

Jean Monnet Network Debating Europe 2020-2024



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Preface



The Jean Monnet Network "Debating Europe" (DebatEU) aimed to enhance dialogue and understanding of the European Union (EU) through citizen focus groups, conferences, and various outreach efforts, facilitating exchanges among citizens, students, academics, and EU practitioners. By engaging in 18 focus groups with well-informed EU Studies students across six diverse member states, the network sought to explore the sources of EU criticism and bridge the gap between EU elites and citizens. The selection of countries included members such as Croatia, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, and Slovenia, allowing engagement with citizens from Eastern, Northern, Central, and Southern EU member states and founding and later enlargement countries of varying sizes.

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Research findings



All focus groups started by showing a series of pictures to the students in order to trigger the discussion. These pictures represent multifaceted aspects of the EU, ranging from its institutional framework to social-political challenges and ideals. The students were asked to choose one or two pictures that, in their opinions, represented the EU best. The passport to the EU was chosen primarily as a symbol of freedom of movement, which is deeply valued by students for its tangible benefits in travel, work, and study opportunities across member states. Additionally, it represents European unity, highlighting the contrast between the rights of EU citizens and the challenges faced by non-EU citizens, reflecting both the privileges and complexities of EU membership.

The focus group participants explain their choice as follows:

“on a more everyday basis I chose this passport as a symbol of freedom of movement, which is perhaps the thing that is most directly felt by European citizens, whether in Bulgaria or in any Member State” (Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 37).

“if you were to ask like the every-man on the street they would probably mention the free movement within Europe to be like one of the most, like probably the first things that come to mind when you ask someone about the EU” (Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 15).

“within the EU that is a great opportunity but outside the EU the passport also causes a lot of problems, so it has- it has this fifty-fifty like this both good and bad kind of thing because those who do not have it would like to have it and there's a lot of problems in terms of migration and human rights comes into it, and asylum comes into it so, for me it encompasses all of the EU's like boons and problematic sides” (Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 15).

The gap and its reasons



Although the students in the focus groups were EU Studies students, highly informed and interested in the EU, their discussions revealed that this interest was not without criticism. Many highlighted the gap between the EU and its citizens, reflecting a sense of disconnect despite their engagement with the subject.

“Citizen participation is always remote in our modern democracies, and particularly in the case of the Union, because there are additional obstacles that make the gap critical” (France 3rd FG, Pos. 111).

“when it comes to like in the EU institutions for example, from what I see is there are still some gaps that can create less transparency in democratic way like for example, how they vote for Spitzenkandidaten to be the representative in the EU Commission” (Germany 3rd FG, Pos. 139).

Participants in the focus groups shared the following insights into the reasons behind the gap:

- **The Brussels Bubble:** The EU is still perceived as being very far away and inaccessible.
- **Complexity:** The EU is perceived as a complex set of institutions that no one can understand.
- **Media Coverage:** The EU is perceived as a secondary issue for the media.
- **Democracy:** The EU is still not perceived as a fully-fledged democracy on behalf of many students.
- **Transparency:** The EU is perceived as an apparatus where many things still happen behind closed doors.

The Brussels Bubble

Many students perceive the EU institutions in Brussels as disconnected from their everyday lives. They argue that when people feel that decisions made in Brussels do not directly relate to their concerns and needs, they are less likely to engage with EU politics or support EU policy initiatives. This, according to the student's views, can lead to a sense of alienation and reduced trust in EU institutions, ultimately undermining the EU's ability to effectively connect with and represent the interests of its citizens.

“So, there is a big distance between the EU citizens and then Brussels” (Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 130).

“But the distance between the centre of the European Union – Brussels – and the other Member States is too great for it to be able to follow some democratic principles, such as voting on the Internet or putting up signs that could be passed by MEPs” (Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 61).



The EU's complexity

The European Union often appears quite intricate due to its many institutions and complex decision-making. This, according to the students, might make it hard for people to understand how it works and lead them to have doubts and questions about its policies and actions.

“I think it is very hard and it is not transparent enough and for the people who do not have a background, they can be lost. I think this is the main reason why the EU is so complex I would say. It is the most visible one” (Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 38).



The complex architecture of EU institutions makes it difficult for common citizens who don't have a background in political science or European integration to understand how EU decisions are taken.

“not so many people can navigate themselves in what is European Commission, how it is different from the Council of Ministers, from the European Council and so on. And, I think that is why, I think that political complexity is really one of the most descriptive ideas and things of the European Union” (Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 19).

“I also think that this, am, that the EU structure of how the decision making is done is hard and complex” (Slovenia 3rd FG, Pos. 100).

“But still, it seems to me that the architecture of the institutions of the European Union is quite complex. How capable is the ordinary citizen, without investing in particular to study political science and European studies, to understand that” (Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 111)

Media Coverage

Limited or negative media coverage, according to the students, has the potential to prevent citizens from becoming supporters of the EU. The negative portrayal and lack of information about the EU, consequently they say, often result in people adopting a critical stance towards the EU.

“[...] the national media, whether it's newspapers or TV news, for example, have nothing on the European Union, they confuse the European Council, the Council of the Union, and so on. So it's too difficult to get information” (France, 2nd FG, Pos. 66).

“the focus is not so much on the European level, not in the media coverage” (Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 66).

“many journalists are not interested in European issues, thus they do not present themselves to the public, and therefore the public does not follow and does not bother to follow” (Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 108).



Democracy and Transparency

Democracy and transparency elicit mixed feelings among students within the EU

Democracy

The EU's democratic principles are not equally established in every member state, as, for example, Polish democracy does not function in the same way as French democracy.



