

EUROPEAN CITIZENS IN BRUSSELS: WHAT MESSAGES?

Virginie Timmerman | *Project manager Citizenship and democracy*

0 n 4 May 2014 Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute organised the second stage of the project “Horizon EU: European citizenship, a horizontal development” bringing together 52 citizens from 18 European Union member states in Brussels so that they could discuss their vision of the EU and their means of access to the EU. This synthesis covers the main points of the discussions of the 52 European citizens.

52 citizens¹ from 18 member countries (*see Map 1*) were chosen because they had participated in the first phase of the project “Horizon EU: European citizenship, a horizontal development” that brought together 150 citizens in their respective countries, in representative groups of about ten people to discuss their access to the EU². They also were chosen so as to obtain a sample that represents European citizens in their diversity regarding several sociodemographic criteria (*see Table 1*).

Table 1 ► The profile of the 52 European citizens participating in the second stage of the “Horizon EU” project

Participants		52
Age range	25-34 years	16
	35-49 years	24
	50 years and +	12
Socio-professional category	Lower to middle (labourer, supervisory staff and employees)*	29
	Middle to upper (middle and senior managers, small and medium size company managers, independent professions)**	21
	Students	2
Gender	Male	30
	Female	22

* Among the participants, here are some examples of professions within the lower to middle socio-professional category: logistic manager, project manager, car driver, employee in a municipality, etc.

** Among the participants, here are some examples of professions within the middle to upper socio-professional category: shop owner, lawyer, farmer, owner of printing and publishing company, etc.

During this discussion, Yves Bertoncini, director of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, and Daniel Debomy, founder and managing director of the opinion research institute OPTEM, asked the European citizens attending two questions:

- What is your vision of the European Union?
- What communication exists between the European Union and citizens?

These are the issues that the 52 citizens debated in Brussels, on Sunday 4 May, in their 16 respective languages, with the assistance of whisper interpreters sitting among citizens with the same mother-tongue. Instinctively, citizens generally divided into groups according to language even though some of them spoke English, the pivot language for debates.

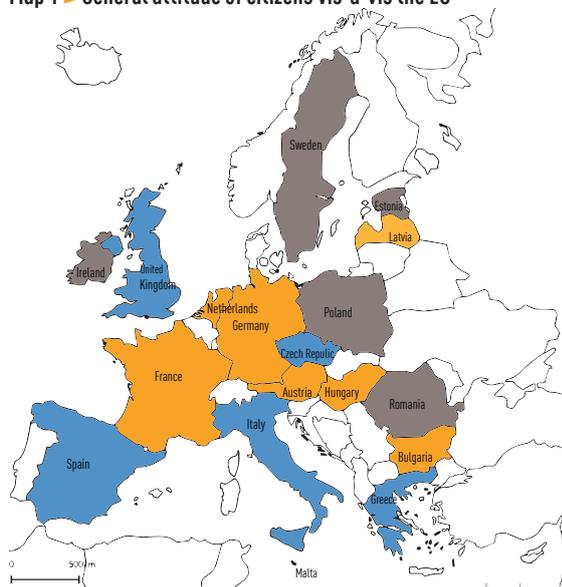
This second stage was a step forward on the horizontal path towards their European citizenship.



1. What is the general attitude vis-à-vis the EU and the crisis?

The discussion between the 52 European citizens focused on their reactions to the results of the first national discussions in which they themselves had participated to learn their attitudes and visions regarding the EU³. Three major categories were identified: member states with a relatively positive attitude vis-à-vis the EU, those with a mixed attitude – recognising positive and negative points –, and lastly those with a relatively negative attitude.

Map 1 ► General attitude of citizens vis-à-vis the EU



Key ► Map 1

POSITIVE	MIXED (BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SIDES)	NEGATIVE
Estonia	Austria	Czech Republic
Ireland	Bulgaria	Greece (major disappointment)
Malta	France (deterioration)	Italy (disillusion and resentment)
Poland	Germany (deterioration)	Spain
Romania (moderation)	Hungary	United Kingdom
Sweden (partially offset)	Netherlands	
	Latvia (initial fear substantially reduced)	

Source: Daniel Debomy, "The involvement of EU citizens in the European project", *Synthesis*, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014; synthesis presenting the results of the project "Horizon EU: European citizenship, a horizontal development."

