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Public Perception Within the European Union – How to
Address the Lack of Understanding

By

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INTRODUCTION

The public perception of the European Union, both at home and abroad, is one of the biggest problems the Union has, but never seems to want to address. There are scholars who have devoted a large amount of time and resources to this subject, such as Martin Holland, Ole Elgström, Natalia Chaban, and Philomena Murray, although their focus has largely been on the external perception of the vast supranational entity. This paper will instead suggest a proposal to at least try and rectify issues with the internal perception, namely a lack (sometimes, total lack) of understanding as to what the Union is, what it does and what it can and cannot do. Member States have largely failed to address this situation, this paper will highlight a need for the European Union to take on this role itself to ensure that certain goals are achieved. In a significant addition to the problem, there are signs of public confusion when it comes to the EU's institutional level that is often, in general, associated with over-bureaucratised process of "institutional engineering". In order to get a brief outline of this problem we used the latest Eurobarometer study that should frame the empirical basis of the study. Therefore, all facts and figures presented in this paper are sourced from there unless stated otherwise.

THE PROBLEM

When reading through the latest Eurobarometer study, we identified a number of problems:

1. Only 20% of EU citizens feel the EU is democratic
2. 37% of people feel they do not benefit from the Union
 - a. Perhaps because they do not understand what it is the Union does for them as said before?
3. Only 30% feel that their own voice counts in the Union
 - a. The Citizen's Initiative seeks to address this issue, but there are still a large number of people who don't know this exists
4. Only 39% of people feel their countries interests are listened to in the Union
 - a. Only 66% of people know that the Council exists.
 - i. The two above points could potentially be related
5. Only 56% of people knew the EP is directly elected.
 - a. This is perhaps one of the most serious problems, as how can people be represented in the EU if they don't even know they can elect representatives.
 - b. Potential cause of the consistently low turnout in elections coming as a result of not knowing about the elections or what they're for
6. 47% of people distrust the Union as a whole, with only 41% trusting
 - a. Similar amount of distrust when trust levels are broken down by each institution.
7. Only 45% of people feel they understand how the European Union Works.

(SOURCE: Spring 2011 Eurobarometer report on Public Opinion in the European Union, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb75/eb75_publ_en.pdf)

This paper will, by and large, focus on the last point of the list (point 7), the issue of only 45% of people understanding how the European Union works, as it is likely that if this point were addressed, then all of the other points would also be rectified. This would almost certainly be the case for point 5, as in explaining about the parliament, one would have to point out that they were directly elected. This in turn may go some way to changing the answer to points 1 and 3, as people would likely feel that the EU was more democratic if they were aware of the elections, and they may feel that their voice counts for something if they realise they can elect officials within the Union. Solving point 7 would also directly solve point 4a, as in explaining the institutions one would have to explain about the Council. This could then perhaps have an effect on the answer to point 4 as people would realise that their countries do at least have a voice in the Union. Finally, a solution to all of the aforementioned points and the solution to all of these could result in a solution to points 2, in that in explaining the Union people may start to realise that they can gain from it, although this is perhaps the most debatable of all the aforementioned outcomes, and point 6, in that a lot of mistrust likely comes from a lack of understanding and a fear of the unknown, which would also be rectified by addressing point 7.

Therefore, as previously stated, this paper will propose a solution that seeks to remedy the lack of understanding of the Union in the hope that a large number of other problems with public perception of the Union will follow.

THE SOLUTION

Really the solution to this problem is twofold; to attempt to control the problem in the short term, at least to the extent to which it is possible, corrections must be made on all occasions where misinformation is spread in the public sphere and marketing initiatives should be undertaken to spread general information about the Union. Second, to attempt to prevent the problem from occurring again, each member state should establish a sort of touring educational group that would travel between high schools offering workshops on the functioning of the European Union, acting as a supplement to the introduction of compulsory courses on the Union. Although the second option would likely be expensive, the level of understanding of the Union that it would foster in future generations would be invaluable to the later success of the Union, providing a generation of individuals who are at least educated, but hopefully also motivated to take part in the functioning of the Union itself.

