

The Citizens of Europe and the European Union in the Current Crisis

Daniel DEBOMY

Our Europe Unser Europa
La nostra Europa A nossa Europe
Nuestra Europa ons Europa η Ευρώπη μας
Vårt Europa L-Ewropa taghna Noastră Europa
Vores Europa A mi Európank Naše
Evropa Nasza Europa Нашата Европа Meie Euroopa
Mūsu Europa Mūsu Eiropa Waša Eurōpa
Naša Evrópa Meidan Eurooppamme
Notre Europe





The Citizens of Europe and the European Union in the Current Crisis

Daniel Debomy

**Daniel DEBOMY**

Daniel Debomy is the founder and managing director of the opinion research institute *Optem*. For 25 years, together with his network of partners across Europe, he has carried out numerous qualitative studies on behalf of the European Commission and other organisations, aiming to understand the citizens' perceptions, attitudes and expectations vis-a-vis the European Union and EU policies, in the 27 Member States and beyond. He also lectures on EU related issues at several schools and universities.

Notre Europe

Notre Europe is an independent think tank devoted to European integration. Under the guidance of Jacques Delors, who created Notre Europe in 1996, the association aims to “think a united Europe.”

Our ambition is to contribute to the current public debate by producing analyses and pertinent policy proposals that strive for a closer union of the peoples of Europe. We are equally devoted to promoting the active engagement of citizens and civil society in the process of community construction and the creation of a European public space.

In this vein, the staff of Notre Europe directs research projects; produces and disseminates analyses in the form of short notes, studies, and articles; and organises public debates and seminars. Its analyses and proposals are concentrated around four themes:

- *Visions of Europe: The community method, the enlargement and deepening of the EU and the European project as a whole are a work in*

constant progress. Notre Europe provides in-depth analysis and proposals that help find a path through the multitude of Europe's possible futures.

- *European Democracy in Action: Democracy is an everyday priority. Notre Europe believes that European integration is a matter for every citizen, actor of civil society and level of authority within the Union. Notre Europe therefore seeks to identify and promote ways of further democratising European governance.*

- *Competition, Cooperation, Solidarity: "Competition that stimulates, co-operation that strengthens, and solidarity that unites". This, in essence, is the European contract as defined by Jacques Delors. True to this approach, Notre Europe explores and promotes innovative solutions in the fields of economic, social and sustainable development policy.*

- *Europe and World Governance: As an original model of governance in an increasingly open world, the European Union has a role to play on the international scene and in matters of world governance. Notre Europe seeks to help define this role.*

Notre Europe aims for complete freedom of thought and works in the spirit of the public good. It is for this reason that all of Notre Europe's publications are available for free from our website, in both French and English: www.notre-europe.eu

Its Presidents have been successively Jacques Delors (1996-2004), Pascal Lamy (2004-2005), Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa (2005-2010) and António Vitorino (since 2011).

Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 1
I. The evolution of quantitative opinion indicators	p. 3
1.1. The evolution of European opinion towards the Union over the past twenty-five years: four major phases, with pro-European enthusiasm alternately rising and falling	p. 4
1.2. The evolution of opinion in the various Member States since the start of the crisis: a drop virtually right across the board, although it varies in terms of both timing and of magnitude	p. 8
1.3. France is experiencing growing Euro-gloom	p. 11
II. How do the European Union's citizens feel about the crisis?	p. 13
2.1. Growing bitterness and resentment in the Euro zone countries currently worst hit by the crisis	p. 13
2.2. Prejudice against the southern countries is resurfacing in some of the western European Member States, while passive or detached attitudes prevail in others	p. 15
2.3. In the new Member States, resistance to "inverse solidarity" has been revealed; in others, we see frustrated expectations	p. 18
Conclusion: Three considerations	p. 23

Introduction

This policy paper was drafted in the wake of a debate organised at the Fondation Jean Jaurès on 27 June 2011 with the directors of opinion research institutes from 17 European countries. The institutes in question are members of a network, coordinated by Optem in France, which has produced most of the European Commission's qualitative studies over 25 years.

Based on this experience, they presented their view of the way the feelings of Europe's citizens towards the European Union have recently evolved in the context of the current crisis.

