

European Policy Brief

■ *The theoretical and normative underpinnings of trust and distrust*

Building a new narrative of enlightened trust at European Union level

In order to respond to the challenges of our society, which undermine trust in governance, we believe that the European Union has to build a new narrative of ownership and civic participation grounded in fundamental rights.

Europe needs to nurture and develop a culture of participation where citizens are recognised as equal partners of institutions, and an effective civil dialogue is promoted in all the different areas of policy and legislative action, and at transversal level. Being able to express concerns and proposals, as well as learning from the perspectives of policy makers and other stakeholders, also contributes to a sense of ownership and responsibility, and ultimately a sense of trust.

In EnTrust, we argue that the new narrative should focus on enlightened forms of trust because the relation between citizens, politicians and political institutions should not be dictated by forms of unconditional and uncritical trust ([Lahusen 2020](#)). Critical citizenship is an essential prerequisite of fully-functioning democracies, and the same is true in regard to the rule of law, power sharing mechanisms between political institutions and the role of the mass media as an arena of critical news coverage and public debates. What is thus required is a narrative that highlights the complementarity of enlightened trust and distrust, which are based on principles of active and critical citizenship, political deliberation and decision-making.

The narrative has to stress the participatory elements, given that trust and distrust are based on a two-way relationship, according to which distrusting political institutions might encourage citizens to develop distrusting attitudes and practices, and thus nurture spirals of distrust ([Lahusen 2020](#)). The new narrative has to stress that enlightened forms of trust involve reciprocal involvement of both sides, which in turn become the subject and object of trust. Additionally, other actors such as the media, social partners, experts and science contribute as mediators in the development of trust and distrust relations. Finally, we believe that this narrative also has to be inclusive in regard to governance levels, because trust and distrust mediate the relations between citizens and public authorities at all levels, local, national, or European. Furthering enlightened forms of trust thus implies advocating for a participatory and critical approach from the grassroots level up to the arena of the European Union.

The opportunity of a long-awaited debate on the future of Europe to be launched this autumn by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council should not be missed. In the last twenty years, there has not been a real debate on the governance of Europe, on long-term reforms that are needed to reinforce democracy by rebalancing the power of different institutions and by increasing the active participation of Europeans. It is time to give citizens the opportunity to evaluate whether current policies and Treaties are adequate enough to respond to the challenges that Europe is facing.

The European Union is also working on a Democracy Action Plan, which constitutes a unique opportunity to set up a framework for a new model of governance based on participatory democracy and active citizenship.

The next months will be critical for the European Union's institutions to develop adequate objectives, a clear scope and follow-up mechanisms that can make the Conference on the Future of Europe a real workshop for the development of enlightened trust and active participation.

Participation and ownership in political governance: some key steps

In EnTrust, we have identified a number of conditions and steps that must be met in order to promote and implement participation and ownership in political governance.

First of all, EU institutions need to invest further in the development of democracy, fundamental rights and in ensuring respect for the rule of law across the European Union through an array of policy measures and an adequate budget. In particular, by developing a strong mechanism to monitor the rule of law and fundamental rights, with both adequate sanctions to address deficiencies and support measures, and an exchange of good practices to ensure progress, the EU can contribute to building the capacity of both governments and citizens, to thus ensure effective legal systems facilitating the exercise of rights, equity, freedom of speech and the media.

Secondly, the EU and member States must put conditions in place that empower independent civil society's ability to both build trust and exercise distrust by holding governments accountable at all levels of governance. This includes a favourable legislative environment

and adequate funding free from conditions, allowing organisations to exercise their advocacy and watchdog role.

Thirdly, the role of civil society as a cornerstone of EU democracy must be recognised. This means developing policy and legal instruments at the EU level, such as a framework for civil dialogue adhered to by all institutions, and provisions that both allow for such recognition and facilitate citizens' cooperation across borders. A new project for the establishment of a statute for a European Association has long been awaited and is currently in discussion at the European Parliament and at the European Economic and Social Committee. Many voices across civil society are also requesting the implementation of the provisions of Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty on an open, transparent and structured dialogue with representative associations and civil society through an interinstitutional agreement.

Fourthly, participation of citizens in EU governance must also be adequately nurtured and prepared. EU institutions and national governments have an important role in promoting and supporting civic education including on European Union policies through programmes and initiatives implemented by civil society organisations and movements, as well as universities. Such programmes are critical for the development of critical thinking in the context of the virulent spread of disinformation.

Penultimately, the EU institutions should encourage the mass media and science to become conscious and proactive mediators of trust relations in providing the grounds for enlightened trust and distrust. Journalists and the mass media should critically examine news reporting practices and engage in dialogue with citizens; science should ensure ethical behaviour and enhance transparency,

designing science choices with citizens who have thus far been involved in the implementation of scientific research, most notably through citizen science.

Finally, new forms of participation that are attuned to the current context of globalisation of information and the spread of social media should be developed.

The recommendations' baseline: preliminary findings of a new research consortium

The recommendations of this Policy Brief are based on the first evidence assembled by the newly-launched [EnTrust project](#). Although empirical research only began at the start of 2020, EnTrust has engaged in two tasks that deliver preliminary insights supportive of our policy recommendations. On the one hand, the EnTrust consortium has started to oversee and summarise available scientific evidence. While this work is ongoing, the consortium has released a first document summarising the state of scientific research and the main lessons to be drawn. This document is available online on the website of the EnTrust project ([First Manuscript on Trust and Distrust in Governance](#)). In general, the review of previous research highlights three lessons to be drawn. Firstly, trust and distrust have constructive and destructive elements, which means that policy actors should be interested in developing enlightened forms of trust. Secondly, trust and distrust build on interdependent and reciprocal relations between citizens and political institutions, which means that governance actors are co-responsible for generating trust and distrust. Thirdly, trust in governance is strongly mediated by the mass media, experts and scientists, which means that policy actors should have an increased interest in safeguarding trustworthy media and science.