It is important to note here, however, that we are not suggesting that people should be made to support the Union through education as that is straying too dangerously towards propaganda. Instead, we are simply trying to provide people with the facts so that they can at least be making educated decisions on the Union, find out how to get involved with it and find out how it represents them. As it was outlined in the preceding section of this paper, there are people who either do not understand the Union or have a negative opinion on it because they do not properly understand what it does and how they are represented. It is therefore logical to deduct that educating these people about the Union would address a large amount of the misunderstandings outlined at the beginning of this paper and thus likely foster a sizeable amount of further support for the Union.

PHASE ONE – The Short Term

To deal with the first phase, this is perhaps the more imperative and practical of the two as it is likely less expensive and offers short term results that could potentially segue into long term results if the current generation were to share their knowledge with the next. The proposal here consists essentially of two main initiatives:

- The distribution of leaflets and other informational materials among citizens containing basic information about the institutions of the Union, the latest news from these institutions, etc., also with the potential to broadcast short (5-10 minutes) informative programs on television outlining basic facts about the European Union.
- The establishment of a 'myth-busting' team who would operate in order to find and offer corrections for misinformation and disinformation spread, either unintentionally or otherwise, by the press and governments of member states.

The main goal of the first point would be the basic education of all European Union citizens in the institutions of the European Union and their functions. This would seek to address several issues outlined in the preceding section to this paper. Namely, primarily, at the very basic level to educate the citizens of the European Union as to what institutions exist in the European Union and what their function is. This would at least create a certain level of general awareness of what the institutions are and what their role is, clearing up issues such as a high number of people not even being aware certain institutions exist (particularly in the case of the Council), but also going some way to remove the perception of the Union only being a bureaucracy, highlighting the democratically elected parliament and the Council and the European Council's role in representing member states.

To elaborate on the funding of such a project, one feasible way would be to make member states finance this procedure on the basis of set goals. For example, annual surveys should be carried out, as are currently by Eurobarometer, and goals could be set (for example, 80% of people must be aware of the 5 main EU institutions, 80% of people must be aware that MEP's are supposed to represent citizens of the Union, not member states interests). When these goals are achieved, the member state in question does not have to distribute information any more. This way it would not over-burden the Union and also force member states to properly commit to educating their citizens on the Union as no member state would want to keep paying the costs it would take to educate their citizens to this level. This method of funding would hasten the process whilst encouraging member states to engage their citizens in the Union.

As for the establishment of a myth-busting team for the European Union, this would address the issue of misinformation and disinformation being spread about the Union. In an ideal world, this would consist of a press office in each member state that would monitor statements in the press and made by government officials to a reasonable extent and, if false information were published or stated by either of the above, pressure for corrections to be made. If the press follows an ethical code of conduct whereby any false statements are retracted and apologised for this would be a fairly simple process, however, if they did not, it may be worth considering the prospect of suing either members of government or the press for making statements that can be proved false. Although this is a very extreme step and certainly not encouraged, it is common practice where misinformation is printed about individuals, so it would not be unreasonable to make it common practice when misinformation is published about institutions.

Although as previously stated offices for this myth-busting team would need to be established in each member state in order to ensure timely reaction to false information, these would only need to be very small teams of people who could report to a central office in Brussels. Therefore, as far as costs are concerned it would be much more practical to have the Commission fund this particular part of the project as most of the

misinformation printed is in regards to action taken by the Commission, but it is also important that whatever measures are taken are done so in the interests of the Union as a whole, something for which the Commission is perhaps best equipped and suited for.

