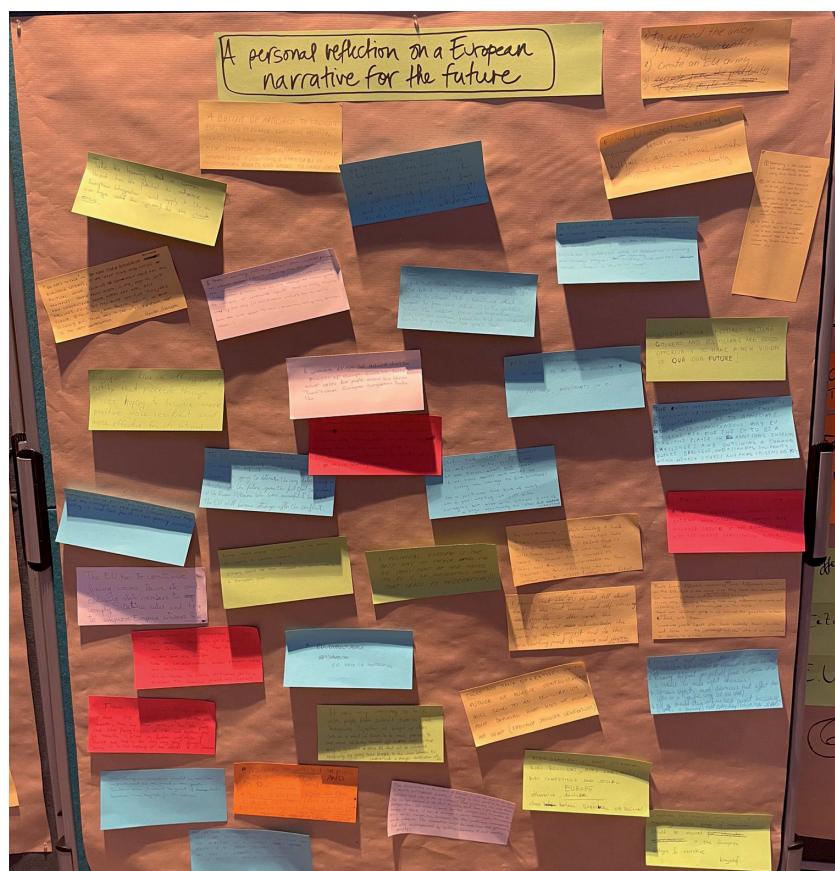
The Social Sciences literature defines focus groups in various ways. The definition provided by Powell and Single (1996:49) applies to the sessions held in this phase of the project: *“A focus group is a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.”*

This qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for the emergence of information from the interaction between participants, differentiating it from other forms of interview (Gibbs, 1997: 2). In fact, key information such as the degree (or lack of) consensus on a specific narrative could only be grasped by the researcher by creating a human interaction within the focus groups.

Overall, around 300 citizens participated in the focus groups across the five countries. Taking place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the focus groups in most of the countries (Germany, Poland, Greece and Italy) were held online for safety reasons. Meanwhile, the epidemiological situation in Spain at the time allowed events to take place in-person.

"I am not sure if I am disappointed (with Europe), I never thought about it from an emotional perspective, I tend to rationalize it, but I guess yes there is an emotional element to it which I don't usually think about ... Something changed for me at some point during the round of crises in 2015, when we always spoke so negatively about disastrous scenarios, we were speaking of kicking out Greece at the time".

A crucial element in the formation of the focus groups was diversity. Each of the five think-tanks selected a group of around 60 participants, split over two focus groups per country. In order to select the citizens, the organisers above all respected three different criteria: 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 mobilised and non-mobilised citizens. This last category concerned the degree of involvement in politics, which was essential to grasp what non-experts understand about the European Union. Thus, mobilised citizens are considered to be those who show a natural interest in regional, national, or European politics, and those who are more or less aware of the



debates occurring around the world. Meanwhile, non-mobilised citizens are those who have a general knowledge of politics, political activity and political debates, although this does not constitute one of their main daily concerns. Besides these three categories used in the selection of participants, the focus groups organised online also attempted to achieve wider geographical diversity in terms of region and city of origin, while the in-person focus groups gathered participants mostly from neighbouring regions and cities (e.g., Barcelona and Tarragona, and other surrounding cities in the case of Barcelona-based CIDOB).

After selecting around 60 citizens per country, each institution held two focus groups of around 30 participants over a short period of time. During the two sessions, all the researchers in different countries used the same set of questions to guide the conversation. The questions were framed to encourage respondents to express their beliefs, attitudes and feelings towards the European Union and the traditional narratives that surround it. They also explored the respondents' information and media consumption habits. In addition, the researchers gave space to respondents to formulate their own positive narrative on the European Union. Throughout the conversation, researchers were instructed to report some key information on the respondents i.e., age, gender and political status (mobilised or non-mobilised).

