

EU legitimacy in crisis: Is it the time for more visibility and transparency?

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1. THE EUROPEAN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: HOW DID WE COME THIS FAR?

a. The EU's legitimacy problem: how crises brought the EU's democracy gaps from the shadows to the light

In recent years, the European Union has been affected in a spiral of international and internal crises, from the global economic crisis to an ongoing global health crisis, and seems incapable to escape from them, thereby creating a European existential crisis.

These crises, by creating a greater “need for Europe”, have indeed put under the spotlight pre-existing deficiencies of the EU democracy. In practice, EU decision-making processes have rarely proved capable of producing meaningful and timely responses to these crises, with the EU often showing the image of a disunited front as a consequence. At the same time, the lack of engagement of EU citizens in these processes have led many of them to question the influence they could possibly have on EU decisions, thereby perceiving an EU democratic deficit.

Overall, these failures of the EU democracy, both in facts and in the eyes of its citizens, have greatly harmed the legitimacy of the EU.

b. Visibility and transparency: identifying two key elements as part of both the issue and the solution

The main opportunity that was highlighted during our Country Team's internal discussions concerned the capability of the EU to acquire more legitimacy through better visibility and transparency.

Visibility of EU actions corresponds to the information flow about, and the engagement of EU citizens in, what the EU is doing, both at national and supranational level. Transparency is linked with visibility and should raise EU citizens' trust in EU actions, while also preserving them from any harmful influences. In this sense, visibility can be seen as the “effective” side of transparency. These largely appear to our Team as being flawed.

As shown by Stanley Baran's definition of agenda setting, ‘Mass media do not tell you what to think, but it tells you what to think about’. Yet, European mass media rarely tell EU citizens to think about EU affairs, except in crisis situations, precisely when the impact of internal divisions on EU decision-making capacities are probably the strongest. This has been made evident to the Team through the example of studies, which have shown that citizens from countries most affected by the global economic crisis also have the highest level of literacy on economic matters.

While part of the responsibility for this issue falls on national mass media themselves, European institutions are also at fault in this respect. The EU has indeed a clear problem of engagement and approach. This is linked to its way of communicating, most often via its own channels, such as official websites and social media accounts, or the Euronews TV channel, and in Brussels. In this manner, the EU requests that citizens change their habits in the way they consume information, by consulting new channels of information, instead of “meeting” citizens in the channels they are already using.

Further to the means that are being used by institutions to spread information, the content of conveyed messages is also seen by our Team as being defective. In this sense, we have identified a failed European “narrative”. While EU citizens are questioning the legitimacy of the Union, and the effective existence of its democracy, the EU often appears as being incapable to successfully address the question of its relevance in modern times. The EU’s narrative is indeed still largely based on its capacity to preserve peace in Europe, which has arguably a poor impact on younger generations.

In addition, large differences in awareness can be found on how the EU influences its citizens’ daily life and in how, in return, they can influence EU decision-making, according to factors such as place of origin and educational-cultural background. This partly relates to the existence of a “two-speed” Europe, with citizens from the least wealthy Member States mainly expecting the EU to help them raise their standards of living, while those living in the most developed EU countries rather focus on getting the benefits of cross-country collaboration. Again, a relevant, inclusive and faithful European narrative is direly needed in this sense.

The latter issue has been, in particular, brought to the attention of the team through the example of ‘European roads’, in particular in Hungary. Since 2010, 600 000 young Hungarians have indeed left the country to seek better working and living conditions elsewhere in the EU. While the Hungarian youth is, thus, rather ‘pro-European’, the EU is being regularly accused by government claims of being similar to the Soviet rule, imperialistic, and responsible for migration. This clearly shows how the lack of high-quality information can generate a generational divide on the understanding of the EU. Similar examples can also be observed when it comes to information concerning such matters as vaccines, LGBT rights.

Such a poor and discrepant level of information and awareness hampers the generation of a common understanding of the EU and of its decisions by its own citizens on the ground, who therefore are less likely to feel engaged, as proven by the general low turnout in European elections, for instance, particularly in the youngest generations.

c. EU’s legitimacy, visibility, transparency... What is at stake?

As emphasised above, recent and ongoing crises generate a stronger “need for Europe”. The European stage increasingly appears as the relevant level to address modern challenges faced by European societies. In addition, recent trends on the world diplomatic stage, recently summarised by Enrico Letta through the phrase “a world of savages”, require Europe to develop a higher strategic autonomy - as recognised by all nowadays.

Yet, none of these goals can be met if decisions taken by the EU do not appear as legitimate in the eyes of its citizens. In addition, poor levels of civic engagement and participation of EU citizens harms the outputs of the democratic process, thereby hindering their capacity to address challenges faced by, and meet expectations of, European societies.

This is why our Country Team is convinced that the EU's legitimacy problem should be taken most seriously and urgently tackled.

Overall, we believe that raising the legitimacy of the EU through better visibility and transparency is key to generating a framework in which the EU democracy can address its structural deficiencies, respond to crises and meet the expectations of its citizens. We will bring concrete and readily applicable solutions in order to reach this goal, under 3 distinct pillars of action.

