

**Executive Summary:**

# Unpacking the European Sentiment

The word “sentiment” is particularly difficult to define. While some will see sentiment as an observation “through one of the senses”, others understand it as “an attitude or feeling towards something or somebody” or a “sense of belonging”. Trying to define a “European sentiment” becomes even more contentious. The term “European” involves multiple geographical, historic and cultural factors that contributed to forging diverse and different European identities. The past two years have been a great challenge to these identities, as the COVID-19 health crisis turned into an economic, social and political emergency. The growing lack of trust between citizens and intergovernmental institutions, competition between nation-states regarding vaccines and sanitary measures... Against this backdrop, it seems more essential today than ever to analyse and question the sense of purpose and belonging among European citizens.

With this in mind, 16 experts took part in the European Cultural Foundation (ECF)’s webinar on the idea of the European sentiment on 16 March 2021, pondering both on its meaning and on the different ways to properly measure it. For a foundation that aims to promote this sentiment through cultural initiatives, this webinar was an urgent and necessary way to reflect on what we mean when we talk about the European sentiment, and therefore what it implies to both promote and track it.

The first part of the webinar revolved around the very definition(s) of the “European sentiment” – looking at what we mean when we talk about a feeling of belonging to Europe? While all participants agreed on the importance of getting “our force and act together as Europe”, there was disagreement regarding the definition and understanding of the concept of “European sentiment” *per se*. If a sentiment implies the use of the senses, and hence is “about the moment”, it is at risk of simplifying matters, according to Pr. Monica Sassatelli[VA1] from the University of Bologna.

For her, a concept as multi-layered and complex as European identities cannot be translated or grasped merely through simplistic and subjective terms. She also highlighted that, within the current state of Europe, the power of sentiments – meaning affects and feelings as drivers for lies, distortions and exaggerations – seem to be with the populists that are rising up in many EU Member States.



Janis A. Emmanouilidis



Rimma Samir



Ismail Einashe



Giuliano da Empoli



Monica Sassatelli

on the margins of Europe, new perspectives and hence definitions of the term could be considered. A negative definition is therefore a great way to put diversity, inclusiveness and collaboration at the very heart of the debate. Who do we not see as European? To question the European sentiment normatively thus becomes a touchstone for empirical change, as it allows us to see who is excluded from both the definition and debates around it.

For Rimma Samir, Master's student in political science, and Janis Emmanouilidis, Director of Studies of the European Policy Centre, there is indeed a distinction to be made between individuals experiencing Europe through the privilege of education (through Erasmus, for instance) and mobility, in comparison to those who must move for economic opportunity or necessity – as their European sentiments are likely to be very different. There is a need to listen to the marginalised and those on the periphery. This reveals that, sometimes, questions such as “What is the European sentiment?” do not have a clear answer and, more importantly, must not have one: it is through the process of questioning fixed definitions and visions that active and inclusive work can be achieved.

Another understanding of the word sentiment was proposed by other participants. Indeed, it was underlined that sentiments have too often been separated from the political realm and hence from the formation of Europe. As we enter a new stage for Europe that is more political, participants felt it was imperative to reconnect with the force of feelings. For Pr. Guido Snel from the University of Amsterdam, sentiments can be “valuable companions to our rational European lives”. Writer and journalist Giuliano da Empoli echoes this by arguing that, to focus on feelings enables us to deconstruct a paradigm where “serious people who deal with Europe, don't deal with culture”. The importance of such action ought to be emphasised – it enables us, if not to shift away from functionalism, technocracy and economic integration, to perceive culture and identity formation as integral and important components of the European project. This parallels the mission of the European Cultural Foundation perfectly.