Research institutes attending the meeting on 27 June 2011 were: Optem (Coordination, France), EADC Yellow Window (Belgium), Alpha Research (Bulgaria), Saarpoll (Estonia), CSA (France), Focus Bari (Greece), Ad Hoc Plus (Hungary), Behaviour and Attitudes Marketing Research (Ireland), Baltic Surveys (Lithuania), Quest (Luxembourg), Misco (Malta),

PQR (Netherlands), Consulmark (Portugal), Mareco (Czech Republic), Data Media (Romania), AIMR (United Kingdom), Psymareco (Slovakia), RM Plus (Slovenia).

Partner institutes in other Member States: Echanges Marktforschung (Germany), Karmasin Motivforschung (Austria), Synovate (Republic of Cyprus), KADEM (Turkish-speaking region of Cyprus), Ulveman Explorative (Denmark), Advira (Spain), Marketing Radar (Finland), Periscope (Italy), Latvian Facts (Latvia), BSM (Poland), Kommunikera (Sweden).

I. The evolution of quantitative opinion indicators

“Standard Eurobarometer” opinion poll surveys conducted in the spring and autumn of each year, using representative samples of citizens from the Member States, involve questions which in some cases are repeated at different times, while in other cases they are linked to a given topical event or development. Two questions, however, have been systematically reiterated each semester for many years¹:

(MEMBERSHIP)²: Generally speaking, do you think that (our country)’s membership of the European Union is...? a good thing / a bad thing / neither good nor bad / Don’t know

(BENEFITS): Taking everything into account, would you say that (our country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union? Benefited / Not benefited / Don’t know

-
1. Identical formulation from one set of surveys to the next, apart from a change in the name of the Community entity itself (European Community, European Union). Questions were asked using the conditional tense in countries or territories that were not yet part of the European Union when the surveys were carried out.
 2. Indicator measured until spring 2010.

1.1. The evolution of European opinion towards the Union over the past twenty-five years: four major phases, with pro-European enthusiasm alternately rising and falling

An assessment of the positive responses scored in the membership and benefits questions allows us to distinguish four different phases since spring 1985³.

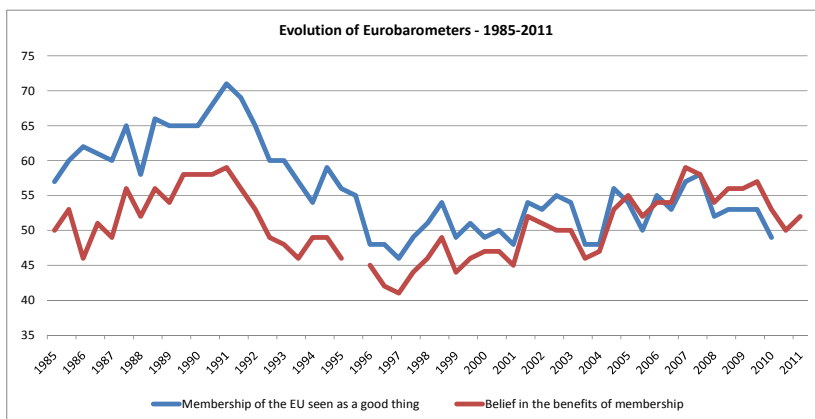
Initial phase

In an initial phase lasting from spring 1985 to spring 1991, public opinion in favour of the Union made considerable progress, rising from 57% to 71% for the membership indicator, and from 50% to 59% for the indicator concerning benefits for the country. This phase was characterised by the drafting and implementation of Jacques Delors' blueprint for imparting a fresh boost to Europe after he was appointed president of the Commission. A dip in enthusiasm over these six years, however, can be seen in surveys conducted in spring 1988.

Second phase

A second phase is marked by a very strong slump, dropping to an all-time low in spring 1997: the first indicator dropped by twenty-five percentage points and the second by eighteen. The start of the decline, in late 1991 and in 1992, coincided with the controversy and the confused debates surrounding the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. The first few years of the decade also saw a decline in economic growth. Moreover, certain events that occurred during this phase also led some people to question the Union's ability to act in a united and effective manner; those events included the mad cow crisis and the crisis in the former Yugoslavia, just on its borders. During that period a slight improvement occurred towards the end of 1994 and in 1995.

3. Average figures for Europe, taking into account the growing number of Member States resulting from successive enlargements.



Third phase

A third phase lasted until autumn 2007, with both indicators enjoying a partial, slow and hesitant rise: up twelve percentage points for the first indicator, and up fifteen percentage points for the second, coming from very low levels in spring 1997. It should be remembered that in the first few years of this phase Europe enjoyed an upswing in economic activity.

