

Emotional Intelligence: the Future of Europe (an Union)

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Abstract

Within a year two populations of Europe – one in the south, the other in the north – have voted against the European Union (EU) and its policy. They did this out of entirely different motives and with different aims. Whereas on 5 July 2015 the Greek OXI was directed against the austerity dictates of the Troika and the degradation of Greece to the state of a semi-colonial country, the British Brexit above all was characterized by the fear of foreigners and the desire to escape from the freedom of movement in the EU. The crisis highlighted the economic interdependence of the EU, while also underscoring the lack of political integration necessary to provide a coordinated fiscal and monetary response. This paper offers a fresh perspective on how trust has been deteriorating considerably during the recent crisis in European countries which are the most affected by the ongoing economic downturn, mostly in the periphery. Consecutively, EU needs to respond to public apathy and anger with emotional intelligence and offer solutions that feel relevant to people today.

Keywords: European Union, emotional intelligence, trust, conscious reasoning, democracy

1. EU and economic performance

There are various reasons to study political knowledge and knowledge about the EU in particular (Dekker and Portengen, 2000; Rijkhoff and Dekker, 2009). Knowledge relates to 'the truth', i.e. what has been or can be proven to be 'true'. Particularly the difference between knowledge and beliefs is important. Knowledge is also to be distinguished from opinions, attitudes, emotions, values, behavioral intentions, and behavior (Krosnick and Brannon, 1993). The EU decision-making process is a complex phenomenon, particularly on matters involving political sensitivity and risk rests with 28 national governments, each one engaged in an open and transparent manner through communication, consultation, and collaboration in favor of its citizens and economy.

The creation of the Eurozone in 1999 was a major turning point as it became the largest economic entity in the world, which now connects 19 nations into a single currency zone watched over by the European Central Bank but leaves budget and tax policy in the hands of each country, an arrangement that some economists and political scientists believe was doomed from the start. The economic crisis of 2008 and the

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ensuing European debt crisis is a personalized, problematic, and promising issue which has changed the character of the Eurozone. The insecure fiscal policies on spending, the effects of last financial crisis and the domestic banking crisis, inefficient institutional setting, and loss in competitiveness have brought some of the biggest Eurozone countries into a stage of recession.

Countries in the Southern Europe, including Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, have been suffering through years of unreasonably high unemployment due in part to ECB policies. Eurostat estimates that 23.296 million men and women in the EU28, of whom 17.756 million in the euro area, were unemployed in June 2015. Among the Member States, the lowest unemployment rates were recorded in Germany (4.7 percent) and the Czech Republic (4.9 percent), and the highest in Greece (25.6 percent in April 2015) and Spain (22.5 percent). The largest decreases were registered in Lithuania (8.2 percent from 11 percent), Spain (22.5 percent from 24.7 percent) and Ireland (9.8 percent from 11.7 percent). The increases were registered in Belgium (8.6 percent from 8.4 percent), France (10.3 percent from 10.1 percent), Romania (7.1 percent from 6.8 percent), Austria (6 percent from 5.6 percent) and Finland (9.4 percent from 8.6 percent). The EU isn't going to have a shared language any time soon, so workers may never move around the EU for employment.

It has become practically unsurprising and anticlimactic that the current crisis, in all of its shapes and colors, has been having a wide variety of effects with diverse intensities on many issues such as the economic situation, unemployment, public finances, inflation, taxation, pensions, education, immigration, energy, environment, and conceptual frameworks such as democratic deficit, parliamentary/government legitimacy, legitimacy crisis and trust. In particular, with respect to the latter ones, it is reasonable to assert that any European citizen would agree that the crisis has had different, generally negative effects on national economies, European and national politics, society, trust, democracy and institutions.

2. How the citizen experiences EU democracy today

To ordinary citizens, EU institutions appear distant, elitist, and difficult to understand. European Commission report (2013) says the number of Europeans who tend not to trust national governments is 72% and national parliaments 69%. One of the main reasons is that the political parties that have the majority in the parliament and thus "govern" a state introduce unpopular laws in periods of economic recession and stagnation, reducing trust and legitimacy and increasing the democratic deficit. All these decreasing indicators have certainly been amplified by the economic crisis. For instance, austerity measures in Greece such as a 10% cut in salaried bonuses and a recruitment freeze in the "narrow public sector", increase of VAT (from 19% to 21%) and of taxes on fuel, cigarettes and alcohol along with some modifications of income taxes; some cuts in expenditures (including in public investment) and central government operating costs. Other measures like retirement age was raised from 60 to 65, penalties introduced for early retirement, pension payments were to be suspended for pensioners who were still employed and more similar ones have certainly had a remarkable negative impact on the Greek citizens (also on the citizens of other EU states that adopted similar measures, for instance Spain, Portugal, Italy and Ireland) and their trust, on democratic representation, democratic deficit, legitimacy, future perspectives and employment.

