

THE INVOLVEMENT OF EU CITIZENS IN THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

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Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, supported by the OPTEM network, organised in December 2013 the first stage of the project "Horizon EU: European citizenship, a horizontal development". It aimed at allowing 150 European citizens to debate about their access to the European institutions. This pan-European synthesis is based on the 18 national syntheses.

Introduction: Research objectives and methodology

This synthesis presents the results of a qualitative study conducted with citizens of 18 of the member states of the European Union: Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

This selection of countries was chosen in order to reflect the diversity of member states of the Union, according to the criteria of size (from the country with the lowest population to the one with the highest), geographical location (North, South, East and West of the continent), level of economic development and the degree of exposure (more or less exposed) to the economic and financial crisis.

This study was carried out by OPTEM¹ together with its partners of the European Qualitative Network². It is part of the wider framework of a project managed by Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute

for the European Commission - Europe for Citizens Programme.

The study is based upon a group discussion³ with average citizens in each of the countries. The demographic composition of the group had a balance between:

- men and women
- age ranges (20-34 / 35-49 / 50-60 years)
- lower to middle socioprofessional categories (manual workers and office employees) and middle to upper categories (middle-level managers, upper-level managers, SME managers and liberal professions).
- varied political preferences.

These discussions took place during the second half of December 2013 (except for one country when it was in January 2014)

National syntheses were prepared by the network partner institute in each country - this panEuropean synthesis was produced by OPTEM.



Main conclusions

1. There are very noticeable differences in the general attitudes expressed in the group discussions vis-à-vis the European Union from one member state to another.

It is clear that the image of the Union has deteriorated in the last few years in quite a few countries (whether europhile or already euroreluctant earlier) – the most strongly in the Southern countries which were the most badly hit by the crisis. Conversely a certain improvement can be observed in several of the new member states since they came into the Union, notably Poland, Estonia and Latvia. Many citizens still appear to be attached to the European ideal – but the Union seems to have drifted away from that ideal.

2. Most citizens think that they are badly, or even very badly informed about the European Union.

They tend to criticize the media, their main source of information (starting with television) in most countries, for their poor coverage of European affairs. We can note at the same time the importance of Internet usage in certain countries, particularly in new member states. At the same time, they admit to being passive and not really inclined to make the effort to go and look for information on those questions. Among the questions which they feel it would be particularly important to know more about, we find primarily crisis-related economic issues. But these questions lead to others on the capacity of the Union to continue as it is, when considering the heterogeneity it has revealed and its great difficulties in dealing with the problems – or at least the respondents ask themselves about changes to be envisaged in the structure and the functioning of the EU.

3. When invited to say how they could make their voices heard as regards the future directions of the European Union or the way it works, the interviewed citizens often appear to be disconcerted by the question at first.

Then they mention voting, or attempts to establish direct contact with EU institutions or representatives thereof – but impediments to citizens' input and to it being taken into account are regarded as significant and often discouraging. There are expectations of means of communication permitting greater involvement; they reflect a demand for closer proximity, interactivity and exchange, which new technological communication tools could help respond to. In fact, among various proposals which were tested, the groups generally reacted very favourably to proposals of interactive means of consultation and expression based on such tools.

1. Attitudes of the interviewed citizens vis-à-vis the European Union

The people attending the meetings were asked to say “what first came into their minds” in relation to the European Union.

This first subject for debate provided an opportunity to gauge **the current climate of perceptions of the Union**, highlighting **the very noticeable differences between the member states involved in the study**.

In two of largest founder states, **France and Germany**, we can observe partly similar perceptions, in the sense that the legitimacy and the original aims of building Europe are not questioned and are still close to people's hearts: a community of values, exchanges, solidarity with the initial aim of peace, the well-understood need to unite to be strong enough in the face of other big countries or blocs in the world.

Achievements that have an impact on people's lives are recognised, positive ones (the euro, which is not criticised in France and which is hardly criticised in Germany any more) or sometimes less positive ones.

However, disappointments and disillusion abound.

In Germany, these were really brought to the fore by the financial and economic crisis. The behaviour of

Greece (“cheat”) was particularly condemned and the role it is said to have played in bringing about the current economic instability and stagnation in Europe. It brings to mind a sort of “perverted solidarity” for the countries that “don't play ball”, and makes one question the relevance of membership criteria of the Union (not strict enough) and fear other instabilities (migrating from the East to the West of Europe, for instance).

The French – who, as we know from many surveys, are in very low spirits at the moment – speak less directly about the crisis and how the Union is dealing with it, but are very critical of an organisation that is complex, onerous, distant and vague, and whose decisions elude the ordinary citizen. It is to be noted that this “bureaucratic criticism” of the Union, which has been observed in other countries for a long time, was not nearly so strong in France a few years ago.

