

Public support for the EU is falling. Here are 10 tips for the pro-EU crowd to get the EU back on track.

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Events of the past year and the Euro crisis have for many commentators put the entire EU project under threat. But, as Gareth Harding argues, the EU's supporters are often contemptuous of the people on whose support the EU project depends. He sets out ten ways for the EU and its proponents to win the support of Europe's citizens and build a more relevant and effective Union.



The European Union is losing the battle for the hearts and minds of its citizens. Public support for the EU is falling, European values are under attack, many of the EU's biggest projects – the Euro, enlargement, Schengen – are under threat and voters are turning in droves to populist parties that are the antithesis of the European dream.

Unfortunately, supporters of further EU integration often don't help their cause by lacking fresh ideas for the bloc's future, failing to match words with deeds and being resistant to change, prickly about criticism and contemptuous of the people on whose support the EU project depends. So here are 10 tips for getting the Union back on track from a critical friend of the EU who has worked inside the Belgeway for the last two decades.

1. Don't mention the war

The European Union is, first and foremost, a peace project aimed at banishing the spectre of the war from the continent. It has largely achieved this goal in western Europe, to the extent that the idea of France and Germany fighting each other again is unthinkable. Instead of harping on about the Second World War – which ended 67 years ago – pro-Europeans need to develop a new central narrative for the Union that is fit for the 21st century and resonates with a generation whose grandparents were born after 1945.

2. What's the story?

EU officials are often excellent at answering detailed questions about their policy briefs but hopeless at grappling with more existential issues such as: What is the European Union for? What value-added does it bring? What are the core beliefs that bind its people together? Most Europeans take peace, free trade, open borders and a single currency for granted. So what is the EU's next big idea? Instead of looking to past gains, the EU should be about creating a leaner, keener and greener Europe based on a highly skilled and educated workforce and a low-carbon, cutting-edge economy. It should also be more bullish about enlargement – the EU's biggest success story – and be more muscular on the world stage.

3. Be radical

EU drum-bangers tend to be terribly conservative and more concerned at amassing further powers than questioning whether they are needed in the first place. Instead of feeling obliged to defend silly policies and useless institutions, they should adopt a more radical and more ruthless approach. Do we honestly need the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee – not to mention the plethora of other agencies that have mushroomed in recent years? Does it still make sense for the EU to spend over a third of its budget subsidising the five percent of Europeans who till the land? Is pumping tens of billions of Euros a year to poorer countries and regions to build motorways and sewage plants the sanest way to build world-class modern economies? A new narrative requires new policies, new institutions and new budget priorities.

4. Accept criticism

The EU has never been very good at accepting criticism or admitting mistakes. “Criticism of the EU is almost considered a heresy,” said former Europe Minister Denis MacShane. “It’s like going to see the Pope and saying ‘I might be a protestant your holiness.’” Instead of endlessly repeating pro-EU mantras, supporters of the European project should create a culture of debate by listening to the people and entering into an honest dialogue with them. They should also occasionally admit they are wrong – on the Euro and the admission of a divided Cyprus for example – and have the humility to apologise.

5. Emit less hot air

In the middle of one of the least smart, inclusive and sustainable urban landscapes in Europe – the EU area of Brussels – I recently saw a banner draped across the European Commission’s Charlemagne building advertising a symposium on “paving the way for smart inclusive and sustainable cities.” A small vignette maybe but symptomatic of the mismatch between the EU’s lofty aims and less prosaic reality that reminds me of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’: “Between the idea/And the Reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the shadow.” The EU should beware of raising expectations that it cannot meet – such as its pretension of having a truly common foreign and security policy or its risible new millennium ambition of becoming the world’s most competitive economy by 2010. Sometimes, it is better to have limited aims – like cutting roaming charges – but actually achieve them.

6. The EU isn’t Europe

The problem with many Euro-cheerleaders is that they constantly confuse the EU (a political construct with 27 states) with Europe (a continent with almost 50 countries). It is quite possible to dislike – or feel no affinity – with the former whilst feeling deeply attached to the latter. Instead of obsessing about passing new laws, adopting new treaties and creating new institutions, fans of the EU would be better off trying to foster a European spirit among people. As former Polish foreign minister Bronislaw Geremek said: “We have Europe. Now we need Europeans.”

7. Value your values

The values that are supposed to define Europe – peace, tolerance, diversity, solidarity, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights – are often flouted by those states that are the keenest on pushing for greater EU integration. It is difficult to see how opposing Turkey’s EU entry (as France and Austria do) or refusing to back the use of force against a murderous dictator (as Germany did during the Libya conflict) or calling for more EU laws while continuously flouting existing ones (as Belgium and Italy do) tally with the Union’s values. The EU needs to be more consistent, more united and more robust standing up for its values – even if that means annoying the Chinese and Russians.

8. Don’t forget the people

The EU spends tens of millions of Euros a year promoting democracy around the world, yet its own decision-making structures are hardly the most shining example of people-power. The Commission, which has the sole power to propose new laws, is not elected and its president has no popular mandate. The head of the European Council is appointed in a similar manner to the Pope. And most decisions in the Council of the EU are made by ambassadors before they reach the desks of ministers. So despite the furious denials of Eurocrats, the EU does have a democratic deficit that is opening up a massive chasm between rulers and ruled. The Eurozone crisis has widened this divide. Much to the delight of officials in Brussels, technocrats have replaced elected politicians in Greece and Italy. And the Commission has amassed further powers over national budgetary decisions that are normally the prerogative of elected parliaments. No wonder the president of the German constitutional court recently remarked: “It would be tragic and fatal if we were to lose democracy on the road to saving the Euro and to more integration.”

9. Create an EU 2.0 from the bottom up

The EU has been an elitist project since its inception. This mattered little when the Union was primarily a trade club. But now that it has taken on many of the trappings of a nation state – a single currency, border protection, increasing control over budgets and the ambition to raise its own taxes – its policies have a much greater impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. Without their support and involvement the EU will wither like a vine starved of water. This means more democracy – at the very least elected European Council and Commission presidents – but also more efforts to engage with Europeans at their level and using their language.

10. Just connect

The EU has traditionally been terrible at communicating. It confuses information with propaganda, is obsessed with process rather than results and is incapable of communicating in language ordinary people understand. If the EU – and its backers – want to connect with citizens it needs to explain its policies using simple, clear language. But above all it has to show how it changes people's lives for the better. If the EU can convince hard-working taxpayers in Milan, Manchester or Munich that it puts more money in their pockets, makes their jobs, streets and pensions more secure and provides better schools and hospitals for them and their families then it will succeed. If it doesn't it will creak, crack and ultimately collapse.

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