



UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI  
FIRENZE

**JEAN  
MONNET**  
CENTRO DI ECCELLENZA

# **THE EU AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES 28 IDEAS FROM THE ERASMUS GENERATION**

School of Political Science,  
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## **Filling the gap between the EU and its citizens in times of Populism and Euroscepticism**

Position Paper by  
Marta Nikolajenko & Gökhan Özen  
(University of Latvia, Latvia)



Gökhan Özen  
[g\\_gokhanozen@windowslive.com](mailto:g_gokhanozen@windowslive.com)

Marta Nikolajenko  
[marta\\_n@inbox.lv](mailto:marta_n@inbox.lv)

*“Never before have I seen such little common ground between our Member States. So few areas where they agree to work together. Never before have I heard so many leaders speak only of their domestic problems, with Europe mentioned only in passing, if at all... Never before have I seen so much fragmentation, and so little commonality in our Union.” Jean-Claude Juncker*

## **Introduction**

It is very easy to divide, yet very hard to unite. In order to unite, one has to remove boundaries. One has to become open minded. Trust is essential and you have to be fearless. Tolerance to differences is a must feature. Happiness is the unity itself.

60 years ago, Europeans accomplished something world had not seen before, they were able to find a way to unite and find a way to work together, despite all the differences and risks. It was not an easy task, but they accomplished it because a single generation had seen two world wars. People saw how destructive war could be. How extreme ideologies could lead to loss of millions of lives. For this very reason, Europeans understood a very important lesson. And this lesson was that humanity should unite and collaborate by seeing the future not in extreme ideologies or wars, but in peace, collaboration, tolerance, wealth, mutual trust, love and respect. Over half a century ago, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and a number of other visionary leaders inspired the creation of the European Union we live in today. Without their energy and motivation, we would not be living in the sphere of peace and stability that we take for granted. From resistance fighters to lawyers, the founding fathers were a diverse group of people who held the same ideals: a peaceful, united and prosperous Europe.<sup>1</sup>

## **The EU and global challenges**

For almost a decade, the European Union has faced major problems, one after another. Traditionally, each crisis has made the EU stronger and more integrated. Even though the EU countries face numerous problems, closer coordination and delegation of

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, The founding fathers of the EU, [http://europa.rs/images/publikacije/osnivaci\\_EU\\_en.pdf](http://europa.rs/images/publikacije/osnivaci_EU_en.pdf)

responsibilities to supranational institutions generally lead to a solution. Since the end of the Cold War, among other developments, Europe has experienced German reunification and post-Communist transitions, the rise of international terrorist organizations, economic and financial problems, a migrant crisis and finally the referendum for EU membership of the United Kingdom. In the current situation, the questions of survival of the EU are crossing almost everyone's minds. Fears, or in some cases hopes, that one might be witnessing the decay and dissolution of the EU are gaining momentum. Today, with the prolonged Greek crisis, the EU getting ready for Brexit, the increased popularity of Marie Le Pen and the rise of such parties as Alternative für Deutschland and Prawo i

Sprawiedliwość in Poland, there are now too many leaders acting against the political unity and trustworthiness of the EU.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to conclude that this unprecedented impact of right-wing populism derives from a political identity crisis across Europe. Somewhere between globalization, expanding of the EU and numerous world crises, a huge gap between the EU citizens and the actual decision making bodies has established itself. Matters that are shaping the daily life of every one of us are seemingly not addressed enough or not communicated enough. People are forgetting the advantages and purpose of the union or simply starting to lose faith in it, because progress, growth and positive changes are not fast enough or instantly noticeable. It is in human nature not to realize the things they have always had. The EU is one of the strongest actors in the world, shaping the world economy and affecting millions of lives within and outside its borders. While living in peace and prosperity for 70 years now one can easily forget that the establishment of European Economic Community brought all the advantages and core values that we now take for granted. For the first time in 10 generations, war between EU Member States is now unthinkable.

