

What state of the Union?

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On September 7th, in his much anticipated first “State of the Union” address to the European Parliament, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso reassuringly declared that the people of Europe could “trust the EU to do what it takes” to secure their future. It was meant to be a rallying call for optimism and self-confidence.

In his view, Brussels had proved wrong all those critics who in recent years had predicted the demise of the Union. Instead, the EU continued to demonstrate that its regulatory system was the best means of managing the ever-increasing interdependence of the countries of Europe. Barroso’s message was simple: yes, improvements are required, but we are on the right track.

Only a few weeks earlier, Eurobarometer published – almost unnoticed, at least in European capitals – the first result of its latest public opinion analysis. Leaving aside some of its intricacies, the bigger picture seems clear: significant parts of our populations are not at all sure whether the EU is actually moving in the right direction. General support for the EU is down (again), and so is the perceived benefit of membership. Yet these indicators are not the most puzzling.

Strikingly, in the eyes of our citizens the EU does not seem to stand for what President Barroso and an array of pundits want the Union to be – namely a guarantor of economic prosperity and a vehicle for stronger European influence in the world. Staggering minorities of just 14 percent and 22 percent respectively believe this to be the case.

Equally worrying is the declining level of trust in EU institutions, which is most pronounced in the three biggest member states: Germany, France and the UK. For a clear majority in these countries, the EU provokes suspicion rather than confidence. Only cynics will take comfort from the fact that trust in national institutions is often even lower.

So what, then, is the state of the Union? Put positively, it is one of flux. The EU is in the midst of an awkward process of self-determination, the outcome of which remains highly uncertain. On the one hand, this stems from the intensifying institutional tensions and confusion which visibly hamper effective EU policymaking at a time when the need for swift and decisive action is overwhelming. The latest evidence of this are squabbles over who takes the lead in the reform of economic governance (European Council President Herman Van Rompuy’s taskforce versus the Commission) and in driving the EU’s international agenda (High Representative Cathy Ashton versus the Council), as well as the embarrassing blame game over France’s Roma expulsions.

On the other hand, there is a yawning gap between the high expectations of European action and the sobering reality of what the EU is currently capable of, which is slowly but surely leaving its mark.

Of course, much of this is self-inflicted. Since the turn of the millennium, the EU has invested a great deal of political and financial capital in initiatives which not only encountered considerable popular resistance (such as the Constitutional Treaty), but which also did little to improve the EU’s capacity to address the most urgent political problems (unemployment and the economy).

All this has left the EU appearing somewhat paradoxical in the post-crisis world: while there is a

compelling case to be made for the influence of the EU in a number of areas, it nonetheless struggles to elucidate a vision of its role and develop a capacity to provide its member states with value-added policy solutions and institutional support. Inevitably, this has led to increased questioning of the EU's *raison d'être* by national stakeholders and populations alike.

A majority of Europeans – 55 percent to be precise – continue to expect that the worst of the economic crisis is still to come. This pessimism is articulated most vociferously by the elderly and the less well-off in our societies. Yet against this dismal backdrop there is also a remarkable preparedness for far-reaching reforms to our social and economic models in order to face an uncertain future. And, extraordinarily, 71 percent of European citizens also agree with the view that reforms should be pursued even if that means some sacrifices for the present generation.

For EU policymakers, both in Brussels and in national capitals, this is an opportunity which must not be wasted. But one lesson of the last decade should by now have become clear: the imbalance between large swathes of EU policies and the lack of genuine political debate, or between technical desirability and political feasibility, cannot be sustained.

We have to build a new consensus for collective progress in Europe – however painful that may be.