

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE FOR EU DEMOCRACY

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The European Union's dwindling democratic legitimacy is an acute political challenge. Trust in EU institutions is declining even in countries where the union once had high levels of support. Populist parties are rising and turning against the EU. To restore its legitimacy, the EU needs to respond to public apathy and anger with emotional intelligence and offer solutions that feel relevant to people outside the Brussels bubble.

How the EU Disappoints

- To ordinary citizens, EU institutions appear distant, elitist, and difficult to understand. The euro crisis has reinforced the trend toward EU-level technocratic solutions at the cost of democratic political deliberations.
- The EU has more accountability mechanisms than other levels of government in Europe, but the complexity of the system makes the union seem even more obscure and distant to citizens.
- Many of the great achievements of European integration benefit individuals and businesses that are already successful. The vulnerable parts of society see the EU as a threat to the remaining protective functions of the welfare state.
- Giving more powers to the European Parliament cannot solve the problem. Parliamentary elections consist of parallel campaigns in each EU country that are dominated by national politics. As long as that persists, the European Parliament cannot fully connect citizens to the EU.

Ways the EU Can Rebuild Trust

Upgrade technology to enable greater citizen participation. The European Parliament needs to connect with citizens through cyberspace to put itself at the heart of transnational public debates. EU institutions could interact with national parliaments more systematically and engage directly with local and regional public assemblies by using Internet-based technologies. Citizens would engage more if they knew about opportunities for direct and web-based participation and had access to deliberative mechanisms.

Provide more ways for citizens to have their grievances addressed at the EU level. The protection of individuals' rights at the EU level has become much stronger in recent years, but the public is largely unaware of these efforts and sees rights as mainly applying to minorities. The EU should widen access to justice and ensure more consistent protection of fundamental rights—and better explain these opportunities to citizens.

Deliver more security and better living standards to citizens, especially to the people who feel left behind by globalization. If the EU became associated with safety nets for citizens, not just austerity and fiscal discipline, it would enjoy greater support. Well-targeted, EU-level schemes to ensure job opportunities and minimum unemployment insurance would go a long way toward reassuring citizens.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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