PHASE TWO – The Long Term

Phase two of the proposal would be a lot more expensive, time consuming and would likely yield any substantial results for around a decade, but could play an instrumental role in securing the future of the Union. This phase would consist of an education program, aimed at high school students who are reaching their penultimate years in high school. This phase would, once again, consist of two sub-stages:

- The introduction of compulsory European Union wide courses in high school on the main functions and institutions of the European Union
- The establishment of at least one touring group of experts in the European Union in each member states to tour high schools and act as a supplement to these courses.

Dealing with the first point, the establishment of these courses could provide vital education and ensure a certain level of understanding of the European Union among the majority of citizens within the whole Union. The key focuses of this program should have similar roots to phase one, but should offer a much more in depth analysis later on. Ideally this course would take place over a time frame equal what would be considered a semester at university level, i.e. four months, and cover, at a minimum, a basic outline of the following:

- The five main institutions of the European Union
 - Their Functions
 - Their makeup and structure
- The history of the Union
- The Unions main competences, such as the internal market

The teachers of this subject would be normal teachers from the school who would also teach about the European Union in addition to what they already do, eliminating the need for a number of newly employed teachers especially for the subject, although of course Member States would be free to do this if they so wished. In the interests of applying a standardised education, it may be wise to have the Commission provide the materials for these courses and offer teacher training courses so that teachers would feel competent in teaching the information themselves. It would also make sense to conclude the course with an exam; multiple-choice would be advised, in order to test the effectiveness of the teaching. In an effort to reach out to an audience beyond the classroom it may also be a good idea to make these courses available on the internet freely accessible to all. This way, adults who may be interested in taking the course also have the resources available. Availability of this service could be advertised during phase one.

The second part of phase two, the establishment of touring education groups, would act as a supplement to these courses. They would not be a necessary part, but could act as a compliment to the material taught in the classrooms. On top of the benefit it would offer to the students, it would perhaps be wise to include MEP's in these lessons. Even if they could only attend a very small number of these seminars it would offer them a valuable opportunity to engage with their potential future electorate and, more importantly, get their future

electorate engaged with them. Although this would be a perfect opportunity, it would obviously have to be done so on the proviso that all interactions through the students and MEP's remain totally non-political, which perhaps multiple MEP's from a range of parties attending sessions in order to provide a balance.

Funding for phase two would be split between the Commission and the Member States, except for the appearance of MEP's at the seminars, which would have to be covered by Parliamentary expenses. As for part one, the cost for materials and education of teachers would be fronted by the Commission, although to save money it would be advised that the Commission train only a small number of teachers from each member state, who would then be responsible for going back to their country and teaching other teachers in their area, thus seriously reducing costs and preventing a logistical nightmare for the Commission. Then, the teachers would be paid by the Member States as per the normal methods for paying teachers in each member state. The e-course would be funded and hosted by the Commission.

CONCLUSION:

Whilst it is obvious that these outlined solutions would be extremely expensive, we feel that education is necessary in securing the future of the Union. It is unlikely that citizens will continue to support a Union they don't understand, so whilst the Union develops to account for the changing world and political environment it is imperative that the citizens are kept abreast of what exactly these developments are and what exactly they mean for the average citizens. In order to be able to do this, citizens must also have at least a basic knowledge of the current standing of these institutions and the functions of the Union as a whole. It is this step that this proposal seeks to achieve. In order to clearly outline to potential outcomes, a bullet pointed list follows in order of perspective benefit for the Union:

- The aim of this program is not to make people support the Union, but simply to help them understand it and encourage them to get involved in it. If they choose to support the Union then it is obviously an ideal outcome.
- If they see potential for the Union and think by getting involved they could affect this change, then surely this is for the betterment of the Union as a whole as the more people that are involved the more representative of the citizens of Europe it will be.
- In a worst case scenario if they choose not to support the Union-originated proposals and mechanisms then at least they do so based on facts and truth rather than misinformation and hearsay.

As stated, although the first outcome is obviously the most preferable one and the second one would be a perfectly agreeable outcome, all of these outcomes are at least a victory for democracy, which is one of the main principles upon which the Union was founded.