On the other hand, the recommendations of this Policy Brief emanate from a [policy dialogue on trust and distrust in EU governance](#) organised on 15 June 2020 under the auspices of the Vice President of the European Parliament, Katarina Barley, responsible for communication, relations with citizens and transparency, underlines the validity of these lessons and the need for a new narrative of enlightened trust. The high-level policy panel included the Director General of DG Research Jean-Eric Paquet, two members of the European Parliament working group on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, Sergey Lagodinsky and Anna Donáth, a member of the constitutional affairs committee in charge of the working group on the Future of Europe conference, Domènec Ruiz Devesa, a representative of civil society, Brikena Xhomaqi, Steering Committee member of Civil Society Europe and Director of the Lifelong Learning Platform, as well as the coordinator of the project, Christian Lahusen.

Speakers and participants have highlighted how the decline in the rule of law and increased corruption in some EU countries affects the freedom of the media and the capacity of civil society organisations to hold their government accountable. These trends negatively affect democracy by creating fear and distrust among citizens, and by placing decision-makers above all, requiring unconditional trust.

Another critical issue is the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on governance, as many speakers indicated. The urgency and unprecedented dimension of the pandemic has shifted the balance of power and enabled governments and institutions to take decisions, disregarding the usual procedures of consultation and dialogue with civil society and social partners. Experts and scientists have also acquired an inflated influence, creating some forms of distrust among citizens, as the proportionality

and impact of measures of civil liberties, as well as possible conflict of interest are questioned. This has been particularly significant in countries with autocratic regimes that have, for instance, misused legislation to fight disinformation on the pandemic to curb freedom of expression.

These developments are not only relevant at the national level, but they also have an impact on the level of trust that citizens have in European institutions because people tend to look at the EU through the lenses of their national experiences, as well as by measuring the ability or failure of reaching a coordinated or unified response to the crisis at the EU level. Furthermore, the divergent levels of transparency of EU institutions, or the lack of information and/or opportunities to be involved have also had an impact on the level of trust towards the European Union as a whole.

Panellists also highlighted that trust in science has been affected by the decline in the rule of law, increased polarisation in our societies and the impact of the pandemic. The concentration of social media platforms among a handful of commercial actors, and the use of social media by autocratic regimes (such as Russia and China) contribute to spreading fake news and unethical behaviour in science. While new technologies offer increased possibilities in terms of information, transparency and access are still lacking. There is also an asymmetry of power between scientists and citizens as end users, which is becoming even more evident in the context of the globalisation of information.

This challenging political context also affects the way intermediary bodies are organised and developed, as was stressed during the high-level discussion. On a positive note, next to traditional civil society organisations, we witness an important development in informal civic movements creating new innovative

ways of expression and responses to societal challenges. Some of these have evolved into more structured organisations in order to become more sustainable. However, we also see the development of a shady civil society. In illiberal democracies, civil society organisations are created by governments to ensure an artificial trust basis in society and to close the space for independent organisations. Moreover, organisations can be gradually “domesticated” by governments by restricting public funding to the provision of social services and by excluding “political purposes” such as advocacy for access to tax deductible donations or the recognition of organisations. These attempts to own and control civil society and promote distrust in their work also signal the erosion of democracy.

In fact, civil society both catalyses and mirrors the development of a pluralistic society. It can both amplify trust by enhancing accountability and transparency in governance when favourable conditions for its development and independence are ensured, or it can contribute to undermining the foundations of democracy by contributing to the spread of regressive ideas and authoritarianism. In this context, there is a need to establish a policy and legislative framework that revitalises the link between citizens and people living in the European Union at large and the European Union institutions. Civil society organisations and movements appear as an indispensable actor for favouring the involvement of citizens, ensuring that they are both informed and critical, so as to develop an enlightened trust. Therefore, the European Union must recognise and support their role while reinforcing the implementation of fundamental rights.

In several European countries, both at local and national levels, different methods and tools of participatory democracy have been developed. Notably, forms of crowdsourcing

legislation have enabled randomly selected citizens and civil society to participate in the drafting of legislation and policy strategies. Successful experiments have been conducted in Finland, Spain, France and Iceland.

Research parameters and project information

The EnTrust project is funded by the EU in the context of the Horizon2020 Research and Innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 870572). The consortium started its work in early 2020, which means that recommendations and findings presented in this policy brief are based on the first preliminary analyses and policy discussions. Future research will be devoted to generate systematic empirical data and analysis that will be exposed to critical debate and intense policy dialogues with policy-makers, stakeholders and practitioners at the local, national and European levels.

The EnTrust consortium consists of eight partner teams conducting research and dissemination activities in seven countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland and Serbia) and at the EU-level. Its work-plan consists of seven work-packages devoted to the systematic analysis and reflection of different aspects of the topic:

1. The Theoretical and Normative Underpinnings of Trust and Distrust
2. Trust and Distrust at the Street-level of Public Policy
3. The Role of Democratic Social Movements in the Formation of Trust and Distrust
4. The Role of the Media in Trust and Distrust Building: Information or Polarisation?

5. Developmental-psychological Insight into Trust and Distrust
6. Appraising Citizens' Trust and Distrust in Governance: Forms, Determinants, Effects and Remedies
7. Civilising Trust and Distrust: Role Models and Recommendations

Further work-packages are committed to the dissemination, exploitation and communication of research, management and ethical issues.

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Further information on the EnTrust project is available at www.entrust-project.eu.

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Project Information

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