Yet the evolution of public opinion over the past ten years has been a jagged affair, punctuated by moments showing a downward trend or a dip. An initial dip can be seen between spring 1999 (marked by the Santer Commission's enforced resignation) and spring 2001. A second dip started in autumn 2003 and it was to last for a year, being fuelled: by Europe's governments openly bickering over whether or not to back the US military operation in Iraq; by criticism of the "expensive" Euro, especially in certain countries; and by fears spawned by the arrival of ten new Member States, fears that were amplified in a context of sluggish economic growth. And finally, there was a slump in autumn 2005 after the French and the Dutch rejected the European constitutional treaty in their respective referenda. This was followed by an upswing which lasted until autumn 2007.

Fourth phase

The end of 2007 saw the start of a fourth phase in which the two indicators began to decline once again.

In autumn 2007, some 58% of Europeans felt that their country's membership of the European Union was a good thing (as opposed to 13% who thought that it was a bad thing, 25% who thought that it was neither good nor bad and 4% who failed to answer the question). That figure subsequently slipped to 52% and then rose slightly to 53% until autumn 2009, finally dropping again to 49% in spring 2010, equivalent to an overall drop of nine percentage points.

In the interval, the number of respondents who judged it to be a bad thing rose by five percentage points, although it continued to remain a minority-held view at 18%. The noncommittal intermediate response rose by four percentage points to 29% (the number of respondents who failed to respond remaining unchanged at 4%).

The percentage of citizens who considered that their country had benefited from its membership of the Union stood at 58% in autumn 2007 (with 29% who thought the opposite and 13% failing to reply)⁴; that figure dropped to 54% in spring 2008, rising again slightly to 56% and then 57% until autumn 2009, then dropping again to 53% in spring 2010 (down five percentage points since the start of this phase) and to 50% by the autumn (down eight percentage points). When this final series of surveys was conducted, 39% said that they thought their country had not benefited in any way from its membership of the Union (while 11% failed to reply), pointing to a ten percentage-point rise over three years; only a relatively narrow gap now separates this response from the figure for positive replies.

4. In spring 2007, the scores were virtually identical: 59% as against 30%.

A comparison of these scores with those of previous phases shows us that the first indicator's level in spring 2010 had dropped by eight percentage points compared to spring 1985, by twenty-two percentage points compared to its peak performance in spring 1991, and that it was close to its all-time 25-year low.

The second indicator's final score in autumn 2010 was identical to its initial score (three percentage points higher in spring 2010). In this last series of surveys, it was nine percentage points lower than its all-time high in spring 1991, and than that of 2007, but it remained clearly higher (nine percentage points) than its all-time low in spring 1997.

The results of the surveys conducted in spring 2011⁵ show no great changes. There is a slight improvement in the benefit indicator, but it is still fairly low (European average: 52% positive answers, as against 37% negative – in other words, plus two percentage points). The membership indicator, for its part, was omitted in the European Commission's questionnaire for the second time running.

Summing up, positive opinions of the European Union are very far today from the peaks that they achieved almost twenty years ago; they stand only a little above their lowest-ever scores recorded in several moments in the third phase; and yet they are still clearly more numerous than negative opinions. There has been a major drop in positive opinion since the start of the crisis, but as things stand today there has been no real collapse...

5. These results were not available for submission in the debate on 27 June 2011. We can see a rise in the benefit indicator in certain countries (particularly Finland, Ireland, Cyprus, United Kingdom, Spain, Romania, France, Belgium...) and a drop in several others (Greece, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania...).

1.2. The evolution of opinion in the various Member States since the start of the crisis: a drop virtually right across the board, although it varies in terms of both timing and of magnitude

The drop noted in the European average since the start of the financial and economic crisis has affected virtually every single Member State, albeit some later than others and not to the same extent or with the same regularity.

This drop began to make itself felt above all:

- in 2007 in the United Kingdom (where an initial dip emerged in late 2006), in Ireland, in Spain, in the Czech Republic, in Estonia and in Latvia;
- from spring 2008 in France, in Germany, in Belgium, in Luxembourg (where the peak seen in autumn 2007 had been preceded by other, higher peaks during the third phase), in Poland, in Lithuania and in Romania, as well as in Portugal and in Greece⁶;
- in autumn 2008 in Denmark, in Malta and in the Republic of Cyprus (in the latter country, following a series of ups and downs ever since it joined);
- in spring 2009 in The Netherlands (where the downward slide from the peak reached in spring 1991 had lasted until autumn 2003, before rising again), in Sweden and in Slovenia;
- in 2010 in Austria (after an upswing lasting four years, following marked shocks in both directions in previous years), in Finland, in Slovakia and in Bulgaria (where the slide in positive assessments of the Union began in 2004, rising slightly in 2009 after hitting an all-time low in autumn 2008).

