

About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.

March 2016.

ISBN 978-2-36567-542-0.

The opinions expressed in this report are the responsibility of the authors alone.

Project coordinated by:



Major partners:



This project is supported by the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Union.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Context

The European Union is in the midst of a fog: the fog of crises, the fog of uncertainty, and the fog of criticisms. Rarely has the context been so dim for the EU. It has been going through a deep economic crisis since 2008. While the outlook is showing signs of recovery, it remains fragile, following years of economic slowdown, social tensions, and austerity policies. To give one possible illustration, 14 out of 28 Member States have seen their GDP per capita decrease, level off or barely grow between 2008 and 2014.¹

The economic and financial crisis has firmly anchored the EU within domestic politics. Up until the Maastricht treaty, the EU benefited from a “permissive consensus” – the European project was largely legitimised on the basis of its positive image. It helped make the continent safer and the economy grow. The 1992 treaty rocked this state of affairs. The raucous ratification processes in Denmark, France and the United Kingdom were early signals that the future would not be as unruffled as before. Likewise, the rise of critical opinions crystallised. Since then, the criticism against the EU has increased and the number of its detractors has swelled. The rhetoric may differ across the EU, but the arguments are broadly similar: The EU is not democratic enough, it lacks legitimacy, and it is an elite-led project divorced from the interests and concerns of its citizens.

Since the outbreak of the economic and financial crisis, the EU has strived to correct the shortcomings, which had plagued the Eurozone since its birth. It passed numerous legislative acts to make the financial sector more resilient, to reduce government debts and deficits, and to provide conditional financial assistance to countries in need. This has triggered bitter debates in many Member States. In the creditor countries, the impression was that they had implemented the necessary policies to clean out their public finances, and they therefore failed to see why others, which had gone astray, should receive their help. In the countries whose living standards plummeted, bitterness against austerity policies prevailed, which were considered to be imposed from abroad. These actions tarnished the European edifice, and the resultant tensions fuelled criticism against the EU. Never before had the EU been discussed so much within Member States, but never before had the tone been so negative.

The post-Maastricht period saw the progressive emergence of a “constraining dissensus” on the EU.² In other words, the EU entered the national political arena and political parties and other political actors started to invest in it. Slowly, further integration lost ground as the automatic response to a collective action problem.

That being said, EU membership has affected the way Member States conduct policy-

making at the European level. Most countries today feel that belonging to the EU contributes to their wellbeing. Membership has transformed how they approach problems. They may seek national solutions, but the EU level can provide another arena to find others, especially if similar problems are shared by many Member States. Moreover, the search for consensus, which characterises the EU decision-making process, has compelled Member States to negotiate intensively with each other to iron out differences and to keep the organisation moving forward.³

However, the crisis has fostered a situation in which national governments do not discount the virtues of integration, but are conversely cautious about surrendering more sovereignty. The development of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) is a prime example. Member States came to an agreement on the monetary policy, whose supervision was given to the European Central Bank. However, the Eurozone's economic pillar was left half-built. Member States remained in charge of their economic decisions regardless of the effects of their decisions on the rest of the monetary union. Sharing a currency is hardly sustainable without decisions made at the appropriate level. This does not mean that the Eurozone's initial flaws triggered the economic crisis or prevented Member States from implementing necessary reforms. Rather, it illustrates that the Eurozone was not built for rainy days and Member States did not appreciate it sufficiently.

