

FACTS FINAL CONFERENCE: AT THE END OF THE ROAD, KEEP GOING

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On May 20th and 21st 2022, the project From Alternative Narratives to Citizens True EU Stories (FACTS¹) held its final conference in Barcelona, bringing together citizens and elected representatives from different member states. CIDOB (Spain), IAI (Italy), Eliamep (Greece), WiseEuropa (Poland), DPZ (Germany) and the Open European Dialogue team from the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Brussels office) held a two-day focus group that included 30 citizens and seven elected representatives from national parliaments.

The FACTS project aimed to identify the narratives about the European Union held by mobilised and non-mobilised citizens² and to clarify if these narratives help or hinder the development of a European citizenship or the sense of collective belonging. After conducting the national focus groups, the final conference, which unfolded over two days and explored narratives and attitudes towards the European Union, was a joint exercise involving citizens of different member states, ages, genders and mobilised or non-mobilised statuses, alongside members of parliament who reflected together on past, present and future EU narratives.

The group of citizens was composed of six Spanish, seven Italian, five Greek, five Polish and seven German citizens, keeping the balance between gender, age and mobilised and non-mobilised citizens. In addition to this, seven members of national parliaments participated, with a balance between origin, gender and political ideology. The citizens who participated in the final conference had previously participated in one of the two focus groups organised in their respective country; therefore, they had prior knowledge of the project and were aware that their fellow citizens were in the same situation. Members of Parliament had previously been briefed about the earlier activities of the project and were well aware of its objectives.

The think tanks working on FACTS acknowledge that the conversations that took place during the conference by no means represent an exact reflection of what European society thinks about the EU and its narratives. Instead, the aim was to paint a picture of the conversation that can result

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2. Mobilised citizens are those who show a natural interest for regional, national or European politics, and who are more or less aware of the debates occurring around the world. 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.

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when mixing Europeans from different backgrounds, ages, genders and nationalities with elected representatives at a time when the health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been left behind, but the economic ramifications still persist. At the same time, Europe faces yet another crisis because of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

What motivates participation?

As the final conference would take place over a longer period than the national focus groups, the dynamics used to create the conversation were different (see Chapter 3). Taking advantage of this opportunity, the first session was designed for participants to get to know each other but also for the politicians to be acknowledged as such. Breaking the ice between participants from different countries and backgrounds was key to achieving a more meaningful debate and deeper conversations. This first session was also helpful for the participants to become more comfortable communicating with one another in the only language shared by all – English.

It seems clear that the need to comprehend the motivations of fellow European citizens was one of the main drivers for the participants to join the final FACTS conference. How citizens' nationalities affect their views on the EU was not the only factor brought up by participants. Working experience and environment were also identified as circumstances that can influence how citizens think about the EU. In fact, some of the participants considered that nationality does not imply big differences *per se* and that cultural exchanges may take one away from their roots in a positive way. By contrast, for another group of citizens different views and arguments on Europe depend very much on nationality. However, it was emphasised that this should mean more cooperation across borders to work out the differences.

Citizens remarked upon how important those exchanges are, not just to meet people from all around Europe, but to try to understand their backgrounds and societal and political motivations, as well as to share feelings and confirm that some states of mind do not differ so much from one another. This illustrates once more that mobility and freedom of movement is the EU's most precious treasure, and should therefore be better promoted and protected. For one participant, a very young male, attending the FACTS final conference was his first experience outside his country. Clearly, not every citizen enjoys the benefits and opportunities of mobility equally; this may mean mobility is a privilege more than a right. In fact, one participant noted that cultural exchanges such as FACTS are great, but that when they end the lack of opportunities back home remains. This was also a reminder that the need to move to other countries for better job opportunities makes mobility less a privilege or a right than an obligation that drives citizens away from home, even if it is to live within the EU. The narrative of having to leave home because of lack of opportunities is not one that can work for the EU in the long run.

The citizens' debates also established that the EU's regional dimension remains a factor (North-South and East-West). Logically, then, the EU should consider this when acting in various policy areas. Participants noted that citizens from southern member states felt closer to each

other than to those from northern Europe; but this was probably due to the larger representation of citizens from southern Europe.

What did not differ, regardless of whether the conversation took place between citizens of the same nationality or was the result of different nationals discussing together, was the double-edged perception of the EU. On the one hand, the ideal image of what the EU should be in the eyes of its citizens prevails, reinforcing the positive perception of the European project. In this image, the EU is associated with peace, solidarity and a chance for development (prosperity). Even if people from different countries often have different views on the EU, they share the same needs for security, peace and the dream of a united Europe.

On the other hand, the EU was also perceived as disappointing or hypocritical. For instance, when it came to the differing treatment of refugees depending on their origins; whether the EU really treats all member states equally and fairly; or whether the EU does enough to defend its rights and values at home as well as around the world.

Another recurring topic that came up in the conversation between citizens of different origins and their elected representatives was how distant the EU is perceived as being. Elected representatives reported that the EU and the debates surrounding it are absent among their constituents. However, MPs also suggested that national governments do not always make the effort to keep MPs informed. They argued that as MPs, they were not involved in European debates and decision-making and that governments had given up explaining the complexity of the European decision-making structure to citizens.

The results of the focus groups

The first exercise of the second day was to reflect collectively on what the national focus groups had brought up (the comparative results can be seen in Chapter 2). Some food for thought was put on the table, and citizens were asked to reflect on the following questions:

1. Is the EU ambivalent?
2. Is there a disconnect between citizens and Europe?
3. Economic livelihood
4. Uneven opportunities across Europe
5. Peace vs. economics when it comes to European identity?

