

# Building a bridge between the European bubble and citizens via social leaders

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*Populism has won its first symbolic victory last June, says [Taman Mhoumadi](#). Brexit was utterly unexpected, with polls predicting a Remain vote share of 60% just the night before. Some voices described Brexit as a first step toward the dislocation of the European Union, and saw the British decision as an indicator of the crisis faced by the EU. Indeed, Poland and Hungary are governed by Eurosceptics, right-wing leaders are getting stronger across Europe and in France, Marine Le Pen's Front National has reached an unprecedented score at the recent Presidential election.*



To rebuild public support and thus survive, the EU should tackle issues that lie at the roots of populism. Through a series of citizen's dialogues organised by the [1989 Generation Initiative](#), young Europeans have identified two main issues and their possible solutions. Indeed, the European Union is exposed to a strong identity crisis and, at the same time must deal with the spread of highly damaging information in the public debate. These weaknesses are effectively used by populists who capitalise on citizen's concerns and anger to advance their own rhetoric.



**President of the EC interviewed by three young YouTubers , 2016. Credits: Etienne Ansotte**

## Enough of the 'Bubble'

The identity crisis does not merely lie with the lack of a sense of European citizenship. According to a [Eurobarometer survey](#), 66% of Europeans feel that they are citizens of the EU. Instead, its roots stem from the widening gap between EU officials and citizens, which is a strong populist argument. European decision-makers are accused of living far from the reality of citizen's concerns, in a 'European bubble' located in Brussels. And the representations of EU institutions in the Member States have not helped reducing this feeling as citizens are not always aware of their existence and role.

As an experiment, [Gabriella Ader, journalist for the De Groene Amsterdammer](#) decided to investigate this so-called bubble. In order to get an in-depth vision of the functioning of the European institutions and the EU officials' lifestyle, she was immersed in the famous 'Quartier Européen' for four months. Her conclusions revealed the reality of this gap with a symbolic quote from an EU civil servant: "How can I know what European citizens want? How can they understand what the hell I am doing here?".

In contrast, social media and digital technologies should offer a wonderful opportunity to speed-up interactions between citizens and their politicians. Yet, although each institution and most of EU officials are active on social media, they have not been able to reach a significant number of citizens. [Data shows](#) that only 700 000 people out of more than 150 million Facebook users in the European Union, are following the European Commission's Facebook page.

### **Empowering a new type of leaders**

89ers' suggested that an efficient way to enhance interactions on social media would be to empower a new type of leaders who are not necessarily experts in EU affairs, but who have developed strong bond with their local or regional communities via social media.

A good starting point was last September when, replicating the '#AskThePresident' project from the United States, Jean-Claude Juncker President of the European Commission was [interviewed by three young Youtubers](#) from France, Germany and Poland. Before the meeting, the three Youtubers asked their own community of followers about their personal concerns and questions which they then relayed directly to Mr Juncker. The exercise had a multiplier effect and was an interesting way of connecting local citizens to EU affairs. Although this type of exercises might expose the EU to open criticism, it should multiply them and keep on interacting with social media leaders as an opportunity to show that the EU is open to the debate and more importantly to criticism.

### **Promoting fact-checking on a pan-European scale**

Populism in Europe evolves in the national public sphere and often relies on wrong or partial information. A clear illustration was the claim from Eurosceptics that Britain was paying £350 Million a week to the European Union. This fake news was highly damaging for the EU and may have influenced a considerable number of voters in their final decision. Indeed an [Ipsos MORI survey](#) showed that 47% of British citizens believed this fact was true.

This is a major issue for democracy and stresses the need for a strong emphasis on media literacy. A proposal developed by 89ers' emphasizes the need for fact-checking trainings on EU affairs for these social leaders mentioned earlier. Established or emerging social leaders would be selected and offered a training package on fact-checking and the fundamentals about the EU. There would also be modules to develop core abilities to succeed in their duty such as public speaking skills, media training and managing an online community. The training should be organised by the European Union but facilitated by civil society experts from different backgrounds (NGOs, academia etc.)

These social media leaders would become 'ambassadors' and raise awareness locally on the importance of 'learning how to learn' fact-checking. The objective is to increase debates on EU affairs in the national public spheres and equip citizens with the skills that will enable them to make informed opinions.

The European project is not dead as long as Europeans will keep believing in the relevance of their European citizenship. In February 2017, the magazine Foreign Policy wrote that "[Europe Is the West's Last Defense Against Populism](#)". To prove it right, the European Union needs to proactively fight back at the populist rhetoric and the spread of fake news. An example of initiative going in this sense was the fact-checking campaign developed by the European Commission Representation in France ahead of the French Presidential Election.

Social media offers an appropriate battlefield to tackle populism but we need to exploit its full potential.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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