6. In the latter two countries, at variance with the average European evolution, a downward trend began to emerge in spring 2000 and autumn 2004 respectively, lasting until spring 2006; this trend was only partly made up for by a rise lasting until autumn 2007.

In many of these countries, there was a temporary pause in the downward trend shortly after it began. Thus certain “sunny spells” were recorded in spring 2009 in Luxembourg, in Spain and in Malta, in the autumn in Greece, and throughout that year in the Republic of Cyprus. Moreover, a certain stabilisation in the indicators’ levels over several series of surveys could also be detected in Belgium (autumn 2008 and spring 2009), in France, in Germany, in Portugal, in Estonia, in Romania (autumn 2008 and the whole of 2009), and in Ireland (the whole of 2009). On the other hand, the downward trend appeared fairly regularly in The Netherlands, in the United Kingdom, in Slovenia, in the Czech Republic, in Latvia and in Lithuania. It is of course impossible to make the same considerations for Finland, Austria, Slovakia and Bulgaria (where the downward trend began only in 2010).

Yet it is possible to notice stability or a slight improvement in the benefits indicator in the latter three countries in the last series of surveys in autumn 2010 – a phenomenon that can also be seen in Germany, in Luxembourg, in Sweden, in Latvia and in Lithuania, among other countries.

Three Member States also stand out for the brevity or weakness of the downward trend in their cases:

- Denmark, which showed a slight rise in the membership indicator after only a moderate drop starting in autumn 2008, though it has to be said that there was a rise in the hitherto weak negative trend in the benefits indicator in autumn 2010; Sweden, with a slight drop in the first indicator, but showing a trend towards a continuation in the positive direction in the second one; and Poland, with initially a more considerable drop in both indicators, but with a trend toward improvement as of autumn 2009.

Two countries stand out for the unique way in which opinion of the Union developed in their cases.

- On the one hand, there is Italy: while it was one of the most pro-European countries in the late 1980s, both indicators began to deteriorate in fits and starts, but very severely, until they hit an all-time low in spring 2008. A return to strength then occurred until autumn 2009, before a new dip was recorded in 2010.
- Hungary, on the other hand, experienced a rather jagged, but nonetheless considerable, drop from the year it joined until that drop bottomed out between spring 2008 and spring 2009; this was followed by a real rise on the part of both indicators in 2010.

We may add to this general picture the case of the Turkish-speaking part of Cyprus, where a major drop occurred between 2005 and spring 2009; but there too, this was followed by a rise (particularly in the membership indicator), which was followed in turn by a new dip in autumn 2010 in the number of respondents who consider that their fully-fledged integration into the Community area would be to their benefit.

As for the breadth of the drop between the moment it began and the most recent surveys conducted, the countries in which that drop has been strongest (considering the trend in both indicators together) are Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland among the older members, and Slovenia, Latvia, the Republic of Cyprus, Romania and the Czech Republic among the more recent ones. The weakest dips that it has been possible to record from the start of the crisis to the present day, on the other hand, are in Sweden, in Denmark, in Luxembourg, in Finland, in Poland, in Slovakia and in Bulgaria – in addition to the specific cases of Italy and of Hungary. Yet at the same time, it is true that the downward trend only began to appear in several of these countries somewhat belatedly.

1.3. France is experiencing growing Euro-gloom

After Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, France is the country among the older Member States where the number of favourable opinions has dropped the most since the crisis began. Before 2007, the level of both indicators had already dropped from the peaks they reached in the first phase – the first indicator following the European average, while the second indicator actually showed an downward trend even though the European average was heading in the opposite direction.

In spring 2010, 44% of French respondents considered that their country's membership of the Union was a good thing, as opposed to 24% who considered it a bad thing (a twenty percentage-point gap), 29% considered it to be neither good nor bad, and 4% failed to voice an opinion. By comparison, the level of favourable responses to this question is highest in Luxembourg (70% as opposed to 12%; a 58 percentage-point gap), lowest in Latvia (26% as opposed to 19%; a 7 percentage-point gap) and in the United Kingdom (29% as opposed to 33%; a negative gap of 4 percentage points).