The information collected was analysed by each institution and published as separate, though comparable, reports. The data from these reports was then used as a starting point for the MPs–citizens dialogue that took place roughly a year after the focus groups.

“I was very disappointed by my own government for not engaging more with the Conference on the Future of Europe ... we should have done more.”

The political dialogue: sitting citizens and parliamentarians at the same table

The parliamentarians–citizens dialogue held in Barcelona on May 20th and 21st 2022 was the last activity part of the project. It served to connect the narratives, feelings and attitudes that emerged from the first round of the focus groups in each country and let new information emerge from the interaction between citizens of different nationalities. In addition, it sought to assess how the results collected the year before withstood the test of time, after a major security crisis in Ukraine affected the European continent. The other key ingredient of this session was the participation of elected members of parliaments, acting as a political sounding board.

The Open European Dialogue (OED) used its experience in crafting events for members of its network of over 150+ parliamentarians to design an inclusive dialogue between citizens and select policymakers. The cohort of citizens invited to join the event in Barcelona was selected from the participants in the previous national focus groups, maintaining an even balance in terms of nationality, gender, age and political mobilisation. In total, a cohort of 30 citizens was created, including six Spaniards, seven Italians, five Greeks, five Poles and seven Germans.

As for the political sounding board, the OED invited members of parliaments from different political parties and factions, in order to cover the widest spectrum of political ideologies in Europe. The political sounding board was thus composed of seven members of parliament representing the following parties: Syriza (Greece), the Democratic Party (Italy), the Five Star Movement (Italy), Civic Platform (Poland), the Basque Nationalist Party (Spain), the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Spain) and Together for Catalonia (Spain). Throughout the two days, this political sounding board was occasionally given the opportunity to offer a personal reflection on their work and challenges as policymakers who operate both nationally and within a European political context; why they decided to get into the job of democratic representation; and to provide feedback on the ongoing conversations. These occasional moments of personal reflection saw politicians come up to the stage and engage in a one-on-one conversation with the facilitator. They were also asked to comment on their relationship with the European political agenda and how they navigate their role as mediators between Europe and its citizens.

The dialogue began with a session dedicated to the sharing of personal stories, as participants sat in threes and were asked to share their own background, their influences, roots and perspectives on Europe, all in just under ten minutes per person. This provided citizens and politicians alike with the opportunity to connect, to familiarise themselves with the point of view of people from different perspectives and to try to understand why different people experience Europe and life so differently.

The second day kicked off with the presentation of the results from the previous national focus groups. Once the results from the five countries' focus groups were shared, some observations were offered to prompt further reflection from the participants, who were now given a chance to exchange their views with those of citizens who participated in other focus groups.

"I wonder if the economic narrative is intrinsically less tied to identity as there seems to be a stronger sense of European identity in those countries where the prevalent narrative is that of peace and security, such as Germany and Poland."

Following the reflection on the results of the focus groups and the presentation of highlights to the plenary, participants were organised into national tables, where they discussed in a facilitated dialogue how the crisis in Ukraine had changed their views about Europe. The national roundtable conversations were guided by a facilitator who ensured different voices were heard, and offered citizens and MPs the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in a more natural way, as they were able to speak in their own language.

"Europe will be stronger after this war."

As the second day of dialogue drew to an end, participants were reorganised into mixed tables and invited to reflect on whether any common narratives seemed to emerge across our diverse group of citizens and politicians. The task challenged the groups to exercise active

listening and empathic skills as in a short amount of time they jointly navigated a plurality of perspectives and strongly held beliefs in the search for some meaningful common ground.

The dialogue was meaningfully enriched by creating an opportunity for citizens and politicians to connect and exchange views and opinions with a process designed for citizens and politicians to be equal participants and to overcome the stiffness of pre-scripted speeches in favour of more natural interactions between citizens and their representatives. This allowed not only the humanisation of the policymakers' profession but also helped explore new perspectives. The opportunity was created for citizens and politicians to engage with people from their own countries as well as with people from countries other than their own, offering an opportunity to be exposed to different perspectives and gain insights into what citizens and politicians are like beyond the political realm. Overall, the design of the sessions and the carefully crafted conversation spaces, guiding questions and mixture of sharing human experience as well as opinions on political issues created the space for new interactions and the emergence of key insights which would have been unimaginable in other contexts. Citizens and politicians alike were able to let their guard down and share their views, as well as their fears and frustrations; they were listened to and given the opportunity to learn from people with very different backgrounds and perspectives. In the end, they attempted to give an honest common evaluation of the state of the European project.

"Even if I don't agree with you, I have found one thing we can agree on which is that Europe is not written in stone, it is not on an inevitable linear path. It is an open-ended initiative that should always be listening and adapt to the changing reality and needs of its citizens."

"After two days of dialogue I have many insights from other people in other countries and with other jobs that I take with me. I understand that some ideas are widespread across Europe and I take with me the sense that our youngest generations are the most enthusiastic – a sense that they are waiting on Brussels to do something".

References

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