In the two countries there is the impression of being badly informed (also by the media which no doubt tend to focus on the negative aspects of things – a point more frequently made in Germany, actually).

In Italy, a country formerly very europhile, the disillusion is very great indeed and is coupled with resentment.

There is clear domination of negativity. The European Union is seen as responsible, if not for the crisis, at least for not dealing with it adequately, thus leading

to major financial and economic problems for Italy, to deepening of social inequalities and to what is more and more a “two-speed” Europe, where Germany dominates and countries like Greece and Italy have to follow.

The original *raison d'être* of building Europe has lost its meaning, the common feeling has faded, the valued diversity of cultures has been jeopardised, etc.

Some of the interviewees, among the youngest, still have a more positive vision of a Union that is aiming for equality, respect of rights, solidarity, common progress – even if these values seem dormant at the moment.

On a practical level, they also recognise positive things (peace, unity in the face of other “blocs”, integration elements such as Erasmus, practicality of the euro – although others, on the contrary, will attribute a part of Italy’s economic problems to the same euro.)

Here also, there is the idea that the media give a negative picture.

In Spain there is the same scepticism and the same disappointments.

There is a real sense of having been abandoned by the Union, as well as a growing gap between the Southern and Northern states (or the “dominant member states”). Spain appears to be “lagging behind” on the economic front as well as on other fronts, even losing mastery of its own destiny.

The Spanish interviewees feel that there is a great distance between them and the European institutions and there is a strong feeling of not being represented there.

Naturally, they recognise the advantages (free movement of people, opportunities for professional mobility, university and cultural exchanges, the euro, EU fund grants, etc.), but for now these take second place.

In Greece the attitudes are similar to those in the previous two countries of the South, perhaps even more clearly defined.

On the economic front (without tackling the question of the country’s own responsibilities at this stage),

they consider that the European Union failed in its “safety net” role by not having anticipated the problems that were to arise for the fragile countries; and the euro is regarded as a factor in Greek difficulties.

The Union appears as more and more unequal and the Greeks see themselves dependant on the decisions of others (not just economically) – the interviewees representing the older population being the most pessimistic.

Positive elements are recognised (open borders for travel, studies, work and trade; common regulations in place; European fund grants – they admit that the country has not availed well of the opportunities presented) – but they remain very theoretical in the current climate.

In Ireland there is quite a different attitude.

In a country that also had to go through a European “rescue plan”, but which is beginning to get out of its problems, the attitudes vis-a-vis the European Union are clearly favourable today.

The Union has been recognised in recent years for its protector role, as a useful “safeguard”, especially financially (even if this “big brother” personality is ambivalent).

More generally reference is made to the European funds which contributed greatly to the development of Ireland during the 1990s, the opening of borders, the euro, obtaining lower interest rates, freedom of movement, protection of rights with the Court of Justice and the “Convention” on human rights – in short, elements that are positive for unification and solidarity between the member states.

The negative elements, that are nevertheless mentioned, include a certain loss of autonomy and power of decision (financially – but also when one thinks of a Union that makes a population “vote again” when the result of a first referendum does not suit it) – under German control in financial matters, and also the “European bureaucracy”, and the irrelevant or inappropriate regulations that are centrally concocted.

In Sweden the first reactions of the interviewees are also positive on the whole – their interest in the topic actually grows as the discussion goes.

As elsewhere, they cite the initial peace project, the opening of the borders which allows young people especially to go and work in other countries, the importance of economic cooperation - and, contrary to what we hear in some (in their own view) "small" or "weak" member states, the feeling that a country of the size of Sweden can have an influence.

This is partially counterbalanced by negative points: drafting too many regulations and norms that are sometimes absurd ("size of cucumbers and strawberries", for instance), bureaucracy, lack of transparency and not enough information available.

In the Netherlands to all appearances, the attitudes have been traditionally very favourable towards the Union (see opinion polls) but have always masked some underlying reservations.

The first reactions are half-heartedly favourable, with recognition of positive concrete elements in European policies (cooperation on security, education and scientific exchanges, grants for agriculture which go "less than previously to one or two (other, of course) countries").

Nevertheless, the European Union, however necessary it may be, seems very far away; its decision mechanisms are nebulous; the search for common solutions seems illusionary faced with the huge differences in "economic and cultural" development between the member states; and there are fears about loss of identity for the country and the influx of immigrants (not to mention criticism of the cost of the double seat of the Parliament in Strasbourg as well as in Brussels).

All of this makes the European Union "hard to grasp".

In Austria the comments made are also both positive and negative.