Overall, the students viewed democracy in the EU positively, but they were critical of how democracy is practiced in the EU, particularly regarding transparency and democratic processes

“I think, EU it’s a democracy, in that way. You can vote in the EU elections, everybody can, you can vote who is sent to represent and then all the issues are voted on” (Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 273).

Transparency

“the EU should be more transparent, in the working of the EU Commission”



Regarding transparency, students acknowledge that EU information is accessible, and citizens have the right to various initiatives. However, they express concerns that the information may be challenging to comprehend, and these initiatives might not always result in meaningful outcomes or changes

“I believe that some sort of decision making in this kind of institution might not be transparent enough when it comes to the final result” (Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 170).

“the way I see EU transparency is like a dirty glass. It is transparent in theory, but does everyone have the tools to clean the glass and see what is on the other side?” (Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 119).

Polarisation and Politicisation



- **The most polarized topic in the EU is migration.**

“the policy that is causing the highest levels of concern outside the EU is migration policy, and the situation in the Mediterranean is why you have countries which are southern Member States and which are evenly conditioned by the migrant wave, such as Greece, Italy, Spain, and Croatia. Naturally, these countries are experiencing pressure at their borders” (Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 97).

“it [migration] is the biggest thing in the hands of the right-wing and that is how they get to power because they... show things that are not really functioning in a country and they always combine it with this issue of migration even though that is not the case, most of those things were not functioning before the migrants arrived” (Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 256).

- **The most influenceable topic by the EU and themselves is Climate change.**

“to fight climate change we have to work all together, and I think the EU is pretty good in trying to do that” (Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 13).

“The topic, that can be influenced best by me, is the climate change, I would also say because I can choose to, I don't know, take a train, not a car. I can choose to recycle. I can choose not to buy fast fashion every month. I can change my life to help the environment in other ways” (Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 133).

Bridging the Gap: Recommendations

I regard the EU as a chance and a hope that our country can succeed in building itself up and reaching the level of developed nations.



The EU Studies students' practical recommendations for bridging the gap were the following:

- **Efficiency:** improving the EU's decision-making processes for greater efficiency and unity, while a French student proposed more radical changes, including transitioning towards a federal system with a real government from the EU Parliament, which would require challenging Treaty reforms.
- **Democratic Processes:** calls were made to empower the European Parliament and create pan-European parties to strengthen EU democracy, but no detailed actions were provided.
- **Transparency and Information:** greater transparency and information about EU policies, better communication about the EU's actions, and stricter transparency measures, including broadcasting sessions of EU institutions via videos
- **Further Integration:** some students advocated for deeper federal integration, but acknowledged this would require difficult Treaty changes.

Bridging the Gap: Recommendations



- Positive Reporting: there is a need for more positive and relatable news on the EU, focusing on local projects and positive initiatives.
- Improving Media Literacy: there is a need for better media literacy and active information-seeking about the EU to combat misinformation.
- More EU Visibility: making EU funding more visible in public projects, despite existing regulations already mandating such visibility.
- More Presence in Social Media: students advocated expanding the EU's presence on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, emphasizing concise, relatable, and meme-based content to engage younger audiences.

Bridging the Gap: Recommendations



- **More of EU Education:** many students complained that they had learned little about the EU in school. They suggested introducing EU topics as early as primary or secondary education to address this gap.
- **Education for All Ages:** while the focus was on younger generations, some students also highlighted the need for educating older generations, noting that the EU has changed significantly since many first learned about it. Programs for lifelong learning were suggested to ensure that all age groups stay informed about the EU's evolving policies and treaties.
- **Practical Education:** they emphasized the need for practical education about EU institutions and decision-making processes.
- **Active Participation:** the importance of teaching people how to participate actively in EU processes, such as launching initiatives, to make the political system feel more accessible.
- **Erasmus Program Improvements:** many students praised the Erasmus program but suggested it be expanded beyond universities, advocating for its inclusion in non-university courses. Additionally, there was a call to simplify procedures for recognizing Erasmus credits, a significant concern for many participants.

Bridging the Gap: Recommendations

The European Union has funded a massive expansion of civil society. However, funds seem to go to private pockets.



- **Fostering European Identity:** students suggested increasing awareness and a sense of belonging to the EU to enhance civic engagement.
- **Enhancing the European Citizens' Initiative:** students argued that the European Citizens' Initiative should be binding to make citizen involvement more meaningful.
- **Encouraging Cultural Exchange and Cross-Border Infrastructure:** improving cross-border infrastructure and promoting cultural exchange were seen as ways to foster a shared European identity.
- **Promoting Civil Society Involvement:** students advocated for stronger support for civil society groups and NGOs to facilitate more grassroots participation in EU politics.
- **Considering Compulsory Voting:** some students proposed introducing compulsory voting in EU elections, although others were opposed to it.

Bridging the Gap: Recommendations

It is likely that the EU's future will be positive, but it must finally become united in order to be an important player in all geopolitical affairs, because a fragmented Union cannot take on this role.



- Holding More Referenda: students recommended holding more EU-level referenda to allow citizens direct involvement in decision-making.
- Reducing Economic Inequalities: the need for the EU to prioritize reducing economic inequalities, linking it to fulfilling basic human needs for a more united Europe.
- Promoting Independent EU Policies: the EU should adopt more independent foreign policies, reducing reliance on external influences and focusing on its own interests.
- More Diplomacy: the EU should refrain from participating in foreign military conflicts and instead focus on diplomatic solutions.
- Stricter Sanctions: enforcing more stringent sanctions against member states that do not comply with EU regulations or values to encourage adherence.
- EU Enlargement: the inclusion of more states in the EU as long as they meet the established accession criteria, regardless of their economic or military status.

Social Media



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