Political trust at the individual includes two main categories of independent variables: Political distance and performance evaluations. The increasing political distance between government and citizens leads to a decline in trust. Distance is primarily measured as policy distance on the salient issues of the day as developed in the classic article by Miller (1974), but may also include measures of ideological distance or distance by party through the division of voters who vote for winning parties and those who are on the losing side (Miller and Listhaug 1990, 1998, Anderson and Guillory 1997, Anderson et al. 2005).

People vote and act irrationally and do not judge the legitimacy of political outcomes based on how much they participate; it's just empirically wrong as political science. They don't like institutions that are highly participatory, and generally they hate parliaments (even national ones), and elected politicians they hate even more, generally speaking, compared to judges and other things. Clearly, then, trust in politicians appears to be at a low point in the EU. A reason behind this is that citizens seem not be symmetrically well-informed by the EU institutions, their national ones, the media and thus, it appears that each citizen, if willing, has to inform oneself and get involved if he wants to make a contribution. Moreover, national politics take over the EU affairs, while citizens often hear about some issue or new European law approved that may have an influence on their lives.

Identity is still primarily national, and so is political legitimacy. Only 46% of Europeans feel attached to the EU, whereas 52% feel no such connection; by contrast, only 9% identify themselves primarily as European, whereas 87% give their nationality as their primary identification. For Europeans who want to regain control of their national destiny, there might still be hope that national leaders can help, so they protest outside the national parliament. Hence to restore its legitimacy, the EU needs to respond to public avoidance, apathy and anger with emotional intelligence. People must feel represented by their politicians in both their statements and their actions, and representative Electoral Systems and Political Ethics are key players of this side of political trust.

3. Being, Brain and Behavior

Applied brain research shows that our brains reach decisions before we actually are conscious of those decisions. Our conscious reasoning does not control our behavior so we rely on our gut instincts to determine our beliefs. Principally we use our reasoning to defend those beliefs. Hence our intuition dominated our reasoning. So what does this imply about our strongly held political views? Are they based on conscious reasoning or is our reasoning merely the way we defend political positions based on our gut instincts? The fact that political discussions between people with opposing views often descend into angry shouting matches suggests that it comes from the gut.

As in most areas of human interaction it requires emotional intelligence to overcome these emotional outbursts. When we feel that our emotional based position is threatened or under attack our body is literally flooded with adrenalin and cortisol, and we move into a kind of fight or flight reaction. We stop listening and begin vigorously to defend our position and this is not limited to face-to-face situations. We have all felt anger when listening to an opposing view on TV or reading what we deem an adversarial opinion piece or editorial. Typically the receiving part of our brains just shut down. Because we generally find these experiences unpleasant most of us tend to avoid them.

Rather we seek our others including TV, print media, and websites that are in tune with our views. From one perspective this is good; we find it soothing to hear and read opinions that are aligned with our own. But this is "groupthink," which merely reinforces our gut feelings. Corporations and communities, universities and unions, faiths and nations have collapsed because groupthink shielded them from external threats.

Hence, the people and politicians should step back from the confrontation, breathe easily to begin to lower their cortisol levels, and then to begin to think about the challenges with less emotional ideology and with a lot more focus on common sense solutions. Emotions are either a by-product of trust decisions or a benefit arising from shared and observed social norms between truster and trustee. Expectations are the basis for any type of behavioral response in a dyadic relationship. Expectation as it relates to trust has generally been studied as a function of the truster's beliefs that trust will be "reciprocated" by the trustee and will be, if not beneficial, then at least not harmful. The logical extension of defining expectancy as the backbone of trust is that people give trust first and foremost because they wish to survive, i.e., because they are afraid, thereby artificially delineating the emotional motivation behind, as well as the affective experiences around, trust.

4. Emotional Intelligence for EU Democracy

The recession the European Union continues to be confronted with, has led to a dramatic effect on young people. In fact, around 20% of Europe's youth labour force is currently unemployed. What is more surprising is that the recession affected high-skilled youths just as the low-skilled. Causes that have led to continuous growth in youth unemployment have been linked to the general lack of key competences in young people, especially in attributes related to emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skills.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify, use, understand and manage emotions in positive ways that will help individuals relieve stress, communicate more effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and resolve conflicts. Emotional intelligence does influence a number of different aspects of one's daily routine and can greatly affect the way one behaves and interacts with others around him.

