

The importance of relations between European citizens for better integration

At the beginning of the history of the European Union, "shared problems" (such as the German question and the reconstruction of European economies) were the basis of European integration and its subsequent development. These were problems, as their name suggests, which could not be effectively addressed at the national level and therefore, required joint management through cooperation between States, as they were linked to the growth of interdependence and the crisis of territoriality of the State, which impaired their ability to govern the processes that affected their territory. Already then, although we know that the EU has become a "quasi-State" (e.g. it is defined as an "*Objet politique non identifié*" (J. Delors)), among the proposals for its development there was the well-known "Ventotene Manifesto" (1941), which argues for a European federation.

*"The question which must first be resolved, and if it is not then any other progress made up to that point is mere appearance, is that of the abolition of the division of Europe into national, sovereign states. The collapse of the majority of the states of the continent under the German steamroller has already placed the destinies of the European populations on common ground: either all together they will submit to Hitler's dominion, or all together they will enter a revolutionary crisis after his fall, and they will not find themselves adamantly distinct in solid, state structures. The general spirit today is already far more disposed than it was in the past to a federal reorganization of Europe. The hard experience of the last decades has opened the eyes even of those who would not see, and has matured many circumstances favourable to our ideal. All reasonable men recognize that it is impossible to maintain a balance of power among European states with militarist Germany enjoying equal conditions, nor can Germany be broken up into pieces once it is conquered."*¹

Since then, the path has been long, passing from the European Communities, through the 1986 Single European Act (SEA), and the Treaties of Maastricht (1992), Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2001), to the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), the "last" step for integration. During this process, the development of the EU can be summarised by considering two different development directions: enlargement ("widening") and deepening. Deepening is the increase in integration between member States, it's the *development of the treaties*, and therefore it is the aspect that interests us most in this case; in particular, we can distinguish between development of the policy process (institutional deepening) and increase in policy areas (functional deepening). There remains a dilemma as to whether and how long the two objectives can be pursued simultaneously. The "existential" questions of how large the EU should be and what it should do in the world remain, in fact, without a single answer, and the 27 countries have different answers. The differences are whether the EU should be: "A more political union?" (Juncker, 2015), "A more social Union?" (Juncker, European Pillar of Social Rights 2018), or "A more green, digitalized, resilient and democratic EU?" (Von der Leyen, Commission Programme 2019).

The European integration is one of the most significant challenges of our time. While the European institutions work at political and economic level, it is also crucial to consider the role of relations between citizens in the process of European integration. These interactions are essential to promote a

¹ https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/the_manifesto_of_ventotene_1941-en-316aa96c-e7ff-4b9e-b43a-958e96afbecc.html

true European unity and a culture of cooperation, which is the basis for creating a European "*sense of community*" which can support and reinforce the integration achieved at institutional level.

This idea is linked to the well-known concept of functional "spillover", which states that integration in a given area (whether economic or of policy) leads to a subsequent integration in another area connected to it, following a to a trickle-down pattern, which covers more and more areas. Obviously in this case it would not really be a trickle, since the movement of the integration would be ascending, starting from the population of the various EU countries to reach the institutional level.

1. The importance of citizen-to-citizen relations

Relations between citizens are the foundation of a cohesive society. They promote communication, cultural understanding and mutual respect. In a European context, where different cultures and languages coexist, these relations can therefore contribute to:

- **Promote solidarity:** Interactions between citizens from different countries help to develop a sense of common belonging and solidarity among the different European countries.
- **Fostering intercultural understanding:** The encounter between different cultures facilitates dialogue and the reduction of prejudices, contributing to greater tolerance.
- **Creating a "sense of community"**, as mentioned above, which is fostered by the two points just above.
- More relations between European citizens could lead to a **better overview of the EU**, and therefore, to **greater demand for integration**.

While the first three points refer to integration from a qualitative point of view, as they are purely concerned with cohesion between European citizens, the last point refers instead to integration from a quantitative point of view, following a reasoning that recognizes that dialogue and unity among citizens could have positive effects not only at the level of the polity's base, but also at the institutional level.

The idea of the importance of social relations between citizens as a basis for greater integration is neither original nor recent. In fact, there are well known attempts by the European institutions themselves to promote integration and relations between European citizens. One need only think of the creation of the Erasmus+ programme (1987), the removal of territorial barriers with the Schengen area, but also the creation of more symbolic elements such as the flag (created in 1955 by the Council of Europe and made an official emblem of the European Community by the heads of state and government of the member countries in 1985) and the anthem of the Union (adopted in 1972 by the Council of Europe and in 1985 by the heads of state or government of the member countries as official anthem of the European Union). The melody used to represent the EU is taken from the Ninth Symphony, composed in 1823 by Beethoven, who set to music the "Hymn to joy" written by Friedrich von Schiller in 1785. According to an EU website²: "*The anthem symbolizes not only the European Union, but also Europe in general. The Hymn to Joy expresses Schiller's idealistic vision of the development of a bond of **brotherhood** among men, shared by Beethoven.*"