Some common aspects were identified in nearly all of the national discussions, particularly those concerning positive aspects. The fundamental values of peace, democracy and freedom promoted by the European project are recognised. The freedom of movement, particularly with regard to people, which

is one of EU's major successes, is also recognised. Among the EU countries that have most recently joined the European Union and those that have experienced the biggest difficulties during the crisis, financing via European funds was mentioned. As for negative aspects, these latter countries resent the unequal treatment of European countries. Those that have suffered from the crisis feel that a two-speed Europe exists, while "new countries" consider that their countries weigh less in European discussions. Almost all countries criticised bureaucracy. There was a wide range of other positive and negative criticisms. Among the most mentioned were the common rights of European citizens, protection with regard to globalisation and neighbours thanks to unity, the lack of autonomy for national governments with regard to common European decisions, too many regulations, economic instability, the distance between citizens and Brussels mainly due to the lack of representation, information and transparency, etc.

The first ones to respond to these observations were some Spanish, French and Italian citizens who sought to clarify the negativity of attitudes described. **One of the Spanish citizens** considers that the distance of European institutions is genuinely one of the major problems, in part because it has enabled national policies to discredit them. Moreover, this negative attitude is mainly a consequence of the crisis since citizens are wondering why so many people can cross Spanish borders to find work, and since European financing in recent years has helped financial institutions more than citizens. **One of the French citizens** spoke in defence of the EU pointing out that it is a genuine lever of influence thanks to its unity in today's world. And **certain Italian citizens** underlined the difference in attitude towards the EU and the euro, the euro being to blame for the crisis the EU is undergoing.

These clarifications prompted **one of the Greek citizens** to affirm the negative attitude of her fellow citizens towards the EU and domination of the European project of certain member states like Germany. Greek citizens feel abandoned at a time when Greece is still teetering between bankruptcy and rescue by the EU, and that corruption persists, especially when it comes to the management of European funds. They also feel abandoned when it comes to territorial disputes with neighbours. Citizens no longer have any hopes for the future in Greece. **One of the Irish citizens** agreed stating that in this context of crisis, the rescue was limited

to banks: citizens continue to suffer while emigration and suicide rates have increased. European rescue plans are not satisfactory with regard to citizens, and there is a clear difference in perception between them and decision-makers.

The German citizens attending, supported by **their Austrian counterparts**, consider that it is not up to their country or the EU to solve the problems of other countries. One of the Czech citizens added that “Those who do not manage their finances well will fail miserably”. **A Swedish citizen and a Dutch citizen** addressed these issues in the last part of the debate pointing out that every state must shoulder its responsibilities and pay for its own errors.

This debate on the economic situation gave rise to demands on the part of certain citizens. **Czech citizens attending** affirmed that the EU needs to stabilise its economic situation and better examine the economic situation of candidate countries when they join the EU and the euro area. **Two citizens, Italian and Maltese**, asked for more solidarity when it comes to immigration issues.

Some of the Latvian citizens attending would like to see aid directed to bankrupt businesses as a priority. **One of the Austrian citizens** thinks that the EU is often used as a scapegoat even though it lacks capacity in certain areas, for instance foreign affairs, and therefore cannot manage effectively. **Austrian and Polish citizens** think bureaucracy and too many regulations are EU shortcomings. **One Polish citizen** feels that the EU - together with NATO - nevertheless provides protection against foreign powers and that it should assert itself against Russia with sanctions in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

Despite all this criticism, **groups of Hungarian, Latvian and especially Polish citizens** reaffirmed their positive vision of their countries' belonging to the EU and that they want to remain member states.

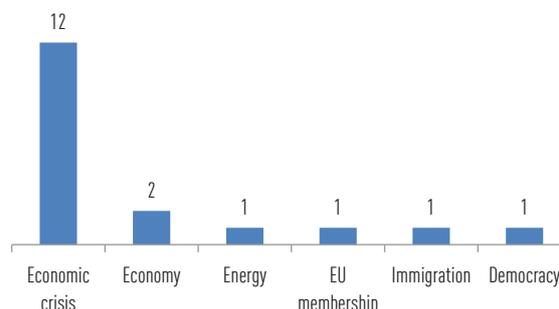


2. Towards a more direct communication between citizens and institutions?

The discussion between 52 citizens continued on their reaction to the results identified during the first national discussions on their access to the EU: their sources of information and knowledge about the EU, information they would like to have, the means of expression they use to access the EU and lastly the means they wished to have.

