



Citizens' perspectives on the future of Europe

Expert commentaries

Overview

When a group of some 200 randomly selected citizens gathered in Brussels in October 2006 to discuss “the sort of Europe we want”, they were asked to decide what issues mattered most to them and should therefore be the focus of the discussions at national level. After two days of intense debate, they finally settled on the following three: the family and social welfare; immigration and the EU’s role in the world; and energy and the environment.

The first of these was particularly surprising, given the traditional argument that family and social welfare policies are very much a matter for national governments and the consequent lack of EU powers to act in this area.

It was also striking that the citizens focused on energy and the environment, which has recently attracted extensive media coverage in the light of the mounting evidence of climate change and its potentially devastating consequences, but was not capturing so many headlines at the time of the ‘Agenda-Setting’ event.

Less unexpected, perhaps, was the decision to focus on immigration, given the increase in global migration and the current debate over how to respond to the challenges posed by today’s increasingly multicultural European societies. It is, however, notable that the debate at the national consultations focused as much on tackling the root causes of migration as it did on issues such as border controls.

The choice of topics – and the outcome of the national consultations – suggests, firstly, that Europe’s citizens clearly recognise the need for European responses to issues which evidently cannot be dealt with at the national level alone; and secondly, that for citizens, it is the results which matter, not the age-old arguments over who does what.

This does not mean that they necessarily want the EU to be given a raft of new powers, although it is clear that a significant number would be in favour of this in some specific areas. However, the results of the national consultations show that respect for national identities, histories and cultures remain very important to them, and that they still want many decisions to be taken at national level. But they also want the Union to play a greater role in setting minimum standards and encouraging governments to commit themselves to action in key areas, suggesting they do not always trust national politicians to deliver on their promises.

This also suggests that the European Commission is on the right track with its emphasis on a “Europe of results”, delivering concrete action on the issues which matter most to ordinary citizens. It also perhaps lends weight to the arguments of those who maintained that opposition to the EU’s Constitutional Treaty did not necessarily reflect a demand for ‘less’ Europe, but rather for one less obsessed with delivering ‘more Europe’ through institutional reform.

The problem with this is that the EU’s history to date has shown that when the Union is merely given a coordinating role and tasked with getting agreement on targets, without any formal powers to enforce them, the results often fall far short of the agreed objectives. It is this which lies behind the conviction that institutional reforms are necessary to deliver what the EU’s citizens want, by giving the Union more formal powers – and better decision-making procedures – in key areas.

But in the absence of agreement on such reforms, how can pressure be put on national governments to sign up to ambitious targets and abide by the commitments they make at EU level in areas where the Union does not have the formal powers necessary to do so?

One way to do this is through ‘peer pressure’. It is this approach which has driven the introduction of ‘scoreboards’ to show how Member States are performing in relation to agreed goals. But, as the limited

success of the EU's Lisbon Agenda for boosting economic growth and competitiveness has shown, such peer pressure only has a limited impact. Today's politicians, with one eye permanently on the ballot box and the next elections, tend to shy away from making difficult choices and taking painful decisions.

So how can governments be convinced that making progress at European level on key issues is in their own interests? One way to do this is through 'bottom up' pressure: i.e. from the citizens, or voters, themselves. However, in order to exert this pressure, channels need to be provided for the citizens to make their voices heard.

Opinion polls have long been used by politicians as a way to measure public opinion, but they are a blunt instrument. They merely record the public's response to a series of questions without any debate on the issues concerned to find out what lies behind those responses.

At this critical juncture in the EU's development, amid signs that the long-standing apathy towards the Union is turning into hostility in many Member States, more sophisticated tools are now needed both to gauge public opinion and to involve the citizens in the debate over Europe's future.

This is precisely what the European Citizens' Consultations were designed to provide. They have demonstrated that the public is not hampered by a lack of knowledge about how the EU works when it comes to debating the sort of Europe they want and value such opportunities to get their views across; that they recognise the trade-offs involved in pursuing particular approaches; and that they want 'more' Europe, not 'less' in areas where they believe the EU can play an important role.

The challenge for Europe's politicians now is to show that they are listening to the citizens' voices, and to find ways to respond to them.

Jacki Davis
European Policy Centre

The social and economic conditions for Europe's families

The panels' calls for a strong EU agenda on family and social welfare policies are striking, given that the power to decide policies in this area lies mostly at the national level, rather than with the Union.

Generally speaking, the citizens want the EU to do far more to encourage Member States to pursue active family and social policies, although they do not appear to want it to be given more formal powers in this area. But this raises the question of whether the Union can respond effectively to these calls without any real power to act.

The EU has already taken up this challenge to some extent, using what is known as the 'open method of coordination': i.e. agreeing common standards, asking Member States to draw up plans to achieve those targets, and then monitoring their progress and exchanging best practices, but without legally binding rules to enforce agreed targets. One example of this approach is the EU's strategy for promoting 'social inclusion' to protect the most vulnerable sections of society.