In autumn 2010, 46% of respondents felt that France has benefited from its membership of the Union, as opposed to 42% who did not (a 4 percentage-point gap) and 12% who failed to voice any opinion at all. The level of favourable responses to this question is now highest in Poland (78% as opposed to 14%; a gap of 64 percentage points) and by far the lowest in the United Kingdom (27% as opposed to 60%; a negative gap of 33 percentage points).

In the pro-European hierarchy, France falls into the bottom quarter or bottom third of the group of 27 Member States: for the membership indicator it is in eighteenth place (if we use the score of favourable responses as our yardstick), or in twenty-second place (if we take as our yardstick the gap

between favourable and unfavourable responses); where the benefits indicator is concerned, it is in twenty-first place (both in terms of favourable responses and of the gap between favourable and unfavourable responses). Quantitative indicators such as these obviously fail to depict the full reality of people's deeply-held convictions regarding the European Union; but their deterioration, and indeed the magnitude of that deterioration, are both undeniable.

II. How do the European Union's citizens feel about the crisis?

On the basis of these observations, the experience of experts in qualitative surveys may help to evaluate the factors lying beneath recent developments and to appreciate the degree of responsibility attaching to the European Union in the eyes of its citizens. Three major aspects are highlighted.

2.1. Growing bitterness and resentment in the Euro zone countries currently worst hit by the crisis

Greece

As of summer 2011, the Greeks do not appear to blame the origin of their crisis on the European Union. Despite the marked drop in the two indicators analysed above, they still hope to see the Union as a shield that can help to save them. They do not even lay most of the blame at its door for the massive austerity cure forced on them – unlike the International

Monetary Fund (IMF) which they consider to be the real instigator behind the increasingly tough economic measures hitting them. Yet in this connection, the Union does appear to be faulted for trotting along behind rather than actively seeking solutions capable of averting the country's "suffocation". Of the other Member States, Germany is the object of particular resentment on account of the reluctance that its government has shown in authorising aid measures, on account of the harsh tone adopted in commentaries on Greece in the German media, and also on account of a form of hypocrisy attributed to it (consisting in deploring instances of corruption while failing to point the finger of accusation at the German businesses behind that corruption; granting loans and demanding that savings be made, while continuing to actively pursue the sale of military materiel...)

Ireland

Nor does the European Union come under greater fire in Ireland for being responsible for the crisis; that label is pinned on banks and on real estate companies, as well as on the government (which took a spectacular thrashing in an election in early 2011). The citizens do not even let their own selves off lightly for having fallen for the excesses of the "Celtic Tiger's miracle", which turned into a mirage. At the same time, they are aware of the reality of the Union's and the IMF's joint bailout plan. But being traditionally very sensitive to an independence that they won at a high price, they are pained by what they consider to be a move by those institutions to take control of their national economy. The pressure to up tax rates on company profits (pressure being brought to bear above all by France and by Germany) is seen as additional evidence of this. The quantitative indicators have always shown Ireland to be one of the most pro-European countries, but that feeling is clearly starting to erode.

Portugal

Bitterness towards the European Union appears to be particularly marked in Portugal, where the Union is openly blamed for failing to show solidarity,

while tending at the same time to defend the financial institutions responsible for the crisis rather than the people who are that crisis' victims. This resentment is directed in particular against the German and French leaders, who are readily suspected of not really wanting to help at all, in fact even of seeking to benefit from the situation.

Spain

The bitterness is just as strong in Spain. While the crisis is blamed first and foremost on the manner in which the banks and the financial markets have been acting, the finger of accusation is also being pointed at political institutions and leaders. The Spanish people appear to consider the European Union as being the main player responsible for pressing for the spending cuts that are leading to the drastic reductions being enforced on the citizens and to the strangling of the welfare state – as shown by the protest rallies at the Puerta del Sol and the mobilisation against the “Euro Pact”. There is a widely held belief that each European country is falling back on attempts to safeguard only its own national interests, and that Europe is moving away from the notion of a common interest.

2.2. Prejudice against the southern countries is resurfacing in some of the western European Member States, while passive or detached attitudes prevail in others

In countries belonging to the former “Deutsche Mark area” it is possible to descry a revival of prejudice against the southern countries.

