

# SWEDISH CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU REPORT OF A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN SWEDEN

Kommunicera

**T**his Synthesis presents the results of a group discussion held in Stockholm on 19 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 held in Stockholm on 19 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union.

It is the Swedish 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 Sweden by kommunika.

This study forms a part of a wider citizenship project managed by Notre Europe – Jacques Delors institute on behalf of the European commission.

### BOX 1 ► Composition of the group of respondents

#### Gender

Women: 3  
Men: 4

#### Age

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

#### Social class

Lower-middle social class: 4 (professions of respondent/head of household: mental keeper, driver, students)

Higher-middle class: 3 (professions of respondent/head of household: it-engineer, economist, management consultant)

#### Political opinion

The respondents were also recruited so that diverse political opinions were represented in the group.

## 1. Initial thoughts about the European union

**The overall spontaneous reactions were positive** to the European Union, regardless of gender or age.

- The general **cooperation** between so many countries is important in order to agree on various issues of economic concern.
- Possibility for smaller countries to **influence** European politics.
- **Work mobility** within the union is positive, especially for the younger generation.
- Originally a **peace project** and is still a possible way to keep peace in Europe.

Comments were then made regarding lack of information as well as some negative aspects of the European Union.

- A feeling that EU is too bureaucratic and at the same time there are many different lobby groups in Brussels, which might affect the democratic system. Therefore one strong comment made was a **need for transparency** regarding the **decision making process**.
- Most of the participants did not know who their representatives from Sweden are, something which was said being negative.

**The more sceptical or even negative comments were made as second thoughts.**

- The focus on politics regarding agricultural products was said to influence the feeling of EU dealing with unimportant matters such as the size of a cucumber or a strawberry, instead of peace.
- It should be noted that the amount of interest for EU related issues increased during the initial discussion, and all participants in the group took pride in contributing to the conversation.

## 2. Sources of information and knowledge on the EU

The **main source** of information was said to be Swedish **media**, **TV news** were mentioned as well as **daily papers** and **news on radio**. One of the participants was born in Poland and mentioned also polish media as a source of information.

- The TV channels mentioned were news on channels 1, 2 and 4 which were all regarded as more informed and reliable than other TV news channels. None mentioned international TV-news channels during this discussion.
- Dagens nyheter (largest daily paper in Sweden) was said to be trustworthy as well as dagens industri (financial daily paper). The tabloids, i.e. the evening press was not seen as trustworthy at all, even though some articles about EU decisions have been published during the years.
- Regardless of media channel, a claim was that the information is selected by journalists, and therefore most likely biased according to political colour of the individual journalist. Most of them are perceived as left wing, and therefore not neutral, on the contrary; many are even against the European Union as an institution, which reflects their reporting.
- TV was said to be a better channel for information due to lack of active interest for EU related issues altogether. It is easier to listen to news than to read a daily paper.

Some of the younger participants also said that some basic facts about EU had been taught in **school**.

- One of the participants had been a university student of political science and commented that there had been students from Greece very critical of the euro and how Germany has dealt with the monetary union. Those Greek students seemed in general more involved and actively discussing EU-related issues.

Interesting to note is that none of the participants said that there is any discussion on EU at their work place or among friends.

Regarding **content of information** only three different issues were mentioned, all three having been in Swedish news during the past few months, namely for or against the monetary union, Swedish snuff and roaming costs.

- Discussion regarding the euro was intense before and during the Swedish vote to be part or not of the **monetary union**. But, the discussion comes alive every time the financial situation is described in the Swedish press.
- Examples mentioned were Greece and how Germany has put pressure in order to rescue European economy.
- **Swedish snuff** (snus) is of national pride and therefore causes feelings of provocation when the EU is discussing the probability to prohibit it.
- **Roaming costs for mobiles** were also mentioned as something that lately has been an item in Swedish media. Most welcome decisions about minimizing those costs.

The participant originating from Poland mentioned that polish press compared to Swedish press, is transparent and that the discussions leading up to decisions within EU are reported and debated in polish press.

## 3. Questions regarding the future of the EU

The **decision making process** within the European Union was said to be one issue of both concern and interest, and came up as the first and most spontaneous comment. The fact that this was mentioned by all showed that one worries about the future of EU and whether it is and will continue to be democratic or not.

- Questions rose had to do with responsibilities and who has insights and makes sure that EU is run democratically.
- A few said that it is hard to trust the EU democracy as so much is written about the lobbyists in Brussels.
- the focus regarding democracy came down to a very detailed discussion on which the institutions or bodies are that keep reviewing what the EU institutions do, if they follow the legislation and rules and what the punishments are if not.

During the discussion some wanted to learn more about **lobbying**, who the various lobbyists are and what questions they are dealing with.

- although lobbyists has negative connotations, there seemed to be some fascination for what it means and what can be achieved, parallel to an understanding of how it fits or does not fit the notion of democracy.

The **rights and obligations** as both Swedish and EU citizen brought questions to the table. Some stated that if EU can become relevant for the individual, the interest will most likely increase among the general Swedish population.