The EU does not have the power to harmonise social standards across Europe, and any attempt to do so would require difficult decisions on whether to 'level up' standards, requiring some Member States to devote far greater resources to social welfare, or 'level down', requiring countries with the highest standards to lower them.

Whilst the panels were keen to see minimum standards established for social welfare, governments are largely opposed to EU action – recent discussions on establishing a European minimum income were, for example, given short shrift by Member States keen to preserve their own powers. Similarly, moves to greater convergence in health care – another area mentioned by the panels – have been limited. Coordination of pensions and health-care policies is at a very early stage, and minimum standards have not been set.

The reluctance to contemplate minimum standards in any of these areas is linked to the hugely sensitive issue of taxation, with national governments fiercely defending their right to decide what level of taxes to impose on their citizens and how to spend the 'income' this generates.

However, in some areas, the EU does have the power (and money) to act on the issues highlighted by the panels and has already done so: for example, a raft of anti-discrimination and equality laws have been introduced and the Union spends a significant part of its budget on supporting Europe's poorer regions through its 'structural funds' programmes.

The panels' call for action on educational qualifications has also already been taken up, with plans to establish a 'European Higher Education Area' by 2010, which includes making degrees more comparable and compatible across Europe. Other forms of educational qualification will soon be covered and the EU also funds and promotes a number of educational exchange programmes.

But the panels' concern with low birth rates, and their desire to promote and defend the family, are not fully reflected in current EU policies, which rarely directly address the family.

The European Commission has highlighted concerns about the ageing of Europe's population in several reports, but any measures to encourage higher birth rates would have to be taken at national, rather than EU, level.

Similarly, the EU's Employment Strategy includes the promotion of a better work/family life balance, but focuses to a much greater extent upon employment creation through greater 'flexibility' from workers. And while a new European Alliance for Families has been set up to foster exchanges of best practice, the EU has few powers to act in this area, and individual Member States have very different ideas on the role of the family in society.

However, the EU did adopt targets for improving childcare in 2002, and the greater availability of such facilities has been linked to increased female employment levels over the last ten years.

It is also striking that while the panels ask for child protection to be a key focus of EU activity, the Union has instead emphasised youth policies and children's rights. This rights-based approach, which is also reflected in the Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights, is much less evident in the citizens' conclusions than social welfare and family concerns. They do not appear to be looking to the EU so much for individualised legal rights, but rather for the reinforcement of collective solidarity.

Simon Wilson
The Centre

The EU's role in the world and the management of immigration

Many of the concerns and ideas raised by the panels mirror debates and initiatives being taken forward at the European level, particularly regarding approaches to legal and illegal immigration. However, the citizens appear to want the Union to go further in using external relations' tools to address the root causes of migration.

The panels' desire for a Europe that speaks with one strong voice mirrors the EU's ambitions to become a unified international player. However, while the Union represents its 27 Member States in some international settings, it does not have any formal right to do so in others.

The citizens' calls for the EU to play an active role in promoting peace and democracy around the world are reflected in the Union's drive to develop a Common Foreign and Security Policy and a European Defence and Security Policy. However, many of the panels appear to want it to go further in this area. (The provisions included in the Constitutional Treaty rejected by French and Dutch voters to create an EU Foreign Minister and an External Relations Service would have significantly enhanced the Union's capacity to do this.)

It is striking that the citizens see a strong connection between the EU's role in the world and the management of immigration, with many stressing the need to use development policies to raise living standards in poorer countries and some calling for the EU – as the world's biggest aid donor – to target its development assistance at those countries which are the biggest sources of migrants. While the EU does not target aid in this way, it has added 'migration management' to the criteria for some development funds. Some also emphasised the EU's role in ensuring that when it comes to development aid, everyone pays their fair share.

Several panels also support the use of other tools to help boost economic growth in developing countries, and appear to be far more ambitious than their governments in this respect: while the EU has opened up its markets to some extent, with preferential treatment for the world's Least Developed Countries, arguments over reducing European farm subsidies have been partly responsible for stalling negotiations on a new world trade deal and debt relief remains a controversial issue.

When it comes to preventing and controlling illegal immigration, the outcome of the panels' discussions mirrors the trade-offs and approaches seen at the national and European level, with Member States seeking to strike a balance between offering humanitarian protection and ensuring some control over choosing who enters the country.

The panels' recognition of the need for a pan-European response to immigration and integration is shared by EU governments, but getting agreement on what that response should be has so far been far from easy. The approach advocated by seven panels – an EU legislative framework with Member State control – is being developed within the European Commission, but a common immigration policy remains a stated but distant goal.