Second, trying to define the European sentiment is a process imbued within a lot of power relations. For the journalist Ismail Einashe, conflicting narratives around the definition of the European sentiment might neglect to focus on who is excluded from this very sentiment. By looking at the people labelled as non-Europeans,



James Kennedy



Natalie Nongayrède



Thomas Triche



Isabell Hoffman



André Willens



Isabelle Schwarz



Guido Snel



Sophie Caroline Wagner

The second part of the webinar looked at ways to capture and track the opinion of Europeans using surveys, polls and studies to help the tracing of progress or regression of this European sentiment. The first take from these conversations was that measuring the European sentiment is contentious because not only will data vary according to subjective lived experiences, but also because “it is only a small proportion of the population that thinks about Europe at all”. With this in mind, CEO of *More In Common* Mathieu Lefèvre frames an important proportion of Europeans as “the forgotten”, i.e. those that feel left behind and detached from both the European project and political decisions surrounding it. Policy officer Edgar Oganjesjan also highlighted how Eurobarometers have shown, over the years, that half of the population of Europeans have felt that their voices were not heard, and that democracy was too weak and that the distance between people and the EU was too great. This gap must be acknowledged and considered when tackling polls, reports and numbers tracking the European sentiment, both now and in the future.



Mathieu Lefèvre



Paweł Zerkow



Edgar Oganjesjan

This webinar also revealed the existence of two types of “hope gaps” – the first one, mentioned by Isabell Hoffmann from the Bertelsmann Foundation, is the gap between potential and reality. Looking at EUpinions, when people are asked about the principles and potential of European integration politics and policy, the scores are very positive and high. However, when people are asked about the current situation and their present feelings towards Europe, their answers become negative. There is a clear gap between the potential of the future, on the one hand, and the assessment of reality on the other. Mathieu Lefèvre adds to this notion by seeing it as a “great avenue for lending a new form of European sentiment”: Europeans do not expect change to come and cannot envision a paradigm shift, but they still have hope that it will come. This sense of hope embodies a great opportunity for creative thinking and active action. For Lefèvre, culture and nature, for their capacity to highlight commonalities and what brings people together, are paramount when it comes to filling the hope gap. Indeed, they will enable

the formation of a European sentiment focusing on a productive sense of bonding, giving “the forgotten” a sense of agency and hope on the European project.

What is clear for all 16 participants is that today is a moment of crisis. For Janis Emmanouilidis (EPC), we are even entering the “age of permacrisis” and defining our attitudes towards the many challenges – both from the past and the future – is paramount. This is therefore an important moment for culture, leaving room for improvement, ideas, debates and evolution. As the urgent need to rekindle the European sentiment is acknowledged and debated, webinars such as this one enable us to grasp the complex, multi-faceted aspects of the terms used and advocate for them to be embraced and reflected upon both in terms of numbers and culture.

As Giuliano da Empoli noted, “disagreements produce energy; controversy on European identity and European sentiment produces energy”. The different discussions contributed towards producing the energy and critical thinking necessary for the formation of fresh thinking and ideas regarding what is to come for Europe and Europeans. Resonating with the European Cultural Foundation’s strategy for 2020-2025, this webinar offered an online space that not only encouraged the sharing of ideas and experiences regarding the European sentiment, but also created a sense of belonging within it. When dealing with a theme this complex and contentious, answers are not always as important as the possibility of asking the right questions. After all, it is only through posing these questions that a thoughtful, complete understanding of Europe, its heritage and its future, will rise to the fore.

How do we go forward from here? First, webinars and discussions such as this one should keep on happening. In his concluding remarks, director of ECF André Wilkens underlines, “if it were so easy, somebody would have already done it. If it is so complicated, then there is something we could do about it!”. Wilkens also noted that there is a need for a greater consideration of the external and foreign factors shaping the European sentiment – cohesion and belonging are also influenced by how other parts of the world are doing. Nonetheless, as the director of the European Cultural Foundation, he mentions his personal experience – noting that, for someone who grew up in East Germany, “Europe was hope” – exemplifying the importance of the European sentiment once again. Indeed, despite its debatable definitions and the complexity of measuring it, this notion remains one that not only enables people to identify with the European project on a personal level, but also brings people together to turn it into a dynamic and inclusive reality.