

# A COLLAPSE IN TRUST IN THE EU? EUROPEANS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS EUROPE DURING THE GREAT RECESSION

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The period of the “Great Recession” since 2008 has led to a downward trend in many indicators of support for European integration. From the point of view of the trust that Europeans have towards Europe (an important dimension of diffuse support for the EU), we can even speak of a deep crisis of trust in the European Union action, as recorded since 2008 in the opinions of Europeans. In some countries (like Greece), we even recorded a collapse of confidence. The analysis of two Eurobarometer studies, one at the beginning of the crisis and another in 2011, shows that if the collapse is certainly there, and not only on indicators of diffuse support towards EU integration, Europeans do not impute responsibility for the crisis to the EU only: Europeans perceive the crisis and the role of Europe in the crisis through the prism of their national experiences, in particular confidence in their governments and the perception of the economic situation of their country. Moreover, the crisis of trust in the EU does not entail ipso facto a serious crisis of confidence in the euro: we do not observe for euro a comparable collapse to that observed in terms of overall trust in the EU. Among euro-zone countries, evolutions are slightly declining but not very significantly; it is in countries that are outside the euro-zone or those who are candidates to enter in that the lower support for the euro can be observed.

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The financial crisis that began in August 2007 in the United States and then spread in several European economies to become a sovereign debt crisis poses more than ever the question of the link between the action of the European Union and how people and citizens perceive it: the combination of financial bailouts of banks, fiscal policies programs and of lower tax revenues linked to the

decline in economic activity in general has resulted in a very significant deterioration of the budget situation and of the public debt ratios, as had never been seen before in peacetime.

In the 17 euro-zone countries, this situation has revealed that the public debts do not benefit from any institutional guarantee. As Patrick Artus (2012) has analyzed this very well, this situation strongly poses a real European dilemma and raises in a particularly crucial way the question of the democratic legitimacy of the European Union, “the choices seem *a priori* clear: on one side, the move towards a more integrated politico-economic system at the level of the euro-zone, on the other side, the national withdrawal, potentially until the breakup of the monetary union. Although since the beginning of the crisis, an in-between has become, since Member States have chosen to favor one mode of intergovernmental decision that apparently ensures national interests and weakens the institutions that guarantee the common interest, such as the Commission and the European Parliament. At the same time, the decisions taken under the pressure of the financial markets are going in the direction of ever greater fiscal solidarity and of strengthened supervision rules. This in-between is probably due to the paradoxical situation in Europe: the combination of the sudden experience of economic interdependence on the one hand, and on the other, strong differences that lead Member States to want to keep a veto right on EU decisions”.

According to Patrick Artus, this “policy of small steps, (through the implementation of ESM or through the strengthening the role of the European Central Bank) cannot provide a comprehensive response to “a well established systemic crisis,” neither a reply to the challenge of the democratic legitimacy of the European Union and the euro zone: “This is that deficit, i.e. the absence of a clear political leadership with a strong democratic legitimacy, which currently feed distrust among the seventeen members of the euro-zone. On the one hand, the Southern countries affected by the crisis count on the financial solidarity of their partners and protest against austerity policies they regard as being' imposed from outside. On the other, some Northern countries expect structural reforms of their neighbours, or even an independent oversight of national budgets, while their citizens whose assistance is sought

through solidarity policies, fear that they do create windfall effects and encourage laxity governments of other states”.

This analysis nicely summarizes the main aspects of the deep crisis of trust in the European Union that we see since 2008 in the opinions of European citizens. Before we analyze this trend few methodological precautions must be posed. First, any analysis of the evolution of public opinion must take the time dimension in consideration: the less favorable assessment that Europeans relate to European integration does not date from the current crisis. It dates from the early 1990s when the conjunction of the “post-1989 world” and public debates on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty introduced in public opinion a series of questions about the limits, the scope and meaning of economic and political European integration. In addition, the indicators that measure the attitudes of European citizens *vis-à-vis* European integration have been the subject of lively debates in academic research literature: these researches reflect the question of the views of European citizens towards the EU in terms of “support”, a concept which itself is linked in the tradition of political analysis to the question of the democratic legitimacy of the EU. These researches make a distinction between the “diffuse support” and the “specific support”, a distinction coming from David Easton analysis who had suggested in the 1960s that any political system owed its stability to a “diffuse support” of citizens defined in terms of “feelings of trust or affection” while it was in the same time evaluated by the citizens in terms of functioning. This distinction is, in the literature on European citizens attitudes towards European integration, endorsed by a distinction which is almost isomorphic: the one made by Fritz Sharpf between support by the “inputs” and by the “outputs”: on the one hand political choices are legitimate if they reflect the will of the people expressed through the mechanisms of political participation or speaking up in civil society, on the other hand political choices are legitimate if they are finalized with respect to the collective good and the good functioning of the system.