Germany

This is the case first and foremost in Germany, where the crisis triggered major concern – and a major drop in the opinion indicators – in 2008 and 2009. That concern has probably abated since then in view of the country's improved economic health, but it is common knowledge that the “Greek

crisis” is sparking a lively debate among the German people because they are averse to paying for the mistakes and for the manipulation that have brought Greece to its present pass. Moreover, the fact that they are being branded “bad Europeans” is causing frustration to spread. These events are rekindling erstwhile both fears over the Euro – whose demise many books and articles are now predicting – and the mistrust that was voiced with regard to the “Club Med” countries when they were admitted to qualify for the single currency.

Austria

The Austrians appear to hold an even more exacerbated opinion regarding aid for Greece and, on a more general level, for all of the southern Member States. The European Union is the target of lively criticism, or that criticism is directed at the aid principle itself, or else it targets the confusion, the lack of vision and of leadership that the Union is displaying in the face of the crisis. And all of this takes place on a terrain fraught, in this country, with residual frustration and resentment towards the Union or towards other, more powerful Member States.

The Netherlands

While some of these criticisms of the Union are probably less extreme in The Netherlands, they are being voiced there all the same; they owe their existence to the crisis situation and they are being broadly exploited by the populist party which currently has the wind in its sails: reluctance to “pay for Greece”, concern over the solidity of Dutch pension funds as they reel the impact of European “solidarity” with countries that are in difficulty and that are not exempt from faults with which the Calvinist mentality has no patience (laxity, corruption...) – and this, in a context in which other fears relating to immigration and to insecurity, which tends to be seen as a consequence of that immigration, are also growing...

Finland

The same issues can be found also in the platform of the “True Finns” party which, following its showing in the election in 2011, has become Finland’s second largest political group.

In these four countries, fear and uncertainty associated with the economic crisis and with the Euro zone’s problems mingle with concerns of a different and often older kind, with both types tending to strengthen and to bolster each other.

The other older Member States in the Euro zone

In the other older Member States belonging to the Euro zone, these attitudes – fear of the crisis having an economic and social impact, of course; the impact that the Euro is considered to have had on the price of products; the Union’s enlargement that is felt to have taken place too rapidly and too widely, and is often seen as a factor for uncontrolled immigration (a sensitive issue particularly in Italy); and difficulty in grasping the direction of European policy, its effectiveness or its relevance... – are indeed not altogether absent, but they appear to be much less vigorous. The aid that needs to be provided for Member States in difficulty is less of a controversial issue, and citizens’ concerns tend to focus on their own country’s domestic situation.

The older Member States outside the Euro zone

Finally, in the older Member States outside the Euro zone, there is a somewhat detached response to the problems caused by the crisis. Given that these countries are not a part of it, they probably feel less concerned by the difficulties being experienced by the countries that are in it, or by the solution that may be found for those difficulties. It may also be true that, while the crisis is having a negative impact on growth here just as it is everywhere else (especially in 2009), there is a fairly strongly held belief in those countries – at least in Denmark and in Sweden – regarding

the solidity of the country's economic and social model. We noticed earlier that the two Scandinavian Member States were among the countries in which the quantitative opinion indicators had dropped the least since the start of the crisis. The same conviction clearly does not hold sway in the United Kingdom, traditionally the most Eurosceptical country, where every negative event affecting the Union tends to boost people's mistrust of it.

2.3. In the new Member States, resistance to “inverse solidarity” has been revealed; in others, we see frustrated expectations

Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia and the Czech Republic

In four of the new Member States, whether members of the Euro zone – Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia – or not – the Czech Republic –, one can begin to make out, in a sizeable swathe of the Eurosceptic citizenry, a tendency to oppose aid for countries (with Greece heading the list) that have fallen into serious difficulty in the wake of the crisis. This opposition is caused by the belief that it is not up to them to rush to the aid of older Member States with a higher development level and standard of living than they have themselves; especially since they are being badly or very badly hit (Slovenia, and Estonia even more badly) by the recession themselves. It is also likely – or at least this is what emerges from commentaries in Estonia, a very recent member of the Euro zone – that the efforts demanded to meet the convergence criteria are weighed up against the budgetary laxity in the countries in question. Furthermore, the image of the Euro as a factor for rising prices enjoyed widespread dissemination in Slovenia (after its introduction) and in Estonia (before its introduction), although Slovakia appears to have been spared that particular problem.