The practical **functions of all EU institutions** were mentioned as one point of interest, although only by a few of the participants.

- It was compared with how the Swedish parliament has a homepage which describes the various committees, work groups and decision making process, etcetera.  
This homepage was mentioned as an example which could be copied by the EU.

The great **challenges** in the near future are to make sure that EU remains truly **democratic**, to **make EU relevant** to the EU citizens, something which can be partly achieved by conveying beforehand which decisions are to be made in various areas.

#### 4. Current means of expression of citizens' views

The participants all expressed how hard it seems to be to make one's voice heard towards politicians. This was a statement made towards both politicians in Sweden and in the EU.

There are political **parties and group constellations in the EU which do not exist in Sweden**, something which was mentioned as strange and somewhat confusing.

On the other hand, so far very few had taken the initiative to learn more or try to influence in other ways than voting during elections.

Although there are ways **to influence** it was said to be **difficult** due to the fact that Sweden is a very small country and of less importance compared to countries like France and Germany

- The upcoming EU election in Sweden in 2014 was mentioned as one way to influence by casting a vote. However, most participants **do not know who the politicians** running for the EU parliament are.
- One problem is that the **Swedish politicians**, either in the Swedish parliament or those running for EU usually do not address issues relevant for the citizens and dealt with by EU. The

Swedish politicians need to focus more on EU than what the case is of today. Only then is the EU on the agenda and might become of greater interest to follow.

- It also became clear that even though Sweden has a minister of EU and democracy, Birgitta Ohlson, most participants did not know that she is the minister of EU affairs. When the name was mentioned by one of the group participants, all nodded in recognition.
- The **EU court** was mentioned as being an institution to which citizens can turn and influence decisions made in Sweden which are seemed to be wrong or opposing EU legislation.
- Some of the respondents did comment that they are **egoistic** and therefore more concerned about the economic development in Sweden than to influence political agendas within the EU.

Some of the subjects mentioned as being important to influence, but impossible as a private person were said to be **migration and environmental** issues. Having said this, the claim was that even if it is hard to make one's voice heard among politicians, it might be easier to address local issues rather than global ones.

One way to hopefully be able to influence was said to be by first getting information about Sweden compared to other EU countries regarding subjects such as **agriculture, education, infrastructure and animal protection** and then turn to the EU homepage with comments.

- The **EU homepage** was said to be a tool for learning and explore for example which decisions have been made during 2013, and how those decisions have affected Sweden. It is interesting however to notice was that the homepage was mentioned as a source of influence, but not earlier in the discussion as a source of information.

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

One of the first ideas proposed was to use internet and **direct voting** on specific topics. Comparison was made to Switzerland where many important decisions are made through referendum.

- By direct voting it was perceived giving the EU parliament more power and influence than the EU council by the help of citizens in the various member countries. This as a consequence would

increase interest both for the EU and certain specific subjects, as the parliament is seen as the peoples' representative which the council is not.

Another idea was to collect **signed petitions** supporting a specific issue. Having reached a specific number, for example 10 000, the issue would be forwarded to the EU office for further consideration and handling.

Important to state is that the participants had no idea that this idea exists in the Lisbon treaty.

- The whole idea of direct democracy seemed to the participants to be attractive and a proof of no hidden agendas due to transparency and citizen involvement. Subjects mentioned to be considered via petitions were **peace and security, agriculture and free trade**, as well as in favour or not to bring certain **new member states** into the EU.

## 6. Assessment of several propositions for improving citizens' involvement

**A. 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.**

Only a few knew that this kind of information service does already exist.

One of them had used the service for a school assignment.

The **web site** is the channel to turn to, rather than the other options; i.e. phone, mail or e-mail.

An information office was said to be an unnecessary cost as it was hard to imagine who would turn to that particular office when there are other channels to get information today if needed or wanted.

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

This idea aroused interest among most of the participants, and was said to be more **relevant** and easier

to digest than actively having to turn to an information office.

- Debates about EU have been broadcasted during the years on topics directly concerning the Swedish citizens, such as snuff and now as election to the EU parliament is approaching.

**C. 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.**

This idea was seen as interesting, and had actually also been a spontaneous reaction to what information could be **of interest**; to compare Sweden with other EU countries.

- The main reason for interest in the results from opinion polls was that it might provide other perspectives on important issues such as the **decision making process, agriculture and environment**.

Even more interesting as an idea was to conduct polls on EU within Sweden and to keep it on a national level.

- Ideas on how Swedes think in various parts of the country and different segments of the population in Sweden regarding for example roads and transport system, agriculture, environment, safety were brought forward as being interesting to learn more about.

**D. 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.**

This idea was **not at all of interest**, as no one would be active or interested enough to spend time for this kind of encounters.

**E. Consultations through the internet organised by the European commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.**

This was said to be a **slightly more interesting way to keep oneself updated**. However, few thought they would actually turn to the internet for consultation.

