

European Construction and Public Opinion

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Abstract

Since its creation, the European Union has been based on an institutional architecture that is unique in the world, formed by the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice, an ensemble that relies on inter-institutional bodies, such as the European Central Bank, the European External Action Service and the Committee of the Regions. This institutional wealth is poorly understood by citizens, who hold the EU responsible for the economic crisis. The populism that is asserting itself threatens the foundations of the EU.

Article

Since the 1950s, the European Community (formerly the European Economic Community and today the European Union) has been governed by an institutional architecture with no equal in the world. None of the many international organizations created since the end of World War Two has had such a broad, complex and in-depth institutional functioning as the European Union, which in many respects resembles a “state in gestation.” EU member states made important transfers of sovereignty in almost every political area falling under the classic sovereign powers, whether it involved the economy, defence, or even internal policy. However, these transfers are less and less accepted by public opinion in these member states, whose citizens prefer by far the national framework as system of reference to a European framework deemed to be distant, opaque and incomprehensible. Consequently, scepticism with regard to the EU has quite clearly increased in all member states over the last twenty years, in other words since the Maastricht Treaty took effect on November 1, 1993. The institutional organization of the EU is based on a triangle consisting of the Council, Commission, and Parliament, whose functioning relies on other institutions with roles that are also crucial, such as the European Court of Justice, the European Court of Auditors, the European Central Bank, etc. The EU also has a group of institutions and inter-institutional bodies in charge of highly specific tasks, such as the European Central Bank (responsible for European monetary policy), the European External Action Service (assisting the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), the European Economic and Social Committee (representing civil society, employers and employees), the Committee of the Regions (representing regional and local authorities), or the European Investment Bank (tasked with financing European investment projects and helping SMEs).

The EU’s institutional balance, which is absolutely unique in the world, has become increasingly complex as the Union has grown (from six member states in 1958 to twenty-eight in 2013) and its operation has been intensified. Yet the partial dispossession of states’ sovereign rights, along with the increasing complexity of the EU’s institutional functioning and the worsening of the economic crisis since 2008, have brought about an increasingly critical attitude among European public opinion, which vacillates between indifference, incomprehension, reluctance or rejection. This is demonstrated by Eurobarometer polls, which emphasize with great regularity the erosion of what was long called the “permissive consensus” with regard to European construction. Today, varying degrees of resistance to Europe can be observed throughout the continent. This resistance takes numerous forms: disaffection (abstention rates above 40% for European elections), deep gaps in understanding

or knowledge of European institutional operation or policy content, the emergence of populist or even far-right parties (such as the Front National), and by powerful movements in favour of exiting the European Union (United Kingdom), or at least the euro zone (FN in France, AFD in Germany). We can also observe, within the centre-right and centre-left parties of EU member states, an increasing distance taken from the European project, and a sovereigntist stance that is incompatible with the idea of an integrated—or over time a federal or confederal —Europe.

Thus, despite over a half century of existence, the European Union remains a distant goal, poorly understood and unpopular. Ignorance of its institutional functioning is at the origin of the scepticism of public opinion regarding the institution, whose advantages wrongly seem to be essentially reserved for a “European elite” that is as distant and inaccessible as “Brussels.” Nevertheless, according to Eurobarometer, the number of Europeans with a positive view of the EU rose from 35% in June 2014 to 39% in November 2014, while 37% of respondents had a neutral view, and 22% a negative one (as opposed to 25% in June). Moreover, the number of Europeans affirming confidence in the European Union also rose to 37% (+6 percentage points since the previous survey held just after elections for the European Parliament). According to Eurobarometer, 51% of Europeans felt that their country’s belonging to the EU was a “good thing,” and only 16% of respondents felt that it was a bad thing, the remainder saying that they did not know (4%), or adopting a neutral position (“neither good, nor bad”). Additionally, two thirds of respondents questioned first in 2009 and then in 2014 said that they were “attached” to Europe (one third affirmed the opposite). Can we deduce from these numbers, which have remained stable even after the explosion of the crisis in 2009, that the majority of Europeans support European integration? If this decidedly seems to be the case when we look at the Union overall, countries traditionally more critical toward the EU (the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic), and especially southern countries, have much lower rates of support for the European project. Yet even in Greece and Cyprus, which were strongly affected by the crisis and the policy of austerity, a relative majority of citizens consider their country’s belonging to the EU as a positive fact. In fact, even if the social consequences of the austerity imposed by Brussels result in votes for populist parties on the right or the left, such as in Greece in late January 2015, the electors drawn by the platform of such parties do not support exiting the euro zone, or even the European Union, but instead want different economic policy aiming to support growth and to boost investment. Despite the fact that a majority of citizens from southern countries say they are “attached” to Europe, this figure has fallen by 10-15% since the explosion of the economic crisis, clearly demonstrating the fact that some Europeans have lost confidence in European construction.

Eurobarometer polls show that citizens from northern and southern European countries are not experiencing the same economic reality. The former hardly feel the effects of the economic crisis, whereas for the latter, two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents believe that the economic problems are far from over, and that “the worst is ahead.” The primary preoccupations of Europeans are therefore of an economic nature. The future of the EU thus depends in large part on how it will respond to this issue that divides Europe and Europeans. All the same, the emergence of populist Euroskeptical parties is not the sole prerogative of southern European countries affected by the crisis. It is a phenomenon present in almost every member state, whether it be Greece (Syriza), Italy (Five Star Movement), France (Front National/Front de Gauche) or Spain (Podemos), or the United Kingdom (UKIP), Germany (AFD), the Netherlands (PVV) or Finland (True Finns). It would be wrong to reduce the origin of these movements solely to the economic and demographic challenges facing the EU. The anger and rejection they express greatly surpass the scope of European integration, and reflect a more general discontent that is not specific to Europeans, as shown by the rise of the Tea Party in the United States.

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