The refugee crisis is also putting pressure on the EU's cohesion. Figures concerning refugees fleeing the conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood are staggering. The EU has received 1,322,145 asylum applications in 2015 – twice as many as in 2014 and four times as many as previous years.⁴ 1,803,370 people have used the

main three migratory routes to enter the EU in the past year alone.⁵ It is implausible to argue that such movements of people could not be forecast. However, acknowledging that millions of people could try to enter Europe is one thing. Taking the appropriate measures to address the upcoming crisis is another. There again, the system is built for sunny days. The Schengen Area relies on two main pillars: the freedom of movement within its borders and the protection of its external borders. The first one is a success, which few would be ready to jeopardise. The second pillar is very shaky. The external borders should indeed be guarded by the countries that have an external border. In normal times, this can be managed. In exceptional situations, geography is a clear enough indicator that those countries could face an awesome challenge. Very little was done early on to help those countries manage exceptional situations. It is certainly possible to argue that they should have prepared better for such cases, but it would be unfair to blame them entirely for their failure to cope with millions of people arriving on their territory. Similarly, the Dublin regulations on asylum were friable from the outset. They argue for instance that an asylum-seeker should claim asylum in the first EU country he/she enters. Those countries are once again likely to be those that have an external border, especially in circumstances of populations fleeing conflicts.

The EU has been scrambling to find solutions to this crisis, which can address both the short and medium terms. It has for instance tried to implement a "relocation scheme", whereby 160,000 refugees would be distributed among the Member States. This caused high tensions in several countries that were opposed to the system. The common argument was that they refused the imposition of being obliged to host a certain number of refugees and that they

should be free to decide who to welcome and how many. The disputes concern the number of people, but also more fundamentally they affect the societies at their core. This crisis is indeed very intimate. It asks every society to consider which blending of population it is ready to have. In countries where immigration is a relatively marginal phenomenon, the debates are more acute.⁶ In this field, the EU is powerless. As such immigration has become instrumentalised by national leaders, especially under the pressure of radical right wing parties. Solutions coming from the top (EU level) are consequently resisted.

Those crises and the perception of the EU, ranging from critical to sceptic, have damaged the Union's legitimacy. At the height of the crisis in 2011-2013, the EU's image was badly damaged. It may have improved since then, but it remains striking that 38% of Europeans have a neutral image of the EU.⁷ Indifference is a more difficult feeling to sway than criticism or optimism.

Description of the project

The *Building Bridges* project was born in this context. The EU is under stress both at the EU level and within the Member States. Simultaneously, those same Member States increasingly assert their interests at the European level, rendering the decision-making process slower and more complex. But it also generalises a phenomenon outlined by many authors: blame the EU for what does not work and reap the rewards when the EU performs well. This behaviour has been widespread in older Member States, but seems to have propagated to the newer ones.

The project aims to look at the EU from the eyes of the Member States. Regardless of the state of integration - how far it should go or

whether it should continue at all for that matter - the EU remains a body composed of 28 Member States. They are the ones that decide the EU's future and shape. However, no analysis has ever been undertaken that looks at all the Member States in this way. This is certainly a complicated endeavour, but a necessary one if we want to understand what all 28 members think about the EU and what their expectations are. This basic understanding can help to better gauge the extent to which the EU is in a deep structural crisis. It can help to assess whether the European project is facing an inextricable future of muddling through. More fundamentally, it can hint at what the Member States want from the EU. This is a simple question that rarely features in times of crisis where urgency trumps cool-headed reflections.

This project, and this publication more specifically, have two complementary goals. The papers in this publication hope to be educational. They all follow the same structure answering five questions: *"What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?"*, *"Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?"*, *"Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?"*, *"According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?"*, and *"Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?"*. It enables an easier comparative reading. The papers aim to provide a solid analysis on each of the 28 Member States in a way that is accessible to the wider public. The intention is that this publication is used as a reference guide that interested readers can consult when they want to know more about any country.

The papers also have an analytical purpose. First, each author analyses how his/her respective country perceives the European Union and what it expects, which is an exercise rarely conducted. Second, they provide food for thought on options that can be brought onto the European agenda to better legitimate the EU in the eyes of the citizens. This is a very important component because the project aims to qualitatively study how citizens view the EU and its actions, how they can feel more included, and how to instil a feeling of belonging to a common public sphere.