We are representing the university of a country that had been occupied and part of Soviet Union for almost 50 years, therefore deprived of a chance to develop itself and be as strong as Scandinavian or other central European economies, not to mention the lack of security, democracy and basic human rights for its citizens during the occupation

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<sup>2</sup> Bukovskis, K., *Eurocepticism in Small EU Member States*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2016

period. Joining the European Union for Latvia was one of the top priorities after gaining its independence. Latvia submitted its application for EU membership on 27 October 1995 and the Latvian Government and its administration gave its first priority to the preparations for Latvian integration with the EU.<sup>3</sup> EU being the anchor of democracy, tolerance, stability and prosperity was the main factor why Latvia was so eager to join. It was a chance to catch up and finally be a part of the “rest of the world”. Many of Europe’s youth may have forgotten the history of generations who had lived through two world wars or perhaps it is already too distant a past for them to care. 60 years ago, the Treaty of Rome was a milestone for the modern European project and since then European institutions have contributed significantly to the creation of a zone of democracy and solidarity that is the envy of the world. The ultimate proof of this is that millions of people from all over the world risk their lives every year through hazardous land and sea journeys to reach these shores – not just for economic reasons, but because Europe is an attractive model of freedom and tolerance that offers people enormous opportunities to fulfill their dreams.

### **Confidence in Europe as a political project**

The main challenge we are facing at the moment is the crisis of *confidence in Europe as a political project*. The challenge is greater than ever as in many parts of Europe, nationalism and populism are on the rise, while the feeling of solidarity and sense of belonging is dwindling.<sup>4</sup> The recently released *White Paper* on the Future of Europe reminds us that “approximately a third of citizens trust the EU today, when about half of Europeans did so ten years ago.” It identifies two core problems: the powers and responsibilities of EU and Member State institutions are not delineated well enough and the EU’s positive role in daily life is not well publicized enough. Therefore, there are

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Press releases database [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-96-30\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-96-30_en.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Durach, F., THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF EUROSCEPTICISM, A Cross-Country Analysis of Eurobarometer results 2007 - 2014

several key messages about the EU's contribution that should be advocated and resonate more widely within the member states:

- ✓ the single market has resulted in wider choice and higher quality for goods and services;
- ✓ the EU has made possible free movement of people for work, leisure and study, including passport free travel and an extremely successful Erasmus program;
- ✓ the EU has been a leading actor on climate change and environmental policies;
- ✓ the EU has improved food safety and consumer protection;
- ✓ It has liberalized EU telecom markets, leading to higher quality services;
- ✓ heroutes;EU has played a critical role in enabling cheaper flights and more choice of
  
- ✓ It has promoted healthcare (including the European Health Insurance Card) and social welfare (including by establishing minimum employment rights such as equal pay, four weeks paid holiday, 14week maternity leave and protections in case of ownership change or insolvency);
- ✓ Its regional funds have resulted in significant new infrastructure investment and jobs in Europe's poorer regions.
- ✓ Its investment in innovation has resulted in significant advances across a number of key challenges, including ageing populations, food security, cleaner transport and low-cost sustainable energy
- ✓ It is enhancing the ability of individual Member States to achieve important goals (in global trade, In development assistance and humanitarian aid, energy security).

The above mentioned advantages of the EU legislations, initiatives and support programs have to be promoted and acknowledged more. While the EU's assistance to Member States through the Structural Funds is regularly mentioned by law in billboards and commemorative plaques near bridges, roads, ports, airports and so on, benefits in other sectors are lost for the consumer eyes. These benefits could be highlighted, for example:

- ✓ Companies could put an EU flag and a reference to the EU legislation on publicity and product packaging;

- ✓ Banks could inform their clients that it is thanks to EU legislation that depositors have a 100,000 EUR deposit guarantee;
- ✓ Telecom companies could refer to EU legislation, while promoting the drop of roaming charges;
- ✓ When the common digital market legislation is finally approved, it could be a requirement that consumers who buy from online retail sites or download digital content receive a message highlighting how the EU enabled this to happen;
- ✓ Search engines could publicize on their web sites that those using their services benefit from privacy guarantees under EU legislation;

