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# Debating the EU's challenges and possible solutions

## Insights into the first DAFEUS policy lab

DAFEUS Policy paper series

**How to make the European Union more effective, efficient and democratic**

**Policy paper no. 1**

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## Abstract

The first DAFEUS policy lab took place at the Université de Montréal and the Goethe Institute in Montréal on 30 and 31 October 2018. The event brought together researchers and non-academics interested in the European Union to discuss the future development of the EU as a multi-level system. This paper summarises the main elements of the debate on the EU's deficits and challenges. It concludes with three policy recommendations developed by the participants in the course of the lab.

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## 1. Brainstorming: deficits and challenges of the EU

The main activity of the first day of the policy lab was a brainstorming exercise on deficits and challenges of the EU. Unsurprisingly, there were many. In the end, participants categorised the various contributions into five groups: Deficits related to ...

1. ... Economic and Monetary Union
2. ... Institutions and how they work
3. ... Perceptions of the EU
4. ... Immigration
5. ... and External Relations

## 2. From challenges to recommendations

The initial plan was to come up with and discuss concrete policy proposals based on the deficits identified on the first day. However, the discussion took a different direction and focused on “perceptions of the EU”. This changed focus notwithstanding, the policy lab participants still developed three recommendations.

As a starting point, participants wondered why the image of the EU has become so negative for Europeans. Why are the two classic positive narratives of “Peace” and “Economic Prosperity” no longer working?

One proposal was to take a step back and consider societal developments. Mistrust, fake news etc. are current challenges to the fundamentals of societies, and seem to reflect that people are increasingly looking for narrow identities, exclusiveness, “we vs others”. This is also affecting the EU, and unlike nation states, the EU cannot provide egoistic identity. The question for the policy lab then is: should we not address these tendencies in society at large?

**Recommendation #1:** Our project is not about challenging the paradigmatic societal change. However, we should acknowledge it so that we can recommend what the EU (and the member states) can do about changing perceptions.

How can perceptions be changed? Journalists used to fulfil a gatekeeper function in that regard, but journalists are no longer gatekeepers in social media. This led to a discussion about

the appropriate target groups – who should the policy lab recommendations address? Out of three principal target groups mentioned ((i) the EU, (ii) member states’ governments, and (iii) citizens), participants agreed that the member states as constituent elements of the EU should be the main focus.

**Recommendation #2:** Focus on national governments. Increase the awareness that their messages shape EU perceptions at home, and change the usual scapegoating mentality (for example the well-known pattern that right after European Council meetings, member states’ governments stress their own negotiating successes).

What can the policy lab offer in terms of recommendations to member states? The organisers provided a number of current publications from think tanks which propose concrete, limited, achievable institutional reforms aiming to make the EU more democratic, effective, efficient, etc. Such proposals are undoubtedly valuable, but policy lab participants felt that the dimension of perceptions is not sufficiently acknowledged. For that reason, participants came up with the following third recommendation:

**Recommendation #3:** Use the case of Brexit to illustrate EU benefits by making clear the difference between membership and non-membership.

### 3. Summing up

Discussions during the first policy lab stressed the goal of improving the EU not only in terms of polity, politics and policies but also in terms of perceptions of the EU. Nonetheless, participants also agreed that there is a fine line between informing about the EU and “propaganda”. In order to deal with perceptions, it would therefore be important to study the ontologies of how member states take up realities. What can the member states agree on? More overarching questions – such as: What is the role of Federalism as a political system? How can we compare EU Federalism with Canada, Switzerland and other federal systems? – featured less prominently in this policy lab than initially foreseen. However, given that the format is new and deliberately leaves some flexibility as to what participants want to discuss, the first policy lab provided valuable insights into contemporary challenges for the EU on the one hand, and the organisation of the next two policy labs on the other.



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The DAFEUS project has four objectives. It enhances the debate on the future development of the EU, fosters public knowledge and awareness of EU politics, promotes EU studies in new research areas, and strengthens the exchange between both academics and practitioners as well as civil society and the general public.

By comparing the EU to federally organised countries, the project will shed new light on the strengths and deficits of the EU's political system. On this basis, DAFEUS develops concrete recommendations on how to make the EU and its federal elements more effective, more efficient and more democratic.

DAFEUS will focus on three key topics:

- 1) Institutions and decision-making in federal systems
- 2) Democracy in federal systems
- 3) Differentiation in federal systems

DAFEUS combines academic research, public outreach and policy dialogue by organising three DAFEUS weeks, each of which includes a policy lab and an annual conference. The events will bring together senior and junior experts with diverse academic and professional backgrounds, policy-makers, civil society organisations and the wider public.

The project's output will comprise a set of webcasts, including expert interviews and speeches, three background papers on the project's key topics, three policy papers with recommendations from the policy labs, three conference reports with key results, a journal article and an edited volume gathering contributors to the project's events. A state-of-the-art website and a corresponding online platform for debate via Facebook complement DAFEUS' outreach activities.

DAFEUS is implemented by the Cologne Monnet Association for EU Studies (COMOS) in cooperation with the Université de Montréal, the Centre international de formation européenne and the University of Cologne.

## **Imprint**

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