The European sentiment at test – it's strong, don't' waste it!

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Europeans have proven their challengers wrong. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, European governments and citizens have displayed admirable levels of solidarity with Ukraine and unity within their own ranks.

This strong European sentiment will be put to a test in the months ahead. But it is not just Russian disinformation or growing cost-of-living or migration concerns that may undermine it. What the EU and member state leaders need to recognise is that their collective response to Russia's war will significantly influence citizens attitudes inside Europe and their image abroad. Their actions will either reassert or undermine European values, and thereby their credibility and legitimacy.

No room for diclinism

Understood as a sense of sharing a common space, a common future and common values, the European sentiment is remarkably strong today.

The European public is strongly attached to Europe, and optimistic about the EU's future, according to recent opinion polls. Governments of most EU member states are clearly pro-European – with the sole exception of Hungary (and mixed messages from Poland and Bulgaria). Throughout the past year, governments of four countries (Czechia, Denmark, Slovakia, Slovenia) have demonstrated a growing attachment to Europe, while in just one (Bulgaria) the government has become increasingly sceptical about the benefits of the European project.

The European Sentiment Compass, a joint initiative by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) explores how Europe is

responding to the challenges that Russia's war on Ukraine constitutes for European values and culture. The findings should encourage the EU and member state leaders to revisit the way in which they talk and think about Europe.

An underrated risk

When asked how Europe should help them, Ukrainian officials typically call for the delivery of weapons and ammunition. Understandably, military equipment is seen as solely capable of making an immediate difference on the battlefield. But the longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the more important it will become to ensure that European support remains acceptable for European citizens and convincing for Ukrainians. This will require a strong "European sentiment", to borrow an expression from Robert Schuman, one of the architects of Europe's post-1945 integration.

What the EU and member state leaders broadly recognise are the risks related to Russian disinformation and the growing cost-of-living and migration concerns among Europeans. These could indeed deeply affect the European sentiment and, with it, also the European support for Ukraine. It's good that the EU and member state leaders are taking measures to tackle these threats.

However, what is underestimated is the risk that their decisions concerning Russian culture, media, and citizens could also undermine the European sentiment. On this, the EU and member state leaders are facing various dilemmas. Should they restrict the presence of Russian culture as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine? Should they clamp down on Russian media in the EU27? Should they impose a travel ban on all Russian citizens? Should they consider Russians as collectively responsible for the war? Or could they see Russian and Belarussian citizens and cultural actors as allies in stoping the war and in the transformation of these countries for the better?

Culture of resistance

The way the EU and member state leaders respond to these dilemmas can either vindicate or refute their image – both in the eyes of their own citizens and those of the rest of the world. Europe can prove to be trustworthy, peaceful, and strong. Or it can provide arguments for those who claim it is hypocritical, aggressive, and weak.

To avoid the latter scenario, the EU and member state leaders need to regain confidence in liberalism and in their own citizens.

First, they need to be very cautious about their dealings with Russian culture in Europe. As long as the war is ongoing, there should be no space in Europe for Russian artists who are to any extent related to the Russian state. However, from this there is a long way to saying that the entire Russian culture should be put on hold – as some in Kyiv and in the more hawkish EU member states propose.

Secondly, the EU and its member states should demonstrate that they are a place where a pluralist debate can happen. Focusing too much on banning Russian media and chasing fake news puts Europe in a defensive. Instead of just complaining about Russian propaganda and resorting to measures that my seem like censorship, Europe should prepare to engage in the battle of narratives – and win it.

Finally, European leaders should resist the temptation of using a black-and-white rhetoric – and instead see people as allies. They should acknowledge that not all Russians bear the same responsibility for war in Ukraine. And that Belarusian citizens are not the same as Lukashenka's regime that collaborates with Putin. In fact, many Russian and Belarusian citizens may prove useful allies in ending war in Ukraine.

High stakes

The war in Ukraine is not just a challenge for European security. It is also putting Europe's commitment to openness, diversity, freedom, solidarity, and individual responsibility to the test. At stake is not just Europe's image in the eyes of the world and of Europeans themselves. The sustainability of Europe's unity and of Europe's support for Ukraine is at stake too.

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