On the positive side, there is reference to the fundamental aims and the values of democracy, equality and rights, and to achievements like free exchange and the introduction of the euro.

On the negative side, there is condemnation of the bureaucratic red tape of the Union, suspicion about the influence of lobbies, whereas the expectations of average citizens have little chance of being taken into account.

In the United Kingdom the many traditional objections to the European Union seem to be even more entrenched today.

There is questioning of open borders which leads to the arrival of undesirable immigrants, "profiteers" of the health system benefits (even if some make the case that this has also brought foreigners who carry out tasks that the British "do not want to do"). The fear of an influx of Bulgarians and Romanians once the transitory period following their entry is expressed. The euro is synonymous with financial instability - but especially and more fundamentally, the interviewees are critical of the attempts made by Brussels (or "foreigners") to rule the United Kingdom.

The few positive aspects that they admitted (free movement of people and trade exchanges) are minor by comparison to the above - and are not always without negative effects.

The hypothesis of exiting the European Union is in the minds of people.

In Poland, a new member state where attitudes to the Union were marked with serious reservations and fears before enlargement and in the first years of membership, the move towards a much more rosy vision that emerged later is fully confirmed.

The Poles in the group refer to a Community with very positive values (freedom, openness, diversity, tolerance, opportunities, progress, modernity, etc.) as well as European policies with positive outcomes (European funds, Common Agricultural Policy, Erasmus exchanges, etc.).

Economic aspects dominate these considerations, with a clear objective of catching up with the more advanced Western countries of Europe.

On the negative side - but this is rather minor - we hear criticism of bureaucratic red tape, the high cost of running programmes and sometimes lack of efficiency - as well as a trend towards "unification of cultures".

In Hungary another central European country who entered the Union at the same time as Poland, the reactions of the citizens questioned are varied and ambivalent.

The “end” of frontiers is greatly appreciated with the feeling of freedom (for tourists, workers, etc.) that it brought. It is even associated with “revenge on Trianon” (the Treaty after the First World War that set new borders cutting Hungary off from part of its territory and leaving in its wake a frustration that has lived on to this day).

The Union as a community of values is cited by the group - for the first time in the history of this small country, a “federation” it has “joined voluntarily”.

However, criticisms, dissatisfactions and frustrations remain, especially with regard to the economy. It is not just a question of the current economic setbacks of the Union, but on a deeper level, the perceived consequences of membership - loss of national enterprises and industries, lost or taken over by foreigners, as well as a resulting feeling that “Hungary no longer decides for Hungary” (including, the example given of the assignment of Structural Funds that it receives - although they admit that their amount seems to have increased recently).

The Hungarians interviewed are conscious of their low level of knowledge, attributed to a lack of information and training, to “filtering” by the media and also their own passiveness in this regard.

In **the Czech Republic**, where there is traditional reservation with regard to the Union, a negative tone dominates: criticism of EU bureaucracy, the fact that small countries “don’t count”, an inequality of treatment which allows the large member states like Germany or France to ignore the rules without incurring sanctions, and at the same time, the instability of the Union due to the “collapse” of the Southern countries and the economic weakness of the new arrivals, Bulgaria and Romania, and finally mistrust in regard to the euro.

However, there are some positive points emerging: free movement for travel, studies and work, social security cover maintained when in another member state, European funds useful for the development of the country and necessary unity to counter other “blocs”.

With **Estonia** we are dealing with a small country, that had joined a huge Union with distant and wait-and-see attitudes, if not mistrustful. Here the initial

reservations have moderated and the image of the Union is now more positive than negative.

Aspects seen as positive include free movement (including to study and to work), the impression of a protecting Europe (it showed itself as such vis-a-vis Greece...) and its grants from EU Funds for developing the country and catching up with the more advanced member states.

However, on the negative side, on the one hand, there are the ideas of over-regulation, standardisations that are counter to historical, cultural and geographical identities, and on the other hand, fears of the consequences of the behaviour of “irresponsible” states like Greece, for whom the Estonians might have to “pay” and to become net contributors.

Moreover, the Estonians feel that the European Union is abstract and distant. They consider that their voice counts for little anyhow and they show limited interest and involvement.

Latvia is a small country that has joined the Union with even more reservations and especially very big fears (of not being able to adapt, of not “bearing the shock”, etc.) - reservations and fears which remained after joining.

Here too, the visions have improved: there is a consensus in the group that the positive points outweigh the negative ones.

Positive: EU fund grants, that can be seen through the concrete projects that they finance; norms and regulations that give “a sense of security” linked to these “modern standards”; entry into the euro area which gives added value to Latvia by giving the country more self-confidence; and free movement of people especially for work abroad.