Then, citizens of different nationalities, genders, ages and backgrounds engaged in collective reflection. Regardless of their individual characteristics, it seemed clear that it is impossible to count a member state as pro-European or anti-European, although trends do exist. Similarly, the vision of what the EU project entails varies across countries: it can be a peace project or an economic project. The view southern Europeans used to have of the European Union as a means of underpinning their democracies is fading to the extent that younger generations are creating their own narratives. For these generations the EU is a given reality. Some cited the need to include Eurosceptic voices on discussions on the future of Europe and to pay more attention to what happens in each country.

Another recurring topic, given the combination of citizens and MPs present at the conference, was the presence or lack of opportunities in the European Union. At this point it was easy to identify the divisions between countries that remain present, such as the North-South and East-West divides, and the new ones emerging, like the rural–urban divide. The material hardships felt in southern Europe during the economic crisis that started in 2008 are still influencing the perception of the EU to the point that southerners focused more on (the lack of) prosperity than on peace, unlike Germans and Poles. As peace has been a constant within the EU, linking the European project to peace favours its perception as a success story much more than when it is identified with prosperity. This was the picture that emerged in the room. Still, the EU always emerged as the lesser evil; as one group of citizens put it: “we cannot imagine how things would look without the EU”.

How will the Russian aggression against Ukraine change Europe?

Given the challenging times the EU was going through, one session was designed specifically to debate the situation in Ukraine. However, and understandably, the conflict was present throughout the whole final conference. As happened in the national focus groups, citizens’ visions and demands about the EU were very much shaped by context and origin. The national focus groups were held during the summer of 2021 and at that time attention was on the COVID19 pandemic, vaccines and the need for solidarity. In May 2022, the focus was squarely on how the war against Ukraine would change the EU.

Again, even on this topic, there was a clear geographical/national divide when approaching the EU’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It was not a surprise to see Polish citizens – driven by history and geography – asking the EU to do more. The same was true for the Polish member of parliament present in the discussion, who was very vocal in asking the European Union and its member states to do more to support Ukraine.

However, every country had its own approach based on its own past and experiences. For instance, in southern European member states – but also in Germany – some anti-Americanism feeling still co-exists at different levels of society and to different degrees. While the United States is not directly involved in this war, any movement made by NATO or the Western allies was viewed with suspicion, as the contributions of some participants showed. In Greece the reasons were twofold. On the one hand, Greeks are still having to cope with material difficulties and economic shortages, and the war started by Russia will add extra pressure to their society. On the other hand, there is a feeling of double standards about the solidarity shown to the Ukrainian refugees compared to what happened during the summer of 2015. The solidarity shown towards the EU countries taking in those refugees was also seen as significantly different.

Germans are aware that this is a crucial moment for their country and the EU, as the debate has completely shifted to focus on values and questioning the usefulness of the foreign policy strategy followed

throughout the Merkel era of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade). The German citizens present in the room were aware that Germany is facing a *Zeitenwende*, a turning point.

The Spanish citizens were somewhere in the middle. On one hand, they felt more involved with the EU, more protected by the EU umbrella and more appreciative of how the idea of solidarity, unity and a potential European identity have been strengthened by the war and the EU's response to it. One participant stated that the invasion of Ukraine was in fact an attack on European values. On the other hand, the double standards in the attitudes towards refugees were also mentioned.

The Italian citizens claimed that the situation in Ukraine is an opportunity to strengthen EU foreign and security policy, but also an opportunity for the EU as a whole. In their opinion, the EU must remodel a project conceived for peace in a time marked by war.

Citizens want a say

Regardless of citizens' country of origin and background, or whether they were mobilised or non-mobilised, they all agreed on one thing: let us have a say. The feeling of being disconnected from what is happening at a European level was omnipresent. Participants felt uninformed about the EU's functioning, structure and decision-making. They did not feel heard or acknowledged by far-off Brussels.

Participants wanted more dialogue between citizens and policymakers on a national as well as European level. They wanted to be better informed and for their input and ideas to be taken into account in policymaking.

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As one citizen put it: “Europe should engage citizens more in the process of creating a common narrative. Citizens should be more involved in policy-making at the European level”.

On this note, an alarming sign might be that almost none of the participants had heard of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and certainly not the results and proposals made.

Towards a future narrative?

Undelivered promise continues to be the story told about Europe. For example, in some areas the EU is perceived as working well but participants doubted whether it has delivered the hoped-for equality of opportunities for everyone.

The war in Ukraine puts the spotlight on values again. Political leaders speak of the Russian aggression also being an attack on European values and some citizens picked up on this idea as well. But many participants in the final conference, as well as some in the national focus groups, could not help but wonder about the extent to which the EU will defend those values. It was noted that this has not always happened in the past. Citizens wonder whether values that are neither always defended nor always shared can result in new and better narratives. In a similar fashion, joint narratives cannot be built if the perception remains that powerful states lead and the rest follow.

The idea that permeated the conference’s final session, on future narratives, was that Europe is a space of permanent debate. Thus, while the narrative of peace and prosperity remains present, other visions also favour a European Union that is stronger than its present capabilities. The EU acts more slowly than people hope for. According to the citizens, every country acts separately when they should be acting together.

More importantly, they highlighted the need to be (pro-)active, instead of reacting to events, which also makes it more difficult to find a powerful narrative like the one on peace and prosperity.

A participant summed it up as follows: “There are many narratives on the future of Europe. Confrontation [between narratives] will bring to an equilibrium point defining what kind of Europe we want (especially [for] younger generations)”.

One thought that emerged from the conversation was that a pragmatic approach should be adopted, taking advantage of the current momentum. This reflects what Robert Schuman said – that Europe will not be made all at once nor according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.

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