² https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols/european-anthem_it

Moreover, in his work “La sfida dell’est. Fiducia transnazionale e sostegno all’integrazione europea”³, Gaetano Calenzo addressed the issue of public support to the process of European integration, in an attempt to offer a partial explanation of the sharp decline that this support had registered in the years following the great enlargement of the European Union’s borders in 2004. Its analysis stems from the low level of confidence in the citizens of the then new member States. According to the author, this lack of confidence in the "new Europeans" weakened what Karl Deutsch⁴ called the "*sense of community*", to which he attributed a crucial importance as a precondition for the formation of a political entity that would result from the union of many States. The hypothesis was that the entry into the EU of new countries whose citizens were not generally viewed favourably by Western Europeans had tested the willingness of citizens to express their consent to the integration process. Thus, greater confidence in the new European citizens should have translated into greater support for this process, as expected from the model adopted. Empirical analysis produced results in line with his expectations. Trust in Eastern Europeans seemed to affect support for European integration almost as much as utilitarian considerations of self-interest. This study therefore highlights that mutual trust between European citizens plays an important role in the European project, directly influencing the integration process, and thus shows the importance of a cohesive base for the future of the EU.

2. Measuring the sense of community

One of the possible measures of the so-called "sense of community" is the percentage relating to positive perception of the EU and the degree of EU citizenship, values collected from the standard Eurobarometer survey 101 (spring 2024), conducted between 3 and 28 April 2024 in the 27 EU Member States, where 26,399 European citizens were interviewed in person, in preparation for the European elections.

The results show that almost three quarters of respondents (74%) say they feel like EU citizens, the highest level in over 20 years. Over six EU citizens out of ten (62%) are also optimistic about the future of the EU, slightly up from the previous survey in autumn 2023. Finally, confidence in the EU has also increased and is now at 49%, while trust in national governments stands at 33%.

The trend seems to be positive and continuously improving, which turns out to be positive, therefore, if we take into account what was stated earlier, also on the level of European integration.

3. Tools and initiatives to foster citizen-to-citizen relations

In recent years, a number of initiatives have been developed to promote relations between European citizens:

- **Exchange programmes:** Initiatives such as Erasmus+, mentioned above, offer opportunities to study and work abroad, creating links between young Europeans. In particular, the Erasmus programme was born in 1987 (since 2014 it is called Erasmus+) and is the most well-known and longest running of the EU-funded programmes in the field of mobility between EU countries⁵.

³ Calenzo Gaetano, “*La sfida dell’est. Fiducia transnazionale e sostegno all’integrazione europea*”, in Synesis Libera Ricerca, novembre 2013.

⁴ Deutsch Karl, “*Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*”, in Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

⁵ <https://www.erasmusplus.it/programma/cose-erasmus/#:~:text=Nato%20nel%201987%20con%20il,coinvolte%20dal%201987%20a%20oggi.>

- **Cultural events:** Festivals, fairs and cultural events promote the meeting between citizens and the sharing of traditions.

- **Voluntary projects:** Transnational voluntary activities encourage cooperation and joint work between citizens. These include, for example, the European Solidarity Corps, a programme that offers young people opportunities to volunteer, in their own country or abroad, within projects aimed at helping communities or populations in Europe.

"The Programme shall strengthen the participation of young people and organisations in activities of solidarity, with a view to contributing to greater cohesion and democracy in Europe, with a particular focus on promoting social inclusion".⁶

4. The challenges to be faced

Despite progress, there are still significant challenges to be addressed:

- **Nationalism and populism:** Political tendencies that emphasize national identities can hinder the building of interpersonal relationships at a European level, the creation of a sense of trust in the European institutions and of a sense of belonging to a political entity "superior" to the purely national, local, one. This is also supported by the disinformation (and lack of information) about the functioning and the objectives of the EU and its achievements, on which certain forces and political figures, who are against, or even just critical of, the Union, base their discussions

- **Linguistic and cultural barriers:** Linguistic differences can be a barrier to communication, making it more difficult to create links, which are also affected by cultural differences, which may lead to difficulties in understanding and accepting the other. This may therefore lead to a lack of a "sense of community" which, as we have seen before, is a necessary part of a deeper integration.

Conclusions

Relations between citizens are a crucial element for better European integration. Investing in initiatives that promote dialogue, understanding and solidarity is fundamental to building a more united and inclusive European Union. Only through cooperation at the local level and the promotion of a culture of peace and mutual respect, we can hope to face future challenges and achieve a real project of European integration.

Of course, the idea of having a pure European "demos" is impossible, and probably would also be an unnecessary goal to achieve, given the limitations resulting from the linguistic and cultural barriers we have just mentioned. Indeed, the idea of a cohesive European community does not assume this community can replace the sense of belonging to one's own national and/or local community, but rather that the two should overlap, through a process of complementarity: valuing their national culture as an essential part of a European one, by finding a common ground, and shared values and objectives.

⁶ <https://www.eurodesk.it/esc>