Negative: the negative side of the freedom of movement is a certain brain drain from the country (which, in reality, would have happened with or without the EU); bureaucratic red tape; injustices and inequalities in the treatment between the old and new member states (as evidenced in the amount of assistance provided to Southern countries like Greece).

In Bulgaria, the attitudes before and at the time of joining could be described as cautious, with a

wait-and-see attitude, while at the same time, open to improvement.

This improvement came about, according to the opinion polls which have been conducted regularly (especially Eurobarometer).

It is relative according to the reactions of the group interviewed.

On the positive side, there is recognition of the advantages of belonging to a democratic community where liberty reigns, the opportunities linked to free movement in all its aspects, the enriching experience of travel and education exchanges – as well as the financing of projects in Bulgaria by the Union.

On the negative side, there are mainly two points put forward: the bureaucratic red tape of the Union, heaps of regulations that are not always adaptable in the local context (in a country that is not yet ready to meet all demands) – and especially the impression of inequality of treatment among the member states; Bulgaria feels like “a poor relation”.

The knowledge of Union matters is, according to the interviewees themselves, weak, as is their involvement in these issues.

The Romanians, in the lead-up to their joining the Union, were known to be brimming with enthusiasm about everything, or almost everything, related to the European Union.

Even though this europopularity has moderated since then, the attitudes are still very positive on the whole.

The Union is regarded as a community of peoples and values (fraternity, the pursuit of consensus, freedom of movement, progress etc.), a Union that provides strength, and at the same time maintains the cultures of each country while facilitating exchanges (unity in diversity).

There are, of course, negative points: the benefits from membership not visible enough, inadequate use of EU Funds, “inferior” status of Romania in the Union – though the country itself is partly to blame –, unfounded criticisms towards it alone for the migration of Romani to Western European countries and also fears of seeing countries leave the EU.

The degree of interest shown was quite high overall.

Lastly, in **Malta**, – the smallest country of the Union and an island, though not formerly cut off from Western Europe like the countries of “the East” under Soviet control – reasonably positive attitudes prevail with two main themes emerging in this first phase of discussion: societal and cultural aspects and issues related to the institutions.

On the positive side, borders open for people travelling, students and workers, European fund grants especially for research development, the general idea of progress – as well as human rights with the introduction of some new rights in Malta.

On the negative side, there are topics heard about elsewhere: bureaucracy, legislation not adapted to the local context (even if some new norms have been positive), inadequate use of the financial aids granted, unequal treatment between “more influential” member states and the others, and not enough Union solidarity faced with the problem of influx of immigrants which creates major problems in a country with a very small territory.

The interest in issues relative to the Union is moderate – greater in areas where people feel more directly concerned (particularly professional ones).

2. Citizens' information about the European Union

2.1. Sources of information and knowledge about the European Union

People in the discussion groups were asked about their **sources of information and opinions on the European Union** – taking sources in the broad sense, including conversations with friends and acquaintances as well as more formal sources.

2.1.1. As expected, traditional media are mentioned in all member states, though in varying degrees.

In many countries, they are the main source of information for most of the citizens questioned.

It is the case almost everywhere in the old member states included in the scope of this study. It is also true in the Czech Republic.



The Internet is barely mentioned in some groups or only by a minority of those interviewed, younger people or those well used to it because of their educational background or their jobs, who mention it.

However, the participants of the Spanish, the Irish and even more so the Austrian groups refer more often to the Internet as a source (or a means of access) they use regularly.

In most of the new member states where the study was conducted (more or less all with the exception of the Czech Republic) **the Internet is mentioned more**, it is often on a par with traditional media, if not more widely used, and the respondents often give particulars about various ways of using it.

Among the traditional media, we note the domination of television over the other types of media **in one out of two countries** (Germany, France, Greece, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania), **whereas its use is more balanced - especially with use of the print media - in the other countries.**

As for **radio**, we hear **reference to it relatively often** in France, Italy, Ireland, Sweden, Czech Republic and Hungary, **less so** in Germany, Spain,

the Netherlands, Austria and Latvia, and hardly at all elsewhere.

Among the **other sources** that the interviewees mention, we find these from time to time:

- School (or university or Erasmus exchange) by young people.
- Specialised sources - consulted for professional reasons.
- More often, “word of mouth” - or “personal experience” from trips, meeting with other Europeans, or else observation of the local impact of EU measures.

2.1.2. The quality and credibility of the media are often seen in bad or even very bad light.

Quite a general criticism of the mass media of all types can be noted in Germany, in France, in Italy, in Greece, in Austria, in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria (less vociferously) and Malta.