Most panels also favour a common approach to border controls, which is in line with the EU's thinking and initiatives such as the creation of the Frontex border agency. However, individual EU Member States have different views on what part the Union should play in this: some favour joint approaches, but others only want the EU to play a supporting role. (It is not surprising that the two panels which raise the issue of burden-sharing with respect to border control – Malta and Italy – are those which have to cope with the biggest influxes of illegal migrants because of their geographical location in the Mediterranean.)

The citizens' emphasis on respect for diversity and preserving Europe's variety of cultures and identities is also reflected in the EU's approach, with a commitment to a Union "united in diversity" enshrined in the EU treaty. The Union already provides financial support to foster cultural exchange and learning, and 2008 has been designated as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

The panels also highlight a number of other factors contributing to successful integration: the importance of a two-way process between migrants and states; the need to observe common laws and values; the possibility of active participation in society; and the importance of language, education, skills, employment and equal opportunities. All these factors were highlighted in the 11 Common Basic Principles on Integration agreed by the EU Member States in November 2004.

Finally, with respect to the labour market, the proposal to create a joint labour market in Europe would be a major change. Currently, labour market regulation is a national issue. The Commission is currently drafting legislation to govern highly-skilled migrant workers which may include some form of EU 'Green Card'. Currently, all those working legally in Europe enjoy the same employment rights as EU nationals, so it is difficult to see how a universal right to work would offer something new, unless it applied to those residing or working in Europe without authorisation.

Elizabeth Collett
European Policy Centre

The environmental and economic impact of Europe's energy use

The panels' calls for "increased common action" on energy issues mirror recent developments at the European level, but the citizens appear to want it to go even further, implying a greater transfer of powers to the EU in this area.

The Union is moving towards creating a more coordinated energy policy at an exceptionally fast pace, in response to mounting concerns about climate change and Europe's dependence on external sources of energy.

However, questions remain about whether EU Member States have the political will to translate the commitments they have made at the European level into national action. The panels' discussions suggest citizens share these doubts, with some explicitly saying they trust the Union not to act in the interests of individuals or monopolies, and to balance economic, environmental and safety concerns.

The EU's March 2007 summit agreed an Energy Policy for Europe (EPE) focusing on three areas – enhancing security of supply, ensuring the competitiveness of Europe's economies and promoting environmental sustainability to combat climate change – with specific targets set in a number of areas. The first and last of these clearly mirror the concerns raised by the citizens' panels.

However, the EU's power to act in this area remains limited. While EU Member States have agreed on the need for further coordination and monitoring at the European level, both the energy policy mix and the concrete measures needed to meet the agreed targets remain a matter for national governments.

The European Commission's formal powers in this area derive from its role in drafting and proposing the legislation necessary to ensure the EU's single market operates effectively and fairly, and to protect the environment. The Commission is seeking to use these powers to the full to make as much progress as possible towards developing a common energy policy, regarding this as a key test of the Union's commitment to a "Europe of results". The panels' deliberations suggest that the citizens share this view.

As a first step to translate the objectives set at the EU summit into concrete action, EU leaders agreed on an Action Plan (2007-2009) to achieve the following key goals:

- achieving a properly integrated and connected internal market for gas and electricity;
- guaranteeing security of energy supply and responding to potential crisis;
- beginning to develop an effective European international energy policy;
- meeting the ambitious targets on energy efficiency and renewables;
- devoting more efforts to developing competitive and sustainable energy sources.

It is striking that all of these are mentioned by citizens as important objectives. The panels' call for the EU to take on the role of setting standards and targets has also already been taken up by the Member States, with the March summit stressing "the leading role of the EU in international climate protection" and the ambitious targets set in March designed to provide a model for others around the world to follow.

However, developing an effective international energy policy will not be easy, given the diverse interests of the EU's Member States and the hybrid nature of EU foreign policy, which means the EU can only present a united front on such issues when its Member States agree to do so.

The Energy Policy for Europe also mirrors citizens' calls for an increased use of clean technologies by setting targets (for increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix, reducing CO₂ emissions, etc.) and by defining the strategy (a common European policy framework and increasing funding for Research & Development, etc.). However, again, the EU lacks the institutional framework to ensure that the required results are delivered across Europe.

It is perhaps not surprising that the divisions between citizens over the role of nuclear energy, with most panels unable to reach a consensus, mirror the heated debate on this issue between governments at EU level.

There is, however, a strong degree of consensus on the need for individuals to take personal responsibility for a “wiser, more aware and responsible use of energy”, with many panels emphasising the importance of education and information in this respect. The panels’ calls for the EU to play a role in this have already been taken up by the Union, but much of this work needs to be done by national, regional and local governments which can frame the debate in a national context and communicate key messages more effectively on the ground.

Finally, the panels’ call for the EU to promote the use of clean energies, and in particular renewables, are in line with the Union’s approach in this area. The EU is devoting more resources to fostering the development of new technologies which will contribute to the fight against climate change, but its budget for such initiatives is relatively small and will need to be strongly complemented by national public and private investment if it is to deliver the desired results.

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