2. BUILDING BACK BETTER: THREE KEY PILLARS TO MAKE THE EU DEMOCRACY 'FIT FOR PURPOSE'

a. A new phone application connecting European citizens to their democracy

Our first solution is to create an application on the phone for European citizens. This app could be a tool to bring Europeans together. The goal would also be to make the EU more translucent and visible to future generations. It would work on a new narrative: show that the EU is here for its citizens and that it wants to consider its different opinions.

Concretely, the app would contain some key information about the EU that could be more user friendly and accessible to read for the general public. It would also explain EU institutions and show what decisions were made and how they will affect us. In this app, "brainstorming sessions" could be organized on an European level so as to make sure citizens feel consulted and involved in the decision process. Citizens could also start referenda and petitions where, for example, after one million signatures this would be taken into account in plenary sessions. After a decision is made in the Parliament, the discussion should proceed to the Council. To access the app citizens would have to use a strict identification process such as "it's me" in Belgium. The main goal of this identification process is to impeach "trolls" and hackers.

After downloading the app we could directly invite users to answer a poll asking the following questions: what can the EU do for you? Why is the EU important to you? What can you do for the EU?

Other functionalities would include:

- Work with national authorities to send alerts to citizens when they are in an endangered place caused by a natural disaster or terrorism for instance. As a tourist in another European country, I won't receive alerts on my phone if there is a disaster. That is why such a feature could be helpful;
- Make a "FAQ section" where people could have access videos explaining their everyday questions in a ludic way;
- Feature some headlines from EURONEWS so as to encourage more people to check the European news network;
- Store social security papers or cards on it such as the "European Health Insurance Card".

All these ideas could be useful in encouraging people to download the app as they would see a practical use in it. The App/Portal should be in every European language.

- b. Spreading the word: a commitment by European Commissioners for increased national coverage of EU actions

It is frequently felt that the EU is based on the belief that national decision-makers would convey its messages and actions in their respective countries of origin. Yet, these have largely failed to do so, contributing to the lack of visibility and transparency of the EU, as illustrated by the well-known scheme “Praise myself for what I like, blame Brussels otherwise”. To finally resolve this deadlock, we believe that the European Commission, through the members of its College, should be proactive in the field of communication and information, seeing this as an integral component of their mission to serve European citizens’ interests.

This can surely not be solely achieved through press conferences held in Brussels. Therefore, our second solution would be that European Commissioners officially commit to spend a certain share of their time on the ground, in the Member States. Importantly, this commitment should incorporate provisions preventing these visits to be solely made in each Commissioner’s country of origin, which are often known to serve personal national political interests. Meanwhile, Commissioners should make the best use of their linguistic skills in order to minimise the need for translation and deliver, as much as possible, messages in the native language of the visited countries. Naturally, in times of a global health crisis, as well as, more generally, of needed decreases in carbon footprints, the Team sees such “national visits” as being conducted both physically and through virtual means, whenever possible/relevant.

Through interactions with local citizens and stakeholders - which should be kept from being unnatural or too scripted - as well as by bringing attention of national media, we believe that these visits would greatly help citizens to “put a face” on the EU and to receive enhanced information on EU decisions. This would allow those truly representing the EU at its highest level to show to citizens the outputs of the EU democratic processes. They could also demonstrate the limits of these processes, and would be able to fight at source the frequent double-speak of national politicians when it comes to EU decisions they contributed to, thereby getting the latter to face their own contradictions in front of their immediate voters.

- c. Building upon what’s there already: upgrading Euronews into a pan-European information network

The Team recognises the potential of the Euronews TV channel as a tool for pan-European, multi-linguistic information, helping to achieve mutual understanding of distant citizens and better visibility and transparency of the EU. However, we believe that much needs to be done to fully exploit this potential.

Our third solution is there to upgrade EURONEWS to a true pan-European information network. This should include providing increased support for a higher diversity and wider scope of programmes, thereby helping bringing the attention of increased numbers of viewers. In addition, contents broadcasted by the channel should be made available on all European languages, live, but also in replay, through the channel’s website and social media. This could therefore attract viewers from across the Union, who will be able to consult high-quality information in their mother tongue. In addition, measures should be taken to allow these contents to be readily re-used by national mass media, thereby turning Euronews into a true pan-European resource of European information. The latter media would therefore

be able to save production costs to inform their viewers on matters known as not being always well understood by them, while citizens would enjoy the benefits of a common messaging and narrative.

In this sense, this new and upgraded pan-European network will provide all the necessary material, lines and stories about the EU and will support journalists around the EU that want to explain EU politics and disseminate success stories to EU citizens. In order people to take interest in european affairs as a whole before starting to watch a more specific channel like Euronews, they need to understand EU politics and engage with a network that can find information analysed and tailored to their background. It could also be an interesting way to slowly bring some light to the subject.

Finally, in order to further enhance European information, opportunities should be closely considered, including via financial and legislative tools, to encourage national media in providing a stronger coverage of EU-related matters, as part of their information mission. The EU is an integral part of the civic rights and everyday life of all its citizens, and should therefore be a section of the news they happen to be exposed to every day.