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A victim of populism

The EU is continuously exposed to biased coverage in considerable parts of the media across Europe.



Henning Meyer

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We are in a crucial week for the European Union. As we approach the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome on March 25, the future direction of the union is still in some doubt. But for the first time since the European constitutional treaty was rejected in France and the Netherlands almost two years ago, there is a serious push to get the political process moving again.

The Berlin Declaration to be presented by the European Council on Sunday is meant to revitalise the union, especially in the two crucial areas of institutional reform and foreign policy. The initiative is overdue and much needed. But apart from the political agenda, the union must also support the creation of a much wider European public realm to connect its citizens to EU politics and counter biased journalism.

In the wake of the rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands, the European Commission started its Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate. The main aim was to open a platform for involvement of European citizens.

The activities of the programme were commendable but insufficient. When the union surpasses its stalemate it is important that the citizens communication strategy is not dropped but expanded. After all, this is the lesson the defeat of the constitutional treaty teaches. The campaigns for the treaty were too short to provide all the necessary information to a European public that was widely disregarded beforehand. And this lack of information made citizens vulnerable to populism. The EU has hopefully learned from this failure and will make the permanent engagement of its citizens a primary objective. This would also be a first step towards the creation of a wider European public realm that is also needed to counter the distribution of wrong information.

The EU is continuously exposed to biased coverage in considerable parts of the media across Europe. One example of this is the misleading information that was published in Monday's Financial Times. According to an [FT poll](#), more than 40% of British citizens think that life has become worse in the UK since it joined the EU in 1973. This sounds like the EU is the reason for this perceived decline. But compare this result with a [BBC poll](#) conducted last autumn revealing that even 47% of the British think that the UK is a worse place to live than 20 years ago.

In contrast to the FT, the BBC also presented the reasons why people hold this belief. The foremost criticisms of the people were a general lack of respect, crime and terrorism, rising living costs, immigration, failing public services and cynical politicians. Even stretching the freedom of interpretation to the limit one cannot blame the European Union for dissatisfaction in these areas. It rather looks like the well-known "blame Brussels for domestic failure" pattern.

It is incredibly hard to counter such misleading coverage. The only means that would help in the long run is the development of a real European public realm where biased journalism can be exposed and corrected. It looks like the European journey will continue shortly. But the EU needs to make sure that this time the citizens of Europe will be taken along and are given a role too.

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