The two main sources of information mentioned were the Internet and traditional media, then the radio, specialised media and school, and lastly personal discussions and experience. However most citizens affirmed that they have little knowledge of European issues. The leading concerns being economic, citizens expect more information from the EU on these issues.

Graph 1 ► EU citizens' expectations regarding information



Source: Graph by Virginie Timmerman, based on Daniel Debomy, “The involvement of EU citizens in the European project”, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014: synthesis presenting the results of the project “Horizon EU: European citizenship, a horizontal development”.

Lastly, citizens participating in the first stage of the project “Horizon EU” mentioned the same means of expression regarding the EU, namely voting and referendums first, direct contact with European actors, then occasionally questioning national governments, consultations, petitions and demonstrations. However, they also spoke of impediments discouraging their participation in European affairs, such as the lack of willingness of national and European actors, the vague and even negative image of the members of the European Parliament (MEPs), the complexity of European issues, no awareness of channels of communication, passivity with regard to seeking information and lastly, the weak influence

felt by citizens of certain countries. In order to become more involved in European affairs, citizens are favourable, even very favourable, to the following proposals: the presence of an information office similar to Europe Direct that is open to the public in every large city, Eurobarometer-type surveys, the organisation of consultations through the Internet by the European Commission, and an interactive service using the Internet and social networks that can collect their opinion.

Discussion on the access to the EU began with the participation of a **Hungarian citizen** who shared his feeling on the complexity of the EU, which he believes is due to the large number of countries that belong. He also considers that member states should shoulder their responsibilities. **An Estonian citizen** agreed with him on this point stating that national actors discredit the EU. **One of the Bulgarian citizens** addressed this issue again at the end of the debate pointing out their lack of confidence in their national and European representatives. Like Estonian citizens, they feel that they were not being heard, both at national and European level. In order to rectify this, **certain Romanian, Hungarian and Bulgarian citizens** would like to have more frequent and direct feedback from the MEPs they elected.



An Estonian citizen joined by a Swedish citizen added that national governments are not the only ones criticising the EU because media does the same. A Maltese citizen explained that he has no confidence in their TV stations because they are controlled by political parties. **Two Czech and Estonian citizens** stated that the European channel Euronews exists but in the Czech Republic it is a pay channel and in Estonia two Euronews channels exist, one in English and the other in Russian, which is a cause for confusion.

A Maltese citizen would like to see more transparency whereas **Austrian citizens** want the EU to use the proper channels of communication. **A British citizen** added that the EU should communicate more about decisions taken, particularly when citizens directly express themselves in referendums or petitions, or through a European Citizens' Initiative, which obligatorily brings together a million European citizens. Moreover, **certain Austrian and Hungarian citizens** would like to see more consultations, particularly when European decisions concern human rights. **Several German citizens** suggested that MEPs come directly to speak in schools.

A Maltese citizen would also like communication to be more direct. For this to happen, most citizens want new information and communication technologies to be used, i.e. the Internet and social networks, especially with regard to voting, **a Romanian citizen** suggested. **A Czech citizen** suggested that every week, Brussels broadcast a 30-minute programme on the state of European affairs, on what has happened and what is scheduled for the following week.

Maltese citizens attending also raised the issue of citizens' interest in European issues. National and European institutions should ask themselves why citizens have lost their interest in these issues. **A Greek citizen** then said that citizens do not need more information but should be more interested in European issues. Indeed, they should be addressed from another angle focusing on the common characteristics of European citizens, their cultures, their wines and their travels. Moreover, **a Romanian citizen** thinks that European issues should be presented in a more attractive way in films or TV programmes. **Bulgarian citizens attending** concluded the debate on the issue of languages: apart from basic information available in all languages, everything is only available in English.

All the European citizens who participated in discussions the first day, met the next day at the European Parliament to hold discussions with representatives of European institutions.

1. Three citizens from each of the discussion groups of the first stage were invited, but only one Dutch citizen came. The two other citizens were unable to attend at the last minute.

2. Daniel Debomy, "The involvement of EU citizens in the European project", *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014.

3. Daniel Debomy, "The involvement of EU citizens in the European project", *op. cit.*



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