



**Citizens' views on fake news
and false narratives about the European Union**

FACTS project

EU INSTITUTIONS & POLICIES

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October 2021
Policy Brief #154/2021

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Disclaimer: This project has received funding from the European Union's Europe for Citizens programme under grant decision No. 615563 and acronym FACTS. This publication reflects only the author's view and therefore 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.

Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union



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

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

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.

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

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

“...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.”

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.

“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.”

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

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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.

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Citizens' expectations of national and EU officials

There is a strong belief that the EU institutions are led by a “directorate” 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 directorate”, 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.

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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.