From the data collected and the analyses conducted, it has emerged that the current situation of the EU is indeed critical, and that negative developments (leading to greater internal dissensions, stalemate and even possibly disintegration) cannot be excluded. At the same time, the EU remains open to more positive results if its problems are clearly understood and tackled with the appropriate remedial actions.

In short, what are the main critical points that have emerged in this period? The first is the diminished confidence of the population in the ability of the EU to contribute effectively and promptly to the solution of the crises. The direct consequence is a reluctance to attribute more powers in the crisis fields to Brussels authorities and, on the contrary, a preference for a return to national sovereignty as the solution. The second point is that this lack of public confidence does not seem to find an adequate response from political parties and elites, even if they remain in general more positive about European integration. This seems very much due to the increased tidiness of traditionally pro-European parties and elites to defend the value of the integration process when faced with the mounting challenge of Eurosceptic parties.
Remedial actions should therefore try to use the positive elements to overcome the negative ones. The most important messages are as follows:

1. The persisting widespread support for European integration is not enough to prevent the current disintegration drives unless it is coupled with a heightened perception among the people that the policies adopted by the EU provide specific responses to their concrete needs and by an increased confidence that the EU authorities are responsive to them.

2. Mainstream parties and elites faced with the vigorous competition of Euro-critical parties and leaders cannot simply rely on a rearguard defence of the European status quo. They must learn that the success of their competitors is largely due to the people’s increasing dissatisfaction with this status quo and to the fact that incumbents have not been able to satisfactorily represent the needs and demands of their voters. Remedial actions must be inspired and guided by these messages. To face the disillusionment of public opinion, innovative EU policies are required: the traditional panoply of European rules and regulations to direct the behaviour of member states must be coupled with positive policies that reach more directly those European citizens negatively affected by temporary or structural crises. In the fields of welfare for those left behind in economic downturns, of immigration management and of security threats, the EU must show its ability to act and to complement the action of national states. Possible examples in the economic field are the harmonisation of welfare systems across countries – including the adoption of a pan-European minimum wage – to help combat inequality and tackle social dumping, and redistributive policies at the EU level to reduce economic and social divergences between and within member states. A more homogeneous European asylum policy, strengthened European control of the external borders of the Union and forward-looking programmes to deal with economic migrants and their economic and social integration, endowed with common resources to sustain their costs both abroad and in the EU, are examples for the problem of immigration. In the field of security the EU should make some visible progress in projecting a unified leadership and unified instruments of intervention (when needed) in the crisis areas.
Snapshots of EUENGAGE results

European citizens show a limited inclination to give the EU more authority on economic and migration policy, especially the Czechs, while Italians were more neutral on migration, and Spaniards on the economy. On the other hand, majorities within the EU thought that EU member states should respond to major security threats together rather than chart their own courses [Figure 1].

FIG1. EUENGAGE Mass survey July-August 2017. “For each of the following policy alternatives, please position yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you fully support the policy on the left and 10 means that you fully support the policy on the right. If your views are somewhere in between, you can choose any number that best describes your position.”

+ Results:

Yes to economic solidarity, but outside of the EU!

Citizens and elites are ready to pool resources to fix economic problems but they are less keen on delegating policy competence to the EU.

The mass position is systematically lower than the elite position and in several countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain) this gap is actually quite large.

Czech Republic, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom are the countries more averse to burden sharing and EU policy coordination when the mass and elite positions are considered jointly.

+ Results: General public and business élite, mind the gap?

- Support for more EU integration varies in different EU countries.
- Economic élites are usually more supportive.
- On economic policies and budget, both economic élites and general populations mainly prefer national decision-making over European action.

Taking everything into consideration, would you say that [COUNTRY] has on balance benefitted or not from being a member of the European Union?

MASS

ELITE

A joint response to security threats is supported by the majority of respondents (mass and business world).

The security threat perspective on immigration is a majority opinion in France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Greece, and receives overwhelming percentages in Poland, United Kingdom and Czech Republic. Only in Italy and Spain the majority of respondents prefer a decision at the EU level.
Prerequisites of policy innovation are political and institutional innovations. Efforts to bridge the representation gap between national and European elites on the one hand and public opinion on the other must be prioritized. In order to improve the European representation process, the supply side must be improved to meet the dissatisfaction expressed on the demand side. The European elections-European parliament-European Commission circuit must be strengthened and this requires, first of all, that political elites supportive of European integration thoroughly renew their narrative of the Union: the image of a strict and punitive headmaster must give way to a more friendly face. The Union is here to contribute first of all to the well-being of its citizens. Beside this, parties and leaders must be able to develop, at the European level, political platforms and policy programmes which are not simply the sum of 27 different national views of the European interest but more integrated ones that can ‘travel’ across the different regions of Europe. European leaders and parties must redefine EP elections as truly European events. The European Parliament should contribute to politically empowering the Commission and strengthen its control over it. Members of the Commission should spend less time in Brussels and visit the different countries of the Union, and in particular crisis areas, on a regular basis.

Institutional innovations such as the unification of the plural presidencies of the Union, a significant budget for the Euro area, a European-wide referendum and the direct election of the EU president should be discussed and explored. Our experience with deliberative democracy suggests that experiments in this direction should be developed to gain a better understanding of the readiness of people to discuss some of the current problems in a more considerate way. Finally, there should be increased EU public relations efforts and information campaigns to better communicate the benefits of cohesion and integration and demonstrate why nationalist and protectionist policies are ineffective in a globalized world. Likewise, the EU should invest more in the younger generations of Europeans, for example through education, to ‘build’ a truly European community based on common values.

@EUENGAGE

The EUENGAGE Final Event
Bruxelles, 27 February 2018
The EUENGAGE project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Its main goal is to inquire into the current tensions between supranational EU governance and popular mobilisation at the national level, critically questioning EU driven policies and EU legitimacy, and to propose remedial actions based on sound empirical research on the relationship between public opinion, national and supranational political elites.

“The EUENGAGE project identifies in the conflicting messages emanating from the functioning of political representation a critical and urgent problem for the future of the EU”.

In this perspective it proposes to set up an interactive, dynamic, multilevel and replicable quasi-experimental research design. Using a variety of instruments and techniques, it will allow not only to study the process of representation in vivo, but also to experiment how innovative and efficient interactions between citizens and politicians can increase the awareness of citizens of the common problems of the Union, and the ability of the European leadership to respond innovatively to the discontent of public opinion.

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