- Questions were raised regarding **what is perceived as major decisions** in the EU. Something

that might not be regarded as a major decision can be of great importance for Sweden

**F. Similar consultations, organised by our national government.**

**Consultations altogether did not arouse any interest** and was more seen as time consuming. The participants had also difficulties to see in what way those consultations would help in creating more interest or influencing the EU to become more transparent.

**G. 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.**

This interactive service using both internet and social networks aroused **great interest**. It was said to be a good start for debates relevant for the citizens.

This would also be less demanding to actually become more active, than for example consultations and meetings.

**H. 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.**

Most of the participants could see themselves getting more active in order to vote in the upcoming elections for the EU parliament. **Information campaigns via various channels** such as TV, internet, social media, internet and newspapers, **would be of great help** in order to make the choices between candidates.

## APPENDIX - DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Kvalitativ undersökning om medborgares engagemang i europeiska unionen Diskussionsguide

**Introduktion:** be varje deltagare att presentera sig med några få ord, genom att säga vem man är, sysselsättning etc.

#### Tema 1

Vi är här för att samtala om europeiska unionen.

Vad är det första du tänker på när vi

Säger EU?

- spontana reaktioner
- fördjupa:
  - typ av ämnen som spontant nämns i samband med EU
  - positiva och negativa aspekter relaterade till EU
  - grad av intresse och engagemang bland ip kopplat till EU-relaterade frågor

#### Tema 2

Vad kommer din kunskap och dina tankar om EU ifrån?

Från vilka källor får du informationen och dina åsikter om EU – med källor räknas allt från officiell information till informell information genom samtal med vänner och andra personer.

- spontana reaktioner
- fördjupa:
  - grad av variation när det gäller källor som nämns
  - typ av information som nämns av var och en
  - intresse och trovärdighet avseende respektive källa

#### Tema 3

Låt oss nu diskutera eus framtid och frågor som du har kring detta

Det finns troligtvis vissa aspekter som du anser är mer betydelsefulla, och vill veta och förstå bättre hur EU arbetar och hur det fungerar – kanske för att du inte får all den information du skulle önska från de källor du tidigare nämnt.

Vilka aspekter skulle du särskilt vilja få mer kunskap om?

- spontana reaktioner
- fördjupa:
  - allmänna intrycket av att ha bra eller dålig kunskap/förståelse för dessa frågor

- uppfattning om eus utmaningar de kommande åren
- uttryck som ip använder avseende behov av ökad kunskap och förståelse – vilka ämnen nämns särskilt? På vilket sätt är befintlig information inte tillräcklig?

#### Tema 4

Som medborgare skall du kunna uttrycka din åsikt och göra din röst hörd avseende eus framtida inriktning – oavsett om du håller med eller ej om en viss inriktning. Vilka möjligheter har du idag att göra dig hörd?

- spontana reaktioner
- fördjupa:
  - uppfattning om att det är enkelt/svårt att uttrycka sig och få sin röst hörd. Motivera!
  - varför uppfattas det vara svårt?
  - vilka specifika områden skulle man särskilt vilja framföra sin åsikt om och bli lyssnad till som EU-medborgare? Vilka är förväntningarna?

#### Tema 5

Det kan finnas olika sätt att göra sin röst hörd.

Låt fantasin flöda om hur det skulle kunna gå till – utan att fundera över om det är genomförbart eller ej. Vad föreställer du dig?

- spontana reaktioner
- stimulera gruppens kreativitet genom att uppmuntra var och en att "hoppa" från en idé till en annan.

#### Tema 6

Här kommer nu några idéer som framförts för att öka EU-medborgarnas möjligheter att göra sig hörda när det gäller EU-relaterade frågor.

Vad tycker du om var och en av dessa.

(Varje intervjuperson får reagera i tur och ordning, och ange graden av intresse för var och en, samt motivera varför).

- informationsservice om EU och EU-politik, bestående av ett informationskontor som är öppet för allmänheten varje stor stad, en hemsida, och service dit man kan vända sig för frågor och snabba svar via telefon, brev eller e-mail
- debatter som organiseras i de större mediekanalerna mellan medborgare och experter på olika EU-relaterade frågor avseende eus inriktning
- regelbundna opinionsmätningar om EU som genomförs för hela europa, vilket möjliggör för medborgarna att få kunskap om åsikter bland



såväl egna landsmän som hur man tänker i andra länder

- D.** att flera gånger per år ges möjlighet att träffa de svenska EU-parlamentarikerna, eller andra EU-politiker i din närhet
- E.** konsultationer för alla medborgare via internet, organiserade av EU-kommissionen inför större EU beslut.
- F.** liknande konsultationer organiserade av sveriges regering
- G.** en interaktiv service där internet och sociala media utgör en permanent bas för att samla medborgarnas åsikter, önskemål och kritik avseende EU
- H.** informationskampanjer som utvecklas betydligt mer aktivt än tidigare, med syfte att uppmuntra medborgare att involvera sig i debatten inför val av ledamöter till EU-parlamentet våren 2014

Tack för ert deltagande i denna diskussion.

Om du kommer på ytterligare idéer, tveka inte att kontakta oss via vår e-mailadress.

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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