Studies confirm that emotional abilities are related to stress tolerance, teamwork, group decision making, leadership potential and overall work performance. The crisis of confidence is deepest in the countries hardest hit by the economic crisis, which means that corruption is very strong in Southern Europe, the countries that are hit by the financial crisis. Hence, interventions on both more local and more global level require the emotional intelligence leadership attributes and awareness of soft skills and hidden factors that create major effect on the ways a country is led and contributes to the EU community. Learning of how to be more aware is the directing process of both top-down and bottom-up members of a group, community, or even nation in order to create and achieve something that none of the members could do alone. Due to the creative nature of group or a nation's achievement, leadership as a phenomenon which arises from the individual is no longer valid in absolute terms. For example, a leader should merge the opposites such as control and autonomy, diverse the organizational structures and sociocultural contexts, even direct change through crises. Such an approach build upon the dynamics of emotional intelligence skills like teamwork and conflict resolution targeting at members or citizens good health and happiness also requires the

provision of appropriate instructions and tools to enhance interpersonal trust, empathy, and collaboration.

Any shared vision needs a structure, to be direct in its own meaning also feasible to be implemented into the chosen cultural context. Such shared visions also require common ground and norms so to create a shared identity and common purpose for shared reality so to clarify, modify and evolve shared activities. Empathy is a crucial interpersonal skill for such leading direction to come from the people and not from top down enforcement. An emotionally intelligent leader can sense the people's flow as a current into the chrono-spatial context, identify the clichés leaders and respond accordingly promoting –or not– active engagement and participation of the whole into the current. Such affective factors of empathy, trust and sense of belonging can be initiated into a small group or critical mass so to be expanded and imitated by the majority. Hence, EU can add value in many ways for individuals and compensates for the shortcomings of national governments. It needs to improve its democratic engagement in ways that are emotionally intelligent to be felt positively by ordinary citizens.

The Maltese Government has identified the promotion of healthier lifestyles and the sustainability of work practices to ensure healthier and longer working lives, as key priorities for projects to be implemented under the European Social Fund (ESF). In this respect, EU funds will be made available to ensure that the highest degree of health and safety is promoted across different stakeholders with the aim to foster employability and wellbeing of the workers. Indeed, one of the overall objectives of Priority Axis 2 in the draft Operational Programme II for the period 2014-2020, financed by ESF, will be to focus on preventive measures to ensure that individuals are equipped with the necessary knowledge and information to make better life choices.

At the place of work, emotional intelligence matters just as much as intellectual ability. A high level of emotional intelligence helps individuals to build strong ties, achieve career goals and ultimately succeed at the place of work. Individuals who do have high emotional intelligence are able to recognize their own emotional state and the emotional states of others. If EU institutions are to regain trust and relevance, they need to articulate emotional intelligence skills and aggregate them into popular will. Emotional intelligence is all about individual life realities, better online participation, social policies which are the only solution to European democracy. EU should finally realize how to communicate the EU policies by finding the right target groups and adapt its political communication to them. To get more legitimate inputs, EU should have more focus groups and more online communication, then every perspective could be heard and every point of view would become part of a more intelligent and more democratic policy-making.

Finally, emotional intelligence is also about social policies that matter for the lives of those sidelined in the current European society. If Europe wouldn't just be about the bad market and would also be about the redistribution of wealth and Europe-wide unemployment benefits, then everyone would know why it's good to participate in European democracy.

One thing is certain: The days when the preeminence of IQ as the standard of excellence is over, at least in the business world. Companies worldwide routinely look through the lens of emotional intelligence in managing their business. The question is whether EU will adapt. Surely, it can try to understand the stories and personal perspectives of 500 million EU citizens, each of them with their own dreams, hopes, personal stories, plans and fears.

Conclusion:

Europeans should improve what they have, not reject the EU completely because it is flawed. The debate between those for and those against the EU is based on false dichotomies: either the EU deserves uncritical support, or it is hopeless and doomed. Neither is true. The EU has many flaws and needs reform. But to attempt a major institutional overhaul of the EU now, on the tail end of a huge internal crisis and while facing major external challenges, would be unwise. Instead, step-by-step improvements should pave the way to building public support gradually by changing how citizens experience the EU.

The EU's greatest weakness is the constant ebbing of public support, so any remedies need to be emotionally intelligent – they need to be felt positively by ordinary citizens in their daily lives. Individuals need to see the EU adding value by compensating for the shortcomings of their national governments. The greatest value of European integration is that it helps national governments move beyond short-term mind-sets, vested interests, and disjointed policies. For the average voter, that means the EU tackles long-term problems like combating climate change, overcoming special interests through fair application of regulations, and countering security threats.

The utilitarian case for the EU is strong. Now it needs to be put in emotionally intelligent terms that are relevant to the Europeans.

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