One expert from a think tank or a university was invited to join from each country. Prior to this publication, four workshops were held across the EU (Warsaw, Madrid, Brussels and Paris). Each meeting gathered experts from the group and local citizens. Those exchanges allowed for frank and fruitful debates about how the EU is seen in that given country. While it is certainly impossible to capture the variety of opinions held in one country, those gatherings aimed to expose as many representative views as possible. The objective was for the experts to be confronted by other discourses on the EU. They may know their national debates as well as those at the EU-level, but they rarely have the opportunity to exchange with non-expert citizens from other Member States of the EU. Those meetings proved useful to open the experts' perspectives on other topics and other approaches to a similar topic. The publications reflect those considerations.

Each article aims to present national debates in their diversity. They obviously cannot encompass the different layers because of a lack of space and due to the specific format of the publication. They do, however, provide a

snapshot of what Member States think and this publication should be seen as such.

Outcome

At the start of the project, the objective was to see whether one or two main political initiatives could emerge at the European level, which might refresh the EU's image and credibility in the eyes of the citizens. The short answer is: none could instinctively revitalise the EU across all Member States.

Three main trends can, however, be discerned from the contributions. The first is that the EU is expected to show results. Instead of grand projects, which can hypothetically federate the Europeans, the EU should focus on delivering on concrete projects. In other words, it should be "an EU of projects". This may not epitomise the new narrative many are calling for, but this reflects the ambient lukewarm mood vis-à-vis the EU. It often plays out in countries, which have been experiencing economic troubles, or in those that are more recent Member States and did not grow up with the overarching narratives that the EU could tell in its first 50 years (peace and economic prosperity). This shows in different forms. In some countries, it is a question of investments. The importance of the cohesion funds is clearly emphasised in the Polish and Slovak articles. The latter even proposes the creation of a "Small Business Act", which the cohesion funds can be a key component of. Considering the importance of cohesion funds in other Member States, it could undoubtedly carry some weight in the debates in other countries. In many others, the role of the Energy Union, especially in Central and Eastern European countries, or the completion of the Single Market feature prominently.

The second main trend is more specific to the Eurozone countries. Solving the economic crisis is a priority. There is broad support for a more robust EMU, but the recipes to reach this stage may be different. Some, such as Finland and the Netherlands, are calling for more responsible Member States first before embarking on the road to further integration. Others, on the other hand, are preaching for more flexibility for countries to implement reforms, in particular Cyprus, Italy and Malta. This is a classic debate in the Eurozone, and it demonstrates the difficulty in moving forward. While almost everyone agrees in principle to do more together, they differ on the best policies to make sure that the Eurozone is stable, thriving and of benefit for all. Overall, the persistent economic crisis is an impediment to talking about grand projects.

The third worthwhile trend to mention is the importance given to foreign policy. Many contributions stress that there is an expectation that the EU should play a greater role in foreign and security policy. However, discussions portray the variety of points of view, which complicate the outlook. The first difficulty lies in setting the priorities. Some countries see EU foreign policy very keenly in the light of further enlargement, as mentioned by Croatia and Slovenia. Others see the need to do more within the Eastern Partnership, in particular Romania and the Baltic countries. The underlying position behind the support for more engagement in the East is a thinly veiled call for further enlargement in that direction. These are two policy fields the EU has already invested in. Others, France in particular, consider that participating in the resolution of the crises in both the East and the South almost represents a make-or-break test for the EU. This is more ambitious, and few countries would go as far as to bet the EU's future on its capacity to solve crises in its

neighbourhood. Several other contributions also call for a much more common foreign and security policy. This is reflected in the Bulgarian, the Czech, the Italian and the Portuguese contributions. While the explicit mention is marginal among the papers, the debate seems present in other countries as well.

Other issues were developed in some papers, such as the need for a greater "social" dimension in the EU. The Belgian and Slovak contributions particularly touch on this issue. This issue is seldom mentioned in most papers. There is, nonetheless, the expectation that the EU can guarantee social cohesion, mostly it seems by helping to curb unemployment rates or guaranteeing financial stability across the EU, rather than by deciding on a "European social model".