The reasons given for dissatisfaction are the following: the impression that there is little coverage of European topics, that the coverage is biased, that the news is “filtered” through the political preferences of journalists or the political leaning of the publication,

the mediocre quality of the coverage of these topics, or the tendency to seek out sensationalism and only showing an interest in what is “negative” in the European Union.

The opposite case may be noted, that of Latvia, where the media are criticised for their “double-talk” which means that they often “paint a rosy picture of the European Union”.

There is more varied criticism depending on the media: in Sweden (quality channels and newspapers against popular or populist television and press); in Poland (criticism primarily of television channels); in the Czech Republic (public radio and television appreciated, as well as economic magazines, and the opposite for their private counterparts); in Estonia (the same appreciation of public channels, the opposite point of view about most newspapers); in Romania (criticism, though moderate, of television).

On the other hand, there is rarely positive appreciation: in Ireland (subjects related to the European Union quite well covered generally); and comparatively few criticisms, overall, in Spain.

2.1.3. On the whole, few people have the feeling of being well or reasonably well informed about the European Union – and even fewer think they have a coherent overview of what is and what does the Union.

It is true that in the majority of cases the citizens interviewed admit to being passive, waiting for the information to be fed to them, and not really inclined to make the effort to go look for it – on subjects that are complex and that, in general, do not have any direct impact on their own lives, and are even off-putting.

Our Irish, Estonian, Latvian, Romanian and Maltese interviewees, however, appear to be relative exceptions, in that they look for information more actively and they consult several sources.

2.2. Expectations of information regarding the future of the European Union

The groups were then asked to discuss the **future of the European Union** and were invited to give their opinion on **what would be important to know**

and to understand better in that perspective, with regard either to the functioning or to the direction of the Union.

2.2.1. In the majority of the member states, economic worries largely linked to the crisis are those spoken about before anything else.

In the countries of the South: Greece, Italy and Spain, along with France, behind the questions asked about the economic future of Europe the interviewed citizens show first of all their vivid anxiety as to the situation of their own country and its ability to come out the crisis.

In other member states the main worry is the rescue plan of the euro area (or more precisely of the member states who got themselves into a bad situation) and its repercussions on the stability of the Union as a whole and of their own national economy.

In this case we find, using various words to express it, the German, Austrian, Irish, Czech, Hungarian and (less strongly) Estonian interviewees.

In a few other countries we also hear questions asked on the European economy, more or less related to the crisis (The Netherlands, Latvia, Poland).

These worries are less to the fore in the Western European countries that are not members of the euro area (the United Kingdom: the question of the country staying in the Union predominates and creeps into the reflections on all other matters; Sweden: debate on the democratic nature and the functioning of the Union). This is also the case in some of the new member states (Bulgaria, Romania, Baltic states: the first questions were about the structure and the functioning of the Union in the future: possibility of current member states leaving, degree of federalism, margin of autonomy for the national level...).

The current economic difficulties sometimes also spark off demand for details, verification and checking of the expenditure of the Union itself, of its budget, of the programmes it manages. We see this mainly in new member states where the contribution of EU financial support is substantial and where its management (centrally or locally) sometimes raises suspicions.

2.2.2. Often linked to the crisis and its consequences, questions on the ability of the Union to last as it is, given its heterogeneity and the difficulties witnessed in having member states follow and respect the same path, and on the changes it could undergo for that reason.

These questions come mainly (though not only) from the above named countries where there is a worry that one of the defaulting member states will endanger the future of the Union as a whole.

The question of possible additional new members is sometimes raised within this context - with the same fear of excessive heterogeneity, and thus a tendency to reply with a no in the German, Austrian and Maltese groups.

An opposite case can be noted: the Poles call for EU membership of Ukraine, and the Latvians mention that possibility, as well as for Moldova and Georgia.

As regards the issue of changes of configuration of the Union, we have mentioned above the case of a few countries where the respondents had already raised that question.

Questions can also be noted about **the control that the Union will exert** on the budgetary or financial orientations of member states (heard, for example, in Italy and in Spain, as well as in Ireland and in Estonia), or more generally on the **member states maintaining or losing their autonomous powers of decision** (with resentment among the Spanish and Greeks).

In several (small or currently weakened) countries, voices can be heard questioning the dominant influence of other member states or worrying about the preservation of their national identity.

In these circumstances, few risk raising the question of the perspectives for a future Union that would be more political and more closely knit. We find questions in this vein expressed in a few groups.

In general, when discussions began to develop in the groups on the subject of **the institutions**, the functioning of the institutions and the decision-making mechanism of the Union, it evidenced the **weak** or very weak **knowledge** of these aspects among the citizens interviewed and it brought to light the need

to understand something about all of this. This was particularly obvious among the French, Italians, Irish, and Swedes interviewed but also among the Spanish, Greeks and Latvians.