Malta and Cyprus

The same phenomenon was not detected in the other two countries belonging to the Euro zone, namely Malta and Cyprus, which were also affected by the crisis, albeit probably less acutely, and which are less inclined to blame the Euro for rising prices. This is especially true of Cyprus, which is culturally and sentimentally close to Greece and which also has economic interests in that country that tend to make it see measures taken to help it in a favourable light. The substantial drop in positive opinion indicators towards the Union in these two countries seems to be due above all to the result of a general decline in the people's morale under the effects of the crisis, with its resulting impact on the image of all institutions.

Poland

Nor can the phenomenon be detected in Poland, which is the only Member State whose GDP has not dropped since the start of the crisis; it is also a country which is increasingly aware of the contribution that European structural funds are making to its development and which is feeling more and more positive towards a Union that it initially eyed very warily indeed. The drop in the opinion indicators in 2008 and early 2009 reflects a moment of fear regarding the consequences of the crisis; these indicators have now started climbing back up again. Reservations are still strong, however, towards the introduction of the euro.

Lithuania

Unlike its neighbour, Lithuania has been very badly hit by the recession, with the image of all the national and international institutions suffering the effects of plummeting morale. The exposure of embezzlement in the management of Community funds probably also contributed to the drop in positive opinions of the European Union until spring 2010. The slight rise in the quantitative benefits indicator in autumn could be due in part to the looming prospect of the German and Austrian labor markets opening up to the Lithuanians.

Latvia

The Latvians, who were at least as hard hit by the economic crisis and who already harboured strong reservations regarding their membership of the Union (but in all likelihood as much out of the fear of not being able to “rise to the occasion” and because they misunderstood certain Community measures seen as unfair, as out of deep-seated anti-European sentiment) voiced their growing frustration as early as 2007 in their responses to the questions asked of them in the Standard Eurobarometer surveys. National political leaders, but also the Union itself, were faulted for allowing European banks (and Swedish banks in particular) to develop the real estate credit bubble that then burst. On the other hand, the European Union’s and IMF’s decision to make available a 7.5 billion Euro loan which allowed the state to meet its commitments, helped to push the indicators back up, as we saw in 2010. There has been no criticism of aid to Member States in difficulty (either here or in Lithuania).

Hungary

Among the new Member States that joined the Union in 2004, Hungary is a case apart. As in Austria, so here too there is plenty of frustration towards the European Union; and this, moreover, in very agitated domestic political waters. There is a widespread feeling that the country’s voice carries no weight and that the European Union enforces its decisions to the country’s detriment; there is deep-seated bitterness at seeing neighbouring Slovakia, which is generally looked down on, having been permitted to join the Euro zone; there is the suspicion that the larger European countries are “manipulating” the crisis and thus also the value of the forint against the Euro; both the Union and the national authorities are faulted for leaving the (numerous) Hungarians who have contracted loans in Euro in difficulty; and the Union is seen as an ally of the multinational corporations and the financial powers... All of this explains the low overall level and the sharp drop in the two quantitative opinion indicators until 2008. The improvement seen in the indicators since then may be due, in part, to the

higher profile acquired by projects financed with Community funding; but they may also be due to the “tough” approach adopted by the right-wing government that won the last election by saying that it was determined to strengthen Hungary’s position within the Union, thus responding to one of the electorate’s expectations. The prospect of the Hungarian presidency may also have further fuelled the idea that the country’s voice can carry weight. The temptation to turn the Union into a scapegoat for all of the country’s problems is nevertheless firmly rooted.

Bulgaria and Romania

The sharp drop in the number of opinions in favour of the European Union in the quantitative indicators in Bulgaria and in Romania does not appear to have any direct link with the Union’s action in the crisis. What does appear to have an impact is the fact that the people’s expectations of the Union are taking so long to meet, first and foremost in connection with the economic development stimulated by Community funds. And while those expectations were strong in Bulgaria, they were the object of out-and-out idealisation in Romania. If the benefits indicator showed a slight rise in Bulgaria in late 2010, it may be because those funds’ impact has acquired a slightly higher profile, with prudent hope being placed in the new government. While in both these countries there is a tendency to contest the national authorities far more than the Union (over their inability, particularly in Romania, to take full advantage of the structural funds at their disposal), these frustrated expectations reflect on people’s general view of the Union. Even if certain demands formulated by the Union have been badly received in the past, people still hope to see it “vigorously incite” national political leaders to act the right way and to set their affairs in order, whