

SPANISH CITIZEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU

REPORT OF A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN SPAIN

Psyma Ibérica Marketing Research

This Synthesis presents the results of a group discussion held in Madrid on 18 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union. It is part of a wider Citizenship Project managed by Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, with the support of national partners of the European Qualitative Network coordinated by OPTEM, on behalf of the European Commission.

Introduction

This report presents the results of a group discussion (see Box 1) held in Madrid on 18 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the EU.

It is the Spanish section of a pan-European qualitative study involving 18 of the Member States.

In each country the study was carried out by the national partner of the European Qualitative Network coordinated by OPTEM: in Spain by Psyma Ibérica Marketing Research.

BOX 1 ► Composition of the group of respondents

Gender

- Women: 4
- Men: 4

Age

- 20-34 years: 3
- 35-49 years: 3
- 50-60 years: 2

Social class

- Lower-middle social class: 4 respondents
 - Hydraulic technician
 - Electro-medicine technician
 - Social worker
 - Inspector, Madrid municipal housing agency
- Higher-middle class: 4 respondents
 - Emission system engineer, Airbus
 - Intern, insurance brokerage (head of household is a businessman)
 - Building company owner
 - Businessman - consulting firm

Political opinion

- The respondents were also recruited in order to have diverse political opinions represented in the group.

1. Initial thoughts about the European Union

Scepticism and disappointment are initially prevalent when discussing the existence of such union across the European Union country members. *"I used to believe in the EU, but after seeing what's happened, now we're going through tough times, I think such a union does not exist".* *"We'll never be able to say EU but global interests instead".*

Respondents believe there is a **great degree of inequality and imbalance** across the different member countries.

"Northern European countries have a certain status. We don't, and we're virtually the poor relation". *"Latin and Mediterranean countries seem to be playing in a different league".*

Respondents understand that **power is concentrated in a few countries**.

"In the end, only two countries rule - Germany and France. I have the feeling the remaining countries are like a piñata, to be broken so money pours out". *"We are nothing in the EU. Whatever Merkel says, that's what goes".*

Lack of identification with the EU and how it operates is revealed.

Citizens feel abandoned by Governments and the EU government.

"To rescue Governments or banks, there is no problem. But to rescue the people... like we didn't exist". *"These facets of politicians are not only present at the European level, but also at the local level in every*

country. It is not caused by the EU, but unfortunately, the tendency is like that".

The distance from the European institutions felt by Spanish citizens is claimed to be widespread.

Respondents highlight that the interests of Spanish citizens are not represented by the members of the European Parliament.

"You have to vote for someone who will defend your interests, whatever their ideology, and someone you can hold accountable, but that is not the way it is".

"The European Parliament members from the different parties should defend the same projects, everything that is good for our country, and it is not the way it is".

Respondents consider not only that Spain trails behind other European countries regarding economic parameters, but also regarding educational achievement.

"For example, my cousin was studying industrial engineering in London, and they have all the tools, special classrooms, companies that offer them the chance to have a future. Here at the university I'm not that lucky. And you think: I'll have to go abroad to have a good future".

Respondents believe there are more discussions about EU-related topics mainly due to current pressures.

"We are also more negative because of the situation we're currently living through. But it is better to open up your eyes, and be aware of what's happening".

Initially it is not easy to come up with advantages associated with the EU – disappointment is the prevalent feeling. The underlying feeling is however that, despite everything, the European Union is positive (see Box 2).

BOX 2 ► Advantages of the EU

- No borders as the key aspect – this helps increase freedom of movement across the EU
- The euro as the shared currency
- Cohesion Fund
- Bologna Process
- Labour mobility
- Cultural exchange

Thinking about the negatives, respondents mention several items, some of them often repeated (see Box 3).

BOX 3 ► Disadvantages or areas for improvement in the EU

- Financial costs
- Distance: far from the citizens
- Pressure (experienced by "second rate" countries)
- Unequal conditions
- Power delegation and decision making

"We had to delegate to some institutions part of our sovereignty, our decision power".

- Loss of control
- "We've been put on a leash, and they take us out for a walk occasionally".*

2. Sources of information and knowledge on the EU

The following **sources** are considered **the most relevant and are most frequently used** for information on EU topics (in this order approximately):

- Television
 - The printed media, i.e., newspapers
 - Digital media
 - The Internet
- "There is a website where information is available like in 16 languages, but when you go to the information as such, it is only English, French and German. I think this is awful".*
- The radio
 - Family and friends
- "My partner tells me all about it. I'm not really interested".*
- The work environment
- "In the work canteen we talk about these topics".*
- Specific documentaries/ talk shows on the EU

Respondents notice the absence of pro-European media and believe each media group protects their own economic interests.

"I hear more EU-related news on Channel 1 and 2, more than on the private channels. That's my feeling".
"In the paper La Razón, if there is any Government-related EU news, it is always presented slightly better than maybe in El País".

3. Questions regarding the future of the EU

Respondents reveal some **interest in finding information on several issues** regarding the future of the EU (see Box 4).

BOX 4 ► Finding information on several issues

- Economic data and budgets, the economic cost for Spanish citizens
- The roles of the individuals working in the EU
- Salaries of EU employees
- Authority of each country to make decisions on their own regardless of EU decisions
- Real objectives set by the EU as a whole
- EU-planned projects to tackle the severe problem of unemployment
- Benefits that EU membership has delivered to each country, and comparison between the situation of each country pre-EU and currently
- How prepared are the individuals representing the interests of the citizens

Respondents suggest the following **recommendations** (see Box 5).

BOX 5 ► Recommendations

- Transparency
 - No bilateral meetings, e.g., Spanish-Italian summits – respondents consider that the standard EU meetings should suffice.
 - Search of shared interests that will not damage other EU country members
- "Solidarity is impossible because we live under a capitalistic system, ruled by self-interest only. A global group is impossible to build because members only come together to protect their own interests. They don't care whether their interests have an impact on a third country".*
- Developing common legislation
- "There is no common law that binds us together. Every country has their own laws – we have nothing in common other than market".*
- A court of justice that will investigate if the rights and duties of citizens are being preserved or jeopardized
 - Larger investments in citizen travel and exchange so they become familiar with other countries in every sense – culturally, professionally, etc.
 - Voting for individuals rather than representative parties is considered important
- "You should vote for a member of the European Parliament you could tell, OK, I will vote for you, and then I'll hold you accountable".*

4. Current means of expression of citizens' views

Respondents feel there are no suitable ways to have a voice on the future EU rules and regulations.

"We have no access to make decisions on any rules. I don't know how many signatures are required on certain topics".

Respondents believe they have **no influence** on decision-making in Europe or within the Spanish Government.

"It is beyond us. It is not in our hands"

"What saddens me, is that it is all a lie – you have no say in it".

Respondents believe the EU website is not useful or effective.

"I visited the EU site like 8 years ago, and wrote a letter demanding transparency in every sense, and I'm still waiting".

Respondents claim there is a **great difference with other countries**. The means of expression in other countries are more active and so are their politicians.

"For example, I have a girlfriend living in Paris, and mobilizations over there are being different. They are paid more attention".

5. Perceptions of new ways for citizens to get their voice heard

Respondents consider the **following ways to get their voice heard** of high interest:

- Citizen's Advice Bureau in every country with active operations
 - Website
 - Unique 24h dedicated communication channel
 - TV shows, and news
 - EU publicity explaining to citizens the best ways to be heard. More continuous information
 - Members of the European Parliament should offer to make part of their workday available to offer solutions to citizen's issues
- "For example, doctors or medical representatives who want to talk to their MEP to be heard on some issue and defend their rights".*

- International cross-cultural meetings on TV programmes... producing a range of conclusions at the end
- Idea exchange across EU citizens
- Work exchanges with other countries

6. Assessment of several propositions for improved citizens' involvement

6.1. 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.

Respondents consider this proposition is **quite interesting**, and rate it 8.7 points on average on a 10 point scale.

Several respondents mention the tool is already available or, at least, something similar.

This proposition is very well rated as it offers citizens information and explanations, and it can solve any possible doubts and queries.

"I said 'quickly' which means there would be many people to receive all the queries. It may exist already so this could be happening now, but I don't use it now because I feel abandoned".

"The channel is not appealing to me if at the end of the line, a machine is answering the telephone".

"I think it is very good but maybe too ambitious and a bit difficult to maintain both the 'quickly', which is a bit subjective, and the 'on the telephone' - it is impossible that the person picking up the telephone will answer all your doubts".

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

Respondents rate this tool 8.25 on average.

This proposition is believed to be a **helpful way to unify citizen's opinions on the EU**.

Respondents find it fundamental that the information be communicated in a close, easy way to ensure comprehension.

Some however do not believe this proposition will help bring EU laws closer.

"It is ridiculous. In the end, you'll go to a radio station or a TV channel, and it will all be focused on what they are interested in. I don't think this will allow citizens to find out about European rules, and why a rule is really going to be implemented".

Respondents say a debate should take place among people with similar experiences. They also value an exchange of opinions between experts and inexperienced citizens.

"I think an exchange of opinions between experienced and inexperienced people is very good. But a debate including people who are not at the same level is totally unrealistic. In the end, it is not a debate - one will clearly swallow the other".

"Experts may know more about some topics but they are not the owners of the truth, and the ones who know about real everyday situations are us, the citizens".

Respondents suggest organizing talks rather than debates to ensure the average citizen can express their interests, concerns, and objectives directly to an individual who can explain and talk about the situation.

6.3. 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.

Respondents rate this tool 6.75 on average.

Some do not support polls, as they do not consider polls are a very objective tool.

Respondents add it is interesting to survey public opinion but question whether other countries' citizens will have any interest in their opinions.

"Everything that involves having information from other countries, other citizens, is always positive".

"It is another channel so people express themselves, and this is fine, but I don't know to what extent I may be interested in what other people may think about it".

"I don't think that, generally speaking, anybody cares what people in other countries think about anything, and I don't know what value this would have".

6.4. 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.

Respondents rate this tool 8.88 on average. This is the **best rated, most desired option**.

"This is what we want, it is very desirable".

"It would be terrific".

"This is what I rated the highest by far".

Some respondents question the possibility of organizing and materializing this initiative.

"Who is not going to like this? I just don't think it is realistic".

"If anything must be discarded, this would go first - I think it is unfeasible. It is physically impossible. And even if it were not, if you are face to face with a politician, you won't be able to say what you want to say, I think you'd start talking to someone who has very clear ideas and is very articulate, and they would take 2 seconds to tell you 3 sentences which at the time would seem fine to you, only to notice 5 minutes later that you didn't say this or that..."

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

Respondents rate this tool 8.12 on average, saying it is a **good way to show interest in the citizens and to listen to their opinions**.

Also respondents add it is a more realistic, feasible, inexpensive and simple option they can envision more easily.

"It is feasible, viable, low cost, and the process to screen information can't be very complicated. Once all these opinions were checked, the majority would win".

"It looks good to me, it is inexpensive, it could be done and we can optimize the questions. Whether MEPs would then take notice, that is the question".

"It is an economical option to test citizen's opinions when making decisions".

Respondents suggest this option should be used to make less relevant decisions as well.

"I think it is very good but I don't like the fact it is only used to make important decisions".

6.6. Similar consultations, organised by our national government.

Respondents rate this tool 7.62 on average.

This initiative receives **two differing types of opinions**:

- On the one hand, respondents find the option is important as it truly protects the interests of the citizens of the country.
"The involvement of the Government in EU's decision is critical".
- Others however believe this tool might bias decisions in favour of the interests of Spanish politicians.
"It is vital we are all together in the same boat in defence of the EU, but coming from the Government, they would be thinking that the money would help them pay their own super-salaries instead of investing".
- Additionally, respondents feel that consultations led by any specific Government will always have partisan interests, and would lack objectivity.
"Depending who is ruling in the country, if it does not move in the same direction as the EU... that's bad".

6.7. 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.

Respondents rate this tool 8.5 on average, on the grounds that it is a **very interesting, innovative idea to collect different points of view**.

"It is possible to learn from people, from the exchange of points of view. I'm not a big fan of social media but they may make you think things differently or open up your mind".

Respondents say it is a way of improving access as social media are now the norm, and everybody is using them.

"A lot easier, more accessible, and more convenient for everybody".

"With a simple Like or Don't like, you can find out".

Respondents mention that not knowing the profile of the recipients is a disadvantage.

"Everything looks good to me but ultimately you don't know who will get this".

Respondents believe this option is less ambitious than the first one, and could be included as part of it.

6.8. 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 next Spring (May 2014).

Respondents rate this tool 6.75 on average, as **one more informational campaign**.

"Because after all, a campaign is a campaign, and they are trying to sell us hot air".

"It is just an informational campaign".

All respondents suspect this initiative may have a hidden agenda.

"Elections, next spring, and informational campaigns – these three phrases worry me. Now they show an interest in making us aware because the elections are coming, right? I feel again cheated".

"It is a good idea, but that they would remember us because of the elections, is very sad. It should be on a continuing basis. It is laughable and utopic that we could have an influence on MEPs".

Respondents consider public campaigns and involving citizens are fundamental.

"It encourages citizens to get involved. So far we've heard and voted without much basis for it".

"Publicity is fundamental. So is providing information. But it smells of elections.

Appendix - Discussion guide

Investigación cualitativa sobre implicación ciudadana en la Unión Europea - Guía de discusión

(INTRODUCCIÓN: Pida a cada participante que se presente en pocas palabras, diciendo quién es y a qué se dedica, etc.)

Tema 1.

Hoy vamos a hablar sobre la Unión Europea.

¿Podría decirme qué es lo primero que le viene a la mente si le pregunto por la UE?

- Reacciones espontáneas
- Insistir:
 - Naturaleza de los temas sobre la UE mencionados en espontáneo.
 - Aspectos positivos y negativos relacionados con la UE.
 - Grado de interés e implicación de los participantes en los temas relacionados con la UE.

Tema 2.

¿De dónde obtiene la información que conforma lo que sabe y piensa sobre la UE?

¿Podría nombrar las fuentes de las que obtiene la información o en las que oye opiniones sobre la UE (con el significado más amplio de «fuentes», desde fuentes oficiales a conversaciones informales con amigos, etc.) ?

- Reacciones espontáneas
- Insistir:
 - Grado de variedad de las fuentes nombradas.
 - Naturaleza de la información en cada una.
 - Interés / credibilidad de cada una

Tema 3.

Vamos a centrarnos en el futuro de la Unión Europea y en las preguntas que les puedan surgir a este respecto.

Probablemente haya ciertos aspectos que considera importantes y que le gustaría saber y entender mejor con respecto a la manera en que funciona la UE y las normativas que ponen en marcha (puede que no encuentre toda la información que desea en las fuentes que ha mencionado anteriormente).

¿Sobre qué aspectos desearía recibir más información?

- Reacciones espontáneas
- Insistir:

- Impresiones generales de tener un alto o bajo grado de conocimiento / comprensión de estos temas.
- Percepción de los principales retos de la UE para los próximos años.
- Expresiones de los participantes sobre la necesidad de saber y entender más (¿el qué exactamente?). Pensando en la información disponible en la actualidad sobre estos temas, ¿en qué aspecto no es satisfactoria?

Tema 4.

Como ciudadano, debería poder dar su opinión y hacerse oír con respecto a las futuras normativas de la Unión Europea (ya sea para aprobar o rechazar una normativa, o por otras razones)...

¿Hasta qué punto puede hacerlo hoy en día?

- Reacciones espontáneas
- Insistir:
 - Percepción de facilidad / dificultad al expresarse y hacerse oír en los temas relacionados con la UE. ¿A través de qué medios?
 - Percepción de razones por las que es difícil.
 - Temas en los que los participantes desearían dar su opinión y ser escuchados como ciudadanos; expectativas que surgen con esa posibilidad.

Tema 5.

Existen muchos medios a través de los cuales los ciudadanos europeos como nosotros podrían hacerse oír. Por favor, deje volar su imaginación y piense en cualquier medio, sin descartar ninguna idea aunque no sepa cómo se podría poner en práctica.

¿Qué opciones surgen?

- Reacciones espontáneas
- Estimule la creatividad grupal animando a los participantes para que «salten» de una idea a otra.

Tema 6.

A continuación le voy a enumerar varios medios que han surgido previamente a través de los cuales los ciudadanos podrían hacerse oír más en temas de la UE. Por favor, dígame qué opina de cada uno.

Los participantes deben reaccionar a cada propuesta por turnos, pregunte por su grado de interés en cada una y las razones.

- 6.1. Servicio de información compuesto por oficinas de información abiertas al público situadas en

las grandes ciudades, una página web y un servicio que responda rápidamente a las preguntas formuladas sobre el funcionamiento de la UE y sus políticas por teléfono, correo postal o correo electrónico.

- 6.2. Debates entre ciudadanos medios y expertos en temas de la UE organizados en medios de comunicación importantes sobre normativas de la UE.

- 6.3. Sondeo de opinión sobre la UE realizado de manera regular en toda Europa, que permita a los ciudadanos saber la opinión de sus compatriotas y de los ciudadanos de otros países.

- 6.4. La posibilidad de reunirse varias veces al año con Miembros del Parlamento Europeo u otros políticos de la UE próximos a su domicilio.

- 6.5. Consultas por Internet abiertas a todos los ciudadanos y organizadas por la Comisión Europea cuando se deban tomar decisiones importantes en la UE.

- 6.6. Consultas similares organizadas por el gobierno de su país.

- 6.7. Servicio interactivo permanente, a través de Internet y las redes sociales, que recopile los puntos de vista, deseos o críticas de los ciudadanos sobre las normativas tomadas por la UE.

- 6.8. Campañas informativas que se lleven a cabo de manera más activa que en años anteriores y así animar a los ciudadanos para que se impliquen en los debates y en la elección de los Miembros del Parlamento Europeo la primavera próxima.

De nuevo, gracias por participar en esta reunión.

Si le surgieran nuevas ideas tras la reunión, no dude en hacérselas llegar.

(Proporcionar una dirección de correo electrónico a los participantes para que puedan transmitir sus ideas)

WHAT DO CITIZENS THINK THE FUTURE CHALLENGES OF THE EU ARE?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW WOULD CITIZENS LIKE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION COMMUNICATE WITH CITIZENS?

Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

HOW DO CITIZENS SEE THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

▶ HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE EU? THE OPINION OF EUROPEAN CITIZENS

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

CITIZENS FACING "BRUSSELS' EUROPE"

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, August 2014

EUROPEAN CITIZENS IN BRUSSELS: WHAT MESSAGES?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, August 2014

THE INVOLVEMENT OF EU CITIZENS IN THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT GLOBALISATION

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT EURO

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT THE EMPLOYEMENT IN THE EU

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

EU NO, EURO YES? EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINIONS FACING THE CRISIS (2007-2012)

Daniel Debomy, *Policy Paper No. 90*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013

DO THE EUROPEANS STILL BELIEVE IN THE EU?

Daniel Debomy, *Studies & Reports No. 91*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, June 2012

MIGRANTS – EUROPEAN STORIES

Frédéric Praud, Florence Brêthes, Hamed Borsali and Kiel, *Comics*, Paroles d'hommes et de femmes / Notre Europe, May 2012

THE CITIZENS OF EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CURRENT CRISIS

Daniel Debomy, *Policy Paper No. 47*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute / Fondation Jean Jaurès, November 2011

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