Some questions were also asked about the rights of citizens, the way in which they are protected and means of recourse.

2.2.3. Other policy issues are raised less frequently overall, although they appear to be particularly sensitive in certain countries.

The management of immigration problems: in Italy, in Malta (where you would expect more EU solidarity), in the Netherlands, in Hungary, and in Latvia (the latter two referred to the problems of emigration of nationals to other member states, as well as the entry of immigration candidates from elsewhere).

Energy issues were noted as being particularly important by the Poles, and by other citizens of central and Eastern Europe: (ere they refer to “dependence on Russia”.

In Poland, they rail against the proposed limits on CO₂ emissions and against attempts to prohibit the exploration of shale gas - these economic development matters clearly taking precedence over environmental protection.

Environmental issues are rarely raised in the context of these group discussions, as well as **demographic** problems.

It is probably not that **these questions** are considered unimportant, but they **take second place to the crisis, how it is handled and the issues it highlights with regard to the future cohesion of the Union.**

2.2.4. The interviewees often admit that all these European questions (with the exception of the very real worries linked to the crisis) are not ones they spontaneously ask themselves every day, and they once again confess to being passive in this regard.

The discussion on these matters did, however, awaken their attention and their interest in finding out more.



3. Means of expression of citizens' views on the European Union

3.1. Means of expression of citizens' views on the future directions of the European Union

The group discussion participants were invited to say **how they could currently**, as citizens, **"give their opinion and make their voices heard as regards the future directions of the European Union** - whether to approve or disapprove such or such a direction, or for any other reason".

3.1.1. This question is not an easy one to answer, it surprises or even disconcerts many interviewees.

It has been previously observed that most of them deem the "top down" communication of information on issues relating to the European Union to be poor; **their feelings on the "bottom up" communication of citizens to the EU bodies is even less favourable.**

This has been seen more or less in all of the countries included in this study.

This is particularly marked in the countries in Southern Europe where bitterness towards the EU has set in, and where the respondents are inclined to think that they have absolutely no access to decisions and no possible influence on them.

3.1.2. The possible means of expression which have more or less been mentioned spontaneously include:

Voting: in the European Parliamentary **elections** or in national elections (depending on the position of party candidates on Europe), or in **referendums** in some countries. It can be noted however that voting does not immediately spring to everyone's mind as a means of expression of citizens' expectations regarding the European Union.

Trying to contact EU institutions or officials in these institutions: possibility of meetings with MEPs or other officials; visiting a representation office; sending letters or e-mails, etc. These potential means of contact are mainly mentioned by interviewees from small member states - in which the visibility of bodies or representatives affected is probably not as bad as in larger countries. However, they are really only **theoretical** for most people, with very few claiming to have actually tried to use them.

More occasionally, questioning the national government, or responding to consultations it may organise, signing **petitions** (but it is often added that this can only be effective if carried out through organisations or if they are publicised by the media), or otherwise demonstrations as a means of protest.

3.1.3. Impediments to citizens' input and to it being taken into account are regarded as significant and often discouraging.

They can be categorised as follows:

Firstly, **the presumed lack of willingness by the institutions and representatives concerned to listen to the citizens and take their opinions into account**, and the corollary doubts that "it could do any good" to try turning towards them. This idea is present in practically all of the countries examined, with varying degrees of force, and it should be noted that **the interviewees make this point about bodies and political representatives in general, at both national and European level.**

Also, the impression of the **minimal influence their country and its representatives have** in the bodies of the Union may add to the problem.

A vague and often quite negative image of the MEPs: mostly unknown, regarded by some people as not representative; sometimes perceived as "second-class" politicians; who are anyway "out of touch" with the life of the average citizens and don't report to them once elected.

Occasionally mentioned is **the specific difficulty in understanding the complex European policy issues.**

At a practical level, **the lack of knowledge in places or the channels used** to address a European Union regarded as immense and remote.

But also the passive attitude of citizens which a large number of the interviewees acknowledge in relation to this topic as well as when it comes to searching for information about the European Union.

3.1.4. However, expectations of greater involvement exist in groups who met in the various countries studied.

Some of the remarks made highlight **several key ideas:**

- **A need for closer proximity:** meeting with officials in nearby places (town hall, local district meetings, information offices open to the public, etc.).

- **A very frequent call for the use of new technological tools for communication:** Internet and the related new tools such as social networks, making it possible to consult the citizens, to collect their views, to receive petitions, to organise debates, etc. (even if these could be complemented by more classical methods).
- **A strong demand for interactivity and exchanges,** in using these various means of contact.