All these, and many others, are powerful and valuable messages that deserve a wide audience and the EU institutions should not expect the Member States to be the main and very active partners in this objective, because it is not uncommon that many Member States consider the EU, and talk about the EU, as if it were some external alien force that does things (usually negative) to the Member States, and European politicians resort to the game of blaming Brussels for everything that is hard or wrong, while appropriating all the credit for things that go well. It is already difficult to understand the decision-making system of the EU, which is complicated by bargaining maneuvers taking place in the background, thus for an outsider, Brussels seems more like *“Game of Thrones”* than a transparent and democratic system. And It cannot be argued that citizens would not be competent or interested in European policies. The politics of EU simply lack space for citizen mobilization.<sup>5</sup> The feeling of lost political agency and the inadequate level of political participation are closely related to the rise of populist parties across Europe. These parties speak directly to ordinary voters by blaming the Brussels bureaucrats and promising to retake autonomy, sovereignty and agency. The anti-Europeans have the luxury of simplicity in their messages while one of the greatest challenges for the EU nowadays is its complex institutional, political settings and decision-making processes that makes it unappealing to the masses. European project has

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<sup>5</sup> Mikecz, D., *Believe it or not: Borders ensure political action*, New Eastern Europe, Issue# 6 2016: Brave New Borders

become increasingly unclear for non-professionals. The guidelines and ways of European integration has resulted in a complicated framework of rules and regulations with blurred institutional responsibilities and an incomprehensible bureaucratic machinery. Humans naturally fear and dislike issues they do not understand, especially if those issues are often seen as unfair through the actions of those in power. This gives enough ground for the emergence of Euroscepticism, not only in the old member states, but also in the small EU countries.

### **Communicating Europe**

The rise of populist movements shows us that there is a strong criticism of the "government by elites" model. If the leaders of the member states denigrate the European project in the eyes of European citizens, the feeling of solidarity – the essential glue that keeps the project together – is at risk of evaporating. *Communicating Europe*, even to its own citizens, requires a sense of shared identity. More attention should therefore be paid to the concrete concerns of citizens and the challenge for the EU is now to ensure that the voice of its people counts more. To ensure that a genuine and open-ended dialogue with its citizens, associations representing civil society and European political is needed, not forgetting also debating with Eurosceptic and other critics of the European project, without the isolationist touch often associated with the EU debate. This would assure richer and more sustainable reforms.

One more target group that should not be neglected is the young generation of the EU. Given the aging population and demographic challenges this is the generation that holds the future of the European project as well as the economic stability of the region. Reaching out to a new generation of European citizens requires focusing on matters that are of interest to them and will have a large impact on their lives. These include environmental issues (climate change), freedom of movement (particularly studying and working abroad) and intense investment in media reading skills and education. ERASMUS and ERASMUS+ programs have proven to be extremely successful as they enable students to get experience abroad, practice their language skills and become more 'open minded'. But the youth unemployment is a growing problem and more

frequently students choose to pass on the opportunity to take part in ERASMUS program in order not to lose time and to secure a place in the job market. Therefore, more emphasis should be put on supporting training programs and finding a way to offer support to companies that choose to hire ERASMUS students or trainees.

Continuing the thought of reaching the “hard-to-reach”, there is a need to go beyond the elite and higher education actors and engage more with hard to reach groups, for instance by further promoting the "European citizens' initiative"<sup>6</sup>. In its communication with its citizens Europe needs more stories that inspire and turn crises into opportunities. Facts are not enough and passion is a necessity. So is simplicity, the language of truth. Europe cannot inspire a sense of solidarity with a defensive narrative. It needs to offer a vision that can inspire because visions are essential to justify sacrifice for the greater good. Social media are natural communication tools for most people who have reached adulthood since the late 20th century. We must recognize that we are wired for storytelling and crafting messages that resonate on an emotional level. These platforms should be used more to tell the inspiring stories, to tell educational stories, to tell real life stories, how EU's initiatives, support programs and legislations are actually improving our lives, supporting local economies, advocating social equality, helping Member States develop rural areas, fighting climate change and working on other issues that are most crucial to citizens. At the same time, we need to be aware that the communication space has become polluted with propaganda and 'fake news' and they are resonating on an emotional level, therefore receiving more attention than a plain official statement. We must persistently respond with a communication style that is authentic, open and honest. Faced with these challenges, the communicators or public diplomats of EU need to be present across the right range of channels and work with trusted third parties.

