

PARLEMETER 2018: TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

Expert Insight

PATTERNS OF AMBIGUITY, CRISIS NARRATIVES AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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Just seven months to go: a most ambivalent context ahead of the EP elections

The findings of the most recent Eurobarometer surveys provide positive indicators signalling a high level of 'generalised support' for the European integration process. This is reflected in various indicators measuring positive attitudes towards the EU. A few examples are sufficient to provide some illustration here. In the Special Eurobarometer survey for the European Parliament of autumn 2018¹, more than two-thirds of EU citizens (68%) believe that their country overall benefits from EU membership, the highest score since 1983. The number who believe their voice counts in the EU (48%) also exceeds the number of sceptics (47%), although by a slim margin. Before the Brexit referendum, only 38% of Europeans felt that their voice counted in the EU².

About Brexit, it is also worth recognising that in the latest Parlemeter survey of September 2018, **more than half of citizens in all Member States with the exception of the Czech Republic and Italy said they would vote 'remain' if a referendum on EU membership was held in their country**. In the same survey, Romania, Greece, Italy, the Czech Republic, Croatia and Slovenia were the only Member States where a relative majority of the population state that they believe the UK's decision to leave was the right one.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that we find support for more EU intervention in a broad range of different policy areas. For a rather comprehensive list of 15 different policy areas which was presented to respondents in the Special Eurobarometer for the European Parliament conducted in April 2018³, we find a majority of EU citizens in favour of more common action. In six of those 15 policy areas, more than 70% of respondents express attitudes that would legitimise a more interventionist EU course in policy-making: the fight against terrorism (77%), the fight against unemployment (76%), environmental protection (75%), the fight against tax fraud (74%), the promotion of peace and democracy in the world (73%) and, last but not least, the issue of migration (72%). In a nutshell, the taste for more common action in a wide range of policy areas seems to signal a strong pro-European mix of attitudes across EU Member States.

¹ Special Eurobarometer "Parlemeter 2018", September 2018. Most figures of this analysis come from this survey. When it is not the case, the source is indicated in footnote

² Standard Eurobarometer Spring 2016, EB85, May 2016

³ Special Eurobarometer "One year to the European elections 2019", April 2018

Pro-European attitudes are also reflected in the most recent findings concerning European Monetary Union. Overall, in September 2018, 61% of EU citizens are in favour of a 'European economic and monetary union with one single currency, the euro'. Within the euro area, support is even higher, with 77% supporting the project for a common economic and monetary area. So far so good. Much more worrying is the remarkably wide diversity of views across individual Member States (varying from 20% in the Czech Republic, up to 88% in Ireland), and the fact that trust in the European Central Bank (41% of EU citizens) is lower than for the European Commission (46%) or Parliament (50%)⁴. In nine EU Member States, less than four in ten citizens trust the ECB, with the exception of the UK all clustering in the South/South Eastern European area⁵. Although it is not a surprise given the contested field of 'crisis handling' over monetary and fiscal policy over the last 10 years, **the findings on EMU and particularly the ECB deliver some evidence for a more ambiguous public mood in the EU concerning key policy areas.**

10 years of continuous crisis narratives around the European integration process

The rather positive indicators from more recent Eurobarometer surveys presented above and the more recent turn towards more positive economic and labour market performance measures in the EU economies stand in stark contrast to the picture of a 'crisis-ridden' EU, a notion that seems to be widespread in the media but also in many academic analyses of the current state of EU affairs. Institutional gridlock, a lack of a shared pro-European identity, centrifugal politics in such important areas as economic policy and migration-related issues – these catchwords represent just a few of the many available examples illustrating the 'crisis discourse' around the EU. That crisis narrative has been an ongoing one for almost a decade now, when in the wake of the financial crisis Europe entered a period of multiple and unforeseen economic, social and political challenges. Long term experts of EU integration dynamics like Gerda Falkner diagnose that the 'EU finds itself in the midst of a series of profound and multiple crises'. **The EU's legal basis, its institutions and decision-making processes, and its overall democratic legitimacy are indeed challenged as never before since the founding fathers of European integration such as Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi and Konrad Adenauer paved the way towards an institutionalised European integration project.**

The crisis scenario is also supported by empirical evidence in a number of findings of the recent Eurobarometer surveys⁶: only 42% of respondents said that they tend to trust the EU, whereas 48% said that they distrust it. The picture concerning the European Parliament does not look much better: although 48% say that that the EP should play a more important role in EU policy-making, 50% stated in Spring 2018 that they trust the EP. A closer look at EU's citizens' preferences does show indeed both: first, strong doses of criticism, and second, enormous variations in perceptions across the electorates of individual Member States. Both define on the one hand a strong barrier for a credible 'positive narrative' around the EU and its achievements, and at the same time make clear how desperately needed a more widely shared positive appreciation of the EU and its institutional core is, to foster a more pro-European public mood particularly in those countries in the South and East of the EU where we find the most sceptical views of the EU and its performance.

⁴ Standard Eurobarometer Spring 2018, EB89, March 2018

⁵ Italy, Poland, Slovenia, France, Croatia, Cyprus, Spain, Greece, and the UK

⁶ Trust in the EU; trust in the EP: Standard Eurobarometer survey Spring 2018; Role played by the EP: Parlemeter 2018

Whereas in Germany pro-European attitudes have gained support within the electorate since the 'shock event' of Brexit in 2016, strong and clear critical views of the EU are evident in two of the three big founding countries of the former European Community. Only a minority of citizens in France (44%) and Italy (39%) are satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU. Whereas in France a clear majority of 61% agree that EU membership is a good thing for their country, in Italy, this share falls to 42%. A broad consensus about the positive aspects of the EU certainly reads strikingly differently. Even more noticeable is the finding that in the East European countries which once – rather enthusiastically – applied for EU membership on the assumption of a clear overall 'net benefit', strong anti-EU attitudes can be found as well as political dynamics that question basic aspects of the core principles of the type of 'liberal civic democracy' on which the European integration process has been built since the 1950s. **Seven months before the European elections will take place, there is nothing like a pan-EU consensus on the state of affairs in the Union.**

More contested competition between national parties due to populist movements

In the meantime, important shifts in the party systems have taken place in various European countries at the national level, often associated with the emergence of populist parties with good chances to use electoral campaigns for the European Parliament elections as a key opportunity to further strengthen their EU-critical profile – and with good chances to increase their share of votes compared with the results of the 2014 elections. EU-critical positions are integral part of the programmatic orientation of these anti-establishment movements, which span from Sweden, through the Netherlands, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, and Italy to Greece. This list of countries isn't even exhaustive.

Populist anti-EU positioning might come in various garbs and degrees of radicalism. Yet the common outlook of the more recent wave of populist movements is that they try to translate a so-far rather passive frustration with the key processes and policies of a modern liberal democracy into active protest at the ballot box. As part of a more general anti-establishment and anti-elite protest, the European Union figures as a particularly prominent point of criticism for populist national movements. **The populist narrative characterises the EU as an elite-dominated political undertaking far distant from the everyday problems of the 'normal citizen'. This narrative will certainly play a role in the electoral campaigns of populist parties for European Parliament elections the 2019.** In two countries which were often regarded as rather 'immune' to right-wing anti-EU populism, Sweden and Germany, the *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats) and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) have each established themselves as the third strongest party in the general elections of 2017 and 2018. In countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, political dynamics have severely questioned civic and political rights that provide the fundamental pillars of liberal democracy.

Elections for the European Parliament are a 'natural playground' for EU-critical political forces. Thus, we will most likely observe strongly EU-critical campaigns as a key ingredient of populist parties in the run-up to the EP elections 2019. **This will decisively shape the agenda of political competition for all other players, and particularly for those parties which have a strong programmatic pro-European basis in their party manifestos but a significant share of voters who might be less immune to populist anti-EU narratives.** This holds for the two (traditionally) biggest families of parties in EU democracies, centre-right Christian democrat and conservative parties (organised in the EP within

the EPP grouping), and social democrats (S&D). Across many democracies in Europe, the ‘flattening’ of the ‘classic political centre’ has been an important dynamic of the last few years, signalling that significant shares of previous social democrat, Christian democrat, conservative and liberal party voters are susceptible to the new anti-establishment offer of populist parties.

Even if one does not focus on new populist forces in national politics, the general notion that we live in an age where new political forces are better suited to push political change than the (old) established ones is widespread across the EU Member States. On average, 53% of EU citizens⁷ think that the new political movements and parties articulating the protest against the ‘old establishment’ can find new solutions better. In none of the current Member States is this share lower than 40%, with the exception of France (36%). Similar, 56% of EU citizens say that these new political forces are more capable of pushing real change and only in Sweden (39%) and the Netherlands (38%) do fewer than 4 in 10 citizens subscribe to this notion. In other words, the *zeitgeist* (which we could translate by the ‘spirit of the times’) is very much leaning towards change and even disruption rather than stability, a more general dynamic the root causes of which can be found in secular social change, globalisation and digitalisation. The EU is not immune to that zeitgeist, as it predominantly presents a configuration of institutions, political processes and policy priorities which owe more to the past than any radical ‘re-configuration’ of its key organisational principles. It seems that the aspiration for change is the driving force for a lot of populist parties, as well as the fear of changes, such as those related to immigration. If the EU and its institutions seem to be the primary target of the populist parties, they are probably not the first target of their electors. **The main challenge for the EU is to position itself as a driving element in a desirable change, and to dissociate itself from the changes that are feared.**

The EP elections: salience, policy priorities, areas of concern

Roughly a year before the EP elections in May 2019, 50% of EU citizens expressed an interest in these elections⁸. However, this figure should not be taken as an indication that the EP elections are an issue with high salience and that the trend towards lower turnout could therefore be reversed. In the same survey, 32% of respondents were aware that elections would be held in 2019 (including 19% who knew that they would be held in *May 2019*). Between spring and autumn this level of awareness has increased by almost 10 percentage points (from 32% up to 41% in the Parlemeter of September 2018), indicating a significant increase of awareness of the European Parliament elections. Within the same period of time, interest for these European elections has remained almost unchanged, at 51% (+1 pp since April 2018). A national analysis of the Parlemeter 2018 shows that only in nine EU Member States do more than a half of the population get the year of the next EP election right. In one of the founding Member States, France, the share of correct answers is still below 30% (29%) and certainly calls for the right political communication measures from the EU and the EP to raise awareness, and beyond that, even the salience of the next EP elections. A President like Emmanuel Macron whose rhetoric has been much about a ‘revitalisation’ of the EU project will have to work hard and do better than so far to raise the salience of the EP elections in his country.

A step in the right direction might be the link between the results of the EP elections and the process of electing the President of the European Commission. In April 2018, a majority of 61% of Europeans state

⁷ “One year to the European elections 2019”

⁸ “One year to the European elections 2019”

that this link represents significant progress for democracy within the EU⁹. On the other hand, 70% wish for a debate accompanying the process. A debate concerning European issues and also the future of the EU.

The issues which are regarded as relevant have shifted in the last years. In Autumn 2012, immigration was described as the most important issue facing the EU by just 8% of EU citizens¹⁰. In the Standard Spring 2018, it is the first concern of Europeans, with 38% of mentions. Moreover, in September 2018, immigration is seen as the main theme that Europeans would like to be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections (50%).

But there are several differences between Member States regarding the issues on which citizens would like the European Union to intervene more than at present. For example, 86% of people in Cyprus and 84% in Spain wish for more EU intervention in economic policy, while only 31% do so in Denmark¹¹. There are similar findings in so-called soft policy fields. In Spain, 86% want more EU engagement in the field of equal treatment of men and women. In Estonia only 32% are in favour of this.

There are a lot of issues which seem to be relevant in a vast majority of EU countries. One example is migration. A total of 72% EU citizens want more EU intervention in this policy field. The rates are even higher regarding environmental protection: 75% are in favour of more intervention. But still, the specific rates vary between 88% in Portugal and only 52% in Estonia or 56% in Austria.

We can perhaps nuance the desire of EU citizens for 'more Europe': **more than the feeling that the EU will deal better with these policies, it reflects perhaps the opinion that individually, Member State cannot act effectively on these topics. It is key to demonstrate that EU action goes in the right direction in these different domains.**

The preferences about which policy area or problems should be at the centre of the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament again reveal strong variations across countries. Therefore, we can expect highly localised national campaigns for the upcoming election. Until the European Union finds a common narrative, which goes beyond the benefits and predominant problems at the national level, it will be difficult to run consistent campaigns all over Europe.

Nevertheless, the upcoming elections require enormous efforts from all pro-European democratic parties. We can expect gains for populist and Eurosceptic parties throughout the Union. They have already made gains in national elections all over Europe and a large majority of Europeans associate positive attributes like solutions and needed changes with them.

On the other hand, approval for a strengthened European Parliament is high. People do not have the best picture of the EU, but still see the chance for positive impacts from it. The EU is not (yet?) questioned, but it needs to deliver. **The upcoming elections offer the next chance to bridge the gap between the EU as an institution and its citizens.** The Eurobarometer data provide a series of possible approaches.

First of all, the desire for real European debates. The most plausible arena for genuinely European debates would be the European Parliament. To get more attention and improve its image, the

⁹ "One year to the European elections 2019"

¹⁰ Standard Eurobarometer of Autumn 2012 (EB78), November 2012

¹¹ "One year to the European elections 2019"

Parliament needs more substantial debates, much better media coverage and possibly also a political marketing stimulus which could work across the EU Member States. We can't judge how likely this is to happen in the near future, but without a significant step forward strengthening the salience and importance of the EP, it will be difficult to foster a more robust pattern of notions around the role of the European Parliament within the institutional setting of the EU.

Second, the majority of people seem to be confident that the EU can deliver improvements in several policies fields. Otherwise they would not express a wish for more intervention. They are also increasingly convinced that their vote in the European elections can help shape their future. This confidence is essential for the future of the European Union. The most effective way forward to strengthen this notion is strengthening 'good policies' and an improved political communication strategy to make these policies more noticeable in the everyday lives of EU citizens.

Parliamentarians need to convey their work to their voters. Brussels has to work on its image and beyond that to get its message over better to the people on the ground. Here it is necessary to position the concrete benefits more clearly as well as the key policy challenges and what the EU can do about them.

The latest Eurobarometer survey shows growing interest in and appreciation of the EU by Europeans. In the long term, these hopes and this optimism can be **the core of a positive European narrative that connects its citizens**. One that could be backed by a broad majority of its citizens in a broad majority of Member States and delivers a contrasting narrative to the populist story of an 'anti-democratic, bureaucratic monster Brussels'.

Otherwise, the future results of the Eurobarometer could signal much more worrying and much less promising attitudes.

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