3.2. Assessment of proposals for improved citizen's involvement

Eight proposals were submitted to the people interviewed.

3.2.1. An information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a website, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.

This proposal is largely based on the content of the Europe Direct services which were set up a number of years ago (but which are still generally unknown).

It is generally received well or quite well by most groups, as an information service which is assumed to be both competent and effective, meeting the required conditions of easy access and proximity, where personalised contact is expected, making it possible to receive explanations and discuss beyond what is provided by raw information.

The **concerns** expressed by some people may be linked to the fact that **it is merely an information service.**

3.2.2. Debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.

The response to this proposal is very mixed.

The groups which tend to welcome this are those who are located in Spain, Sweden, Austria, Poland, Latvia and in Romania: they view the participation of ordinary citizens in these debates and the promised interaction with experts as favourable.

In other member states, doubts are expressed in varying degrees about the conditions to be met in order for them to be a success and “lead to something”. Many speak of their experience with news programmes and political “talk shows” at national level which prove to be disappointing.

The most sceptical are probably the Greeks, Irish, Dutch, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Maltese.

3.2.3. Opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of Europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.

The proposal of cross-border opinion polls is looked upon quite favourably in most cases (it is noted that the existence of such pan-European surveys - Eurobarometer - is almost entirely unknown), the most receptive seem to be the German, French, British, Austrian, Polish, Latvian, Romanian and Maltese group participants.

In these groups and in others (also positive but rather less so) in most of the other countries, interest in the proposal is partly because such surveys are a type of citizens’ consultation and partly because of the opportunity to make comparisons with other countries: this arouses a genuine interest (provided that the issues actually concern and affect the citizens, and also that the results are easily and rapidly available).

The reactions are more negative to this type of poll in a few groups.

3.2.4. The possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your members of the European Parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.

When this idea was announced, **the participants in several of the groups surveyed showed a genuine and keen interest** (Spanish, Irish, Czechs, Estonians and, slightly less so, Italians, Poles and Latvians).

Here they see the opportunity for personal contact with leaders whom they could directly address in order to ask questions and receive answers.

Doubts as to whether the promised proximity and direct contact will be present give rise to the **more**

tepid responses or to the **scepticism** observed in **other groups**.

3.2.5. Consultations through the Internet organised by the European Commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.

The responses to this suggestion are generally very positive.

The idea of a consultation, open to everyone, on important political issues, is in general welcome. And, for a large majority of the interviewees, the method envisaged (online) offers benefits such as accessibility and practicability (from your home, whenever you decide) and modernity (in spite of a few reservations thinking of people who have no access to the Internet).

Some, however, specify certain conditions to be met in order for the hypothetical interest to become a reality: firstly a way must be found to make the population aware of consultation launches; then there must be a way of coming back later to the citizens who expect that their response is taken into account.

Doubts of this type, questions notably about the information processing “logistics” to be implemented are sometimes voiced, mitigating or determining the support of these interviewees.

Added to only a moderate expression of interest in issues of European politics, they result in opinions which are clearly more reserved in some countries (Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Bulgaria).

3.2.6. Similar consultations, organised by our national government.

This proposal only differs from the previous one in terms of the organiser: the national government instead of the European Commission.

In most countries the idea of a consultation by the Commission is deemed preferable. It is this idea itself that it is the central organ of the Union which is logically responsible for it, and especially - in spite of the loss of support to the Community institutions - because it represents a presumption of neutrality and objectivity which tends to be denied to the national authorities.

The preferred option of consultations by the Commission is very clear in France, Italy, Greece, Ireland, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and in Malta.

In two countries the interviewees tend to show a greater interest in consultations of national initiative, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (and in two more, Sweden and Latvia, the reactions to both options are fairly similar).

3.2.7. An interactive service using the Internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.

This proposal has been received very positively overall.

In addition to the effective modernity of online consultations there is also a sense of proximity and informality in both the form and content of the communication made possible by the social networks.

The wording of the proposal suggests the idea of a direct and easy channel of communication with the Commission - particularly since the system would remain open permanently.

The questions which have been asked in some groups relate to the informal and non-organised aspect of expressions posted on social networks: some people wonder if this "chaos" could be structured to allow for efficient processing of information.

As in the case of the previous proposals regarding Internet, some comments have also been made in

relation to members of the public who are "excluded" since they are unable to access electronic means of communications, and queries about providing feedback to the citizens and how their contribution would be used - yet they do not question the interest in what is being offered.

In nearly all of the countries the interest is evident, and is especially clear in a lot of them (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Sweden, Poland, Estonia, Romania, Malta).

3.2.8. Information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take part in the coming election of members of the European Parliament in May 2014.

Setting up such information campaigns is generally regarded as desirable, particularly in the run-up to the European elections where the ins and outs are not necessarily clear and the turnout is low.

The respondents expect informative campaigns which are neutral and non-partisan: about the European Union in general, about the implication of its policies on the life of citizens in the country, about the issues at stake in the election and about the various political projects.

Support is however not as strong as for some of the above proposals which seem more innovative - this is one of the reasons for the merely relative interest demonstrated for example in Latvia, Bulgaria, Malta, and in the Netherlands.

1. OPTEM, 74 chemin de la Ferme des Bois, 78950 Gambais, France, Tél.: +33 (0)1 34 87 18 23, Fax: +33 (0)1 34 87 17 83, optem@optem.fr
 2. Austria: Karmasin Motivforschung; Bulgaria: Alpha Research; Czech Republic: MARECO; Estonia: Saar Poll; France: OPTEM with the support of Inter View Partners; Germany: Echanges Marktforschung in cooperation with Psyma; Greece: Focus Bari; Hungary: Psyma Hungary; Ireland: Behaviour and Attitudes; Italy: Periscope; Latvia: Latvian Facts; Malta: MISCO Malta; the Netherlands: True Research; Poland: BSM; Romania: Data Media; Spain: Psyma-Iberica; Sweden: Kommunikera; the United Kingdom: AIMR.
 National syntheses are available on the website of [Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute](http://www.notre-europe.eu).
 3. Two discussions in Latvia, on the initiative of the Latvian network partner.

APPENDIX: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction: Ask each participant to introduce him(her)self with a few words, by saying who he(she) is and what he(she) does, etc.)

Theme 1: We are here together today to talk about the European Union.

Could you please tell me what first comes to your mind about the EU?

- Spontaneous reactions
- Probe:
 - Nature of topics spontaneously mentioned about the EU
 - Positive and negative aspects related to the EU
 - Degree of initial interest and involvement of the respondents in EU related issues

Theme 2: Now, regarding what you know and what you think about the EU: where does that come from?

From what sources do you get information or do you hear opinions about the EU – taking the word “sources” in the widest sense, ranging from official information sources to informal conversations with friends or other people...?

- Spontaneous reactions
- Probe:
 - Degree of diversity of the sources mentioned
 - Nature of (information) inputs from each one
 - Interest / credibility of each one

Theme 3: Let us now discuss more specifically the future of the European Union and questions you may ask yourselves in that respect.

There are probably certain aspects which you regard as important and you would like to know and understand better as regards the way the EU works and the directions it takes – as you may not get all the information you would like to get from the sources you have mentioned earlier.

What aspects would you particularly wish to know more about?

- Spontaneous reactions
- Probe:
 - General impressions of having a good or a poor degree of knowledge/understanding of these issues
 - Perception of major challenges for the EU in the coming years
 - Expressions by respondents of a need for better knowledge and understanding – on what subjects more particularly? In what is the information currently available on these subjects not satisfactory?

Theme 4: As a citizen, you should be able to give your opinion and to have your voice heard as regards future directions of the European Union – whether to approve or to disapprove such or such a direction, or for any other reason.

How can you do that today?

- Spontaneous reactions
- Probe:
 - Perceived ease / difficulty to express oneself and to have one's voice heard on EU related issues – by what means?
 - Perceived reasons why it is difficult
 - Specific subjects on which respondents would particularly wish to give their opinion and to be listened to as citizens; expectations in that respect

Theme 5: One may think of various means by which European citizens like us could have their voice heard.

Let me propose to try and think of any possible means, just letting our imagination run, without giving up an idea even if we do not know for the moment how it could be implemented in practice. What could we imagine?

- Spontaneous reactions
- Stimulate the group's creativity by encouraging respondents to "jump" from one idea to another

Theme 6: I am now going to submit to you various ideas that have being put forward, of means that could be put in place to allow citizens to have their voice better heard on EU related issues. I will ask you what you think of each one.

Make the respondents react to each proposition in turn, asking them about their degree of interest for each one and reasons thereof.

1. An information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a web site, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.
2. Debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.
3. Opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of Europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.
4. The possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your members of the European Parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.
5. Consultations through the Internet organised by the European Commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.
6. Similar consultations, organised by our national government.
7. An interactive service using the Internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.
8. Information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take part in the coming election of members of the European Parliament in May 2014.

Thank you again for coming to participate in this discussion.

If other ideas cross your mind following the discussion, do not hesitate to let us know.

(Communicate a relevant email address which the respondents can use for that purpose).

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