One of the tools that EU should use more actively to foster mutual trust and productive relationships with its citizens is Public Diplomacy. Although it is more often looked at as a “soft power” tool in EU external relations, one must not forget that EU

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission, *European Citizens' Initiative*, <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome>



cannot automatically perceive itself as one body, it still consists of 28 separate member states, each one with different history and mentality, therefore public diplomacy within the member states also is necessary, especially in the current political situation, where “fake news” generated by euro-sceptics and political players that would like to see EU get weaker and more disintegrated. The objective of EU public diplomacy is defined as: “Long-term engagement aimed at building trust by engaging with the public in partner countries in a more meaningful way on issues that resonate most at the local level.” Main tools that are mentioned to achieve this goal are people-to-people activities, networking events, outreach activities, empowering cultural operators and encourage collaboration activities.<sup>7</sup> But these only target the “partner countries” and help shape how the EU is perceived there, while there is no policy on how the EU is perceived by Member States and its citizens. The voice of the EU commission is the representation office in each member state. According to the Commission, this is the institution that monitors public opinion in their host country, provides information on the EU through events and the distribution of brochures, leaflets and other materials. Logically, this should be the institution that is responsible for more public engagement and more active public diplomacy. To ensure that the right messages are delivered and they resonate at the right level the standard public diplomacy rules can be applied:

- ✓ The context for public diplomacy: The core ‘messages’ to be communicated have to be defined, e.g. the benefits of the EU or its core values.;
- ✓ Moving away from the information culture - there is a need to adopt longer-term perspectives on public diplomacy including, but going beyond the ‘information culture’ to stress dialogue or two-way communications. This dialogue includes
  - ✓ also a development of a more ‘listening culture’;
  - ✓ circulation of information and keeping up with the ‘local mood’ – improving the
- ✓ Capacity building: public diplomacy requires multiple skills and many of these are subject to minimal training and much of it is learnt on the job.

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, *PUBLIC DIPLOMACY to build trust and mutual understanding*, 2014  
[http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/fpi/documents/20160620\\_fpi\\_publicdiplomacy\\_infographic\\_web.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/fpi/documents/20160620_fpi_publicdiplomacy_infographic_web.pdf)

Public Diplomacy has always been a part of EU's foreign policy. By applying these methods, as we stated above, the EU can enhance its soft power even further, and can get its message across to the wider public. While we are helping countries and communities in need to overcome their challenges and to understand the value of democracy, freedom and solidarity, or while we are standing by our values in the eyes of the strong and advanced world economies, EU is spreading a very valuable message and in some ways EU is changing the world. It is very important for the citizens of EU to get in touch with this feeling of purpose. We need to work more on bringing our people together and showing the undeniable privilege and advantage that is the European Union.

## **Conclusions**

Despite all the challenges, the European Union still is one of the strongest international actors. This strength comes from the unification of countries and none of them can influence the world alone, the way 28 nations together can. Unity brings us a tremendous power and it balances the other actors in the world. In order to keep living in peace, wealth and prosperity, we have to work on getting united even more and finding our way back to the feeling of solidarity and the sense of shared identity – the essential glue that keeps the project together. More division and separation is not an option. Unity is a must. For the European project to survive another 60 years, the key is flexibility and more engagement, in both directions, by uniting and connecting stronger within itself, and if possible in the future, expanding even larger. Countries should strengthen their relations and not be afraid to remove borders. Only that way we can move towards the United Europe that one of our founding fathers, Mr. Winston Churchill, described as *'Europe whose moral design will win the respect and acknowledgement of all humanity, and whose physical strength will be such that no person will dare to disturb it as it marches peacefully towards the future.'*