Migration and asylum were other often mentioned topics. It is, however, difficult to distinguish between the contextual and structural elements of this issue. The project and the papers have occurred over a period of intense media and political attention on this issue. It is a matter of debate whether these topics were included because of the context, or because a European solution would further legitimise the EU and a failure to do so would undermine the Union. What is certain is that many national citizens expect actions, but it differs from one country to the other. For some, the time is ripe for a common migration and asylum policy while for others, the urgency is to find a way to stem the flow of refugees.

Overall, the contributions emphasise an overwhelming sentiment across Europe: criticism against the EU is more widespread and ingrained in mainstream political debates. This is reflected in contributions from founding members, such as France and Germany, as well as newer Member States, such as Cyprus and

Slovenia, to say nothing about the United Kingdom. In several other countries, a paradox emerges between a continuous support and a eurosceptic attitude vis-à-vis specific policies. This is revealing in the Danish and Slovak papers. Many of those countries embody a utilitarian view of the EU. Poland and Sweden are additional examples of this approach.

However, it would be disingenuous not to mention that the EU retains a general positive view in some other Member States. Lithuania and Luxembourg are prime examples of europhile countries despite the crisis. Ireland could also fall into this category. The Irish contribution indeed points out how the population has not blamed the EU for the crisis, but its national leaders.

An overwhelming element has surfaced in the discussions with local citizens and in the contributions to create a greater European public sphere: the EU should be more talked about. While achieving a common public sphere might be a long-term goal at best, creating links between national societies can help citizens to become better informed and can quash stereotypes.

Two aspects are often mentioned: the role of education and the role of the media. There is a clear call from many corners of Europe to provide more space to teach the EU at school. It may be premature to discuss a common education policy, as evoked in the Portuguese contribution, but Member States should adapt their curricula in order to provide more lessons about what the EU is and what it does. It would make for better informed citizens and possibly more interested citizens as well. The role of exchange programmes is also often cited as a

positive way to become better acquainted with other Member States.

A corollary to this is the role of the media. It is accepted that the EU gets more coverage now than in the past, but mostly because of the economic crisis and the migration crisis, which generate more negative than positive opinions. Growing attention from national outlets on the EU would be a welcome development. Some contributions also emphasise the role of civil society in stimulating the debate on the EU.

In the end, the project may not offer a new narrative for the EU, simply because none can broach the different views and expectations that exist on the EU. It provides an overview of the diversity of views on the EU and perhaps a call for a change of tune. Instead of looking for a positive and overarching narrative, the EU's primary goal should be to deliver as much as possible with the competences that it has. This last element also requires a better understanding of what the EU can achieve and what remains entirely in the hands of the Member States.

This is not a grand strategy and may give the impression that the EU's political dimension has weakened. Perhaps it has, but it seems unpalatable to have lofty discussions on the future of the EU without addressing seriously and steadily the crises at play today. This does not mean that the two are mutually exclusive, but whatever happens at the European level should be justified on the basis that it would improve the EU, the Member States' trajectory and citizens' lives. A failure to bridge today's concerns with plans for tomorrow could be disastrous for the European Union.

Endnotes

1. Eurostat, Main GDP aggregates per capita, in current prices, in euros.
2. Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "A Post-Functionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus", *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2009, pp. 1-23.
3. Christopher J. Bickerton, *European Integration: From Nation States to Member States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 12.
4. Eurostat, Asylum and new asylum applicants - annual aggregated data.
5. Frontex, "Migratory Routes Map", <http://frontex.europa.eu/>.
6. This was very clear at the workshop organised in Warsaw at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) in May 2015. Immigration was a sensitive topic and many participants emphasised that Poland was perhaps not ready to become a country of immigration economically and culturally.
7. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, No. 84, Autumn 2015, <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/>.