These methodological considerations are important because, from the point of view of the analysis of the reactions of citizens towards the crisis and the European integration, and towards the EU in the crisis, we cannot avoid the question of whether the effects of the crisis are on “specific” or “diffuse” support levels: in

the original design of Easton, there is a compensation mechanism and communicating circuit between the two levels, diffuse support being in his words, a “reservoir of favorable attitudes” which can compensate for the loss of “specific” support when the political system does not “deliver” to its citizens. In this latter case, the crisis of trust that we see in the EU action does not question the commitment and the general support of Europeans towards the overall objectives of European integration and a significant leeway exist for the EU to create (or resuscitate...) the public demand for European public policies.

**Table 1. The two forms of European citizens support towards EU**

% for the EU27 members in 2009 and 2011

		EB71.1 (2009)		EB76.3 (2011)	
		%	% « dont' know»	%	% « dont' know»
« Diffuse » support	In favor of a monetary union with only one currency, the euro	64	7	56	8
	Membership to EU is a « good thing »	53	4	–	–
	Trust in the European Union	50	11	39	10
	In favour of EU enlargement to other countries in the coming years	48	12	43	11
« Specific » support (*) In favor of more decision taken at the EU-level to	Fight against terrorism	80	4	82	2
	Fight for environment protection	73	4	66	2
	Fight against unemployment	61	5	39	2
	Trust in the European Commission	47	22	40	20
« Specific » support	Positive image of EU	44	2	33	2
	Things are going in the good direction in the EU	36	11	23	9

Sources: Eurobarometer 71.3, June-July 2009; Eurobarometer 76.3, November 2011. Data have been analyzed by the author and weighted.

The table below compares some indicators of these two forms of support from two Eurobarometer surveys in 2009 and 2011, one survey at the beginning and the other one at middle of the crisis. Even limited to a few indicators, the comparison shows a clear fall in support for the EU and its actions whatever the “diffuse” or

“specific” support is considered. The economic crisis has had a very negative impact on the general or specific support to EU actions or institutions.

Other indicators from more recent or complementary to Eurobarometer surveys complete the picture. At the most general level of support for European integration (“diffuse” support), the spring 2012 Eurobarometer records (for the first time since the creation of this indicator) equality between positive and negative opinions about the functioning of democracy in the European Union. While in 2007 and until 2009, only 32% of Europeans declared themselves dissatisfied with the way EU functions, in 2012 the increase was 12 points at the same time that the number of satisfied went down by 10 points. At this very general and diffuse level of support for the EU, this decline is particularly striking. And dissatisfaction gains dramatically in Greece (from 40% in 2007 to 70% in 2012), but also in Spain (14% in 2007, 30% in 2009 and 52% in 2012), Italy and Portugal (37% in 2007, 39% in 2009, 66% in 2012). These countries, both exposed to the reality of the crisis and the conditionality of the aid to rescue their banking sector and restructuring of public debt, are more than any other the theatre of a real collapse of the trust in the EU. The image of the EU is of course also deteriorated not only for the overall European level (20% of Europeans in the Spring 2011 Eurobarometer have a negative image of the European Union against 15% in 2007), but also very deteriorated in the countries who were highly exposed to the crisis: the negative image of the European Union now brings 40% of Greeks (13% in 2007), 25% of Portuguese (12% in 2007) or 16% of Spanish (6% in 2007). While these evolutions are strongly or very strongly downward we can nevertheless observe that the negative image of the EU remains at levels below 50%.

These data are well summarized by the indicator of trust in European integration. Many researches have shown the link between political trust and support for the political system; political trust is an essential dimension of “diffuse” support”, one of the most synthetic indicators of this support. Declining trust in the EU since 2008 is first strong and widespread: there are only two countries among the 27 members of the EU in 2011 for which there is increasing trust in the EU compared to 2007: Sweden (+2 points) and Finland (+10 points), two countries whose levels of pro-EU

opinions are usually lower than for all countries and whose opinions were able to welcome the affirmation of budgetary rules at European level. But in all other countries, “large” or “small” European countries, regardless of the time of accession to the EU, net “contributors” or “recipients”, we are witnessing a particularly significant drop in trust (Armigeon and Ceka , 2014).

Nevertheless, these data do not allow to assign the responsibility for the collapse of support for European integration in the EU alone: Europeans perceive the crisis and the role of Europe in the crisis through the prism of the national experience they have had of it, in particular trust in their governments and the perception of the economic situation in their countries (Hobolt *et al.*, 2013). It is also the confidence in national governments and in particular the confidence in the ability of these governments to cope with the economic crisis that is involved.

But what about support for the euro? One might expect that the support for the euro experiencing a very important decline in trust: as Patrick Artus summarized in its analysis, the governance of the euro area is actually at the heart of issues of legitimacy and citizens support, including their “diffuse” dimensions. If the level of support for the euro has actually declined between 2008 and 2012, there has not been a comparable collapse to that observed in terms of the overall trust in the EU. In countries members of the euro-zone the evolutions are slightly declining but not are not very significant. And it is remarkable to see the small differences between the countries members of the euro-zone who are “debtors” (those exposed to austerity plans and constraints of the EU and the IMF) and those who are “creditors”. The collapse of support for the euro still exists elsewhere, but outside the euro-zone, in the countries that have chosen (such as the United Kingdom) not to join the euro-zone but also in countries which are candidate to join the euro-zone. A recent work by Sara Hobolt thus clearly shows that in the countries of the euro-zone, the majority of citizens still think that the European Union is more able to resolve the crisis than the national government (Hoblot , 2013).

## Recommendations

The data presented here show that the opinions of European citizens towards European integration do not let themselves be grasped by simplistic opposition between “pro” and “anti” European. Multidimensionality of these opinions is the rule. More than during the “Maastricht years”, European citizens have questions at several levels on European integration: the debate can no longer be summarized in just splitting between supporters of national sovereignty and “integrationist”. European integration has, by its own dynamics, both homogenized and heterogenized the representations that Europeans have the European integration process. “What are the contributions of the EU vis-à-vis the actions of national governments? Where are the limits of European public policy, particularly in economic matters? Europe for whom or for whose benefit? Where are the boundaries?”, are just some of the questions that now oppose popular representations schemes of European integration. More recently, researchers have even suggested that it is more the growing “indifference” to Europe than opposition to European integration that characterizes the disoriented public opinion today (Duchesne *et al.*, 2013).

For all these reasons, it is particularly important that the main tool the researchers can access to analyze the dimensions of the opinions of Europeans toward European integration is shifted in a more “academic” direction. The Eurobarometer is a survey conducted and funded by the European Commission; if it does not ignore the links with the academic community, it is not fully an “academic” survey in the traditional sense of the term.

If Eurobarometer has contributed in a fundamental and irreplaceable way to the development of academic research and constitutes one of the largest databases available to researchers and the public, it sometimes lacks consistency in its questionnaires and indicators: if a good part of the indicators to distinguish the forms of “diffuse” and “specific” support are there, all are not there and are not there systematically. The result is a sometimes optimistic presentation of the Eurobarometer data in reports prepared by the services of the European Commission. More annoying is the often one-dimensional nature of the collected data: too many indicators measure the same dimension (favorable/unfavorable to European integration) and too little measure alternative dimensions: Europe

of the Left, Europe of the Right for example. Indeed, it is through the politicization of issues of European integration that citizens may give more meaning to European integration and could reduce the dissonance between the ideological compass used for issues of national politics and the absence of such ideological benchmarks that raise Europe in their minds (Hix and Bartolini, 2006; Belot *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, it seems increasingly clear that more qualitative and contextual observation devices should complement the range of available data: the micro-social and territorial contexts of production of political attitudes are, for European integration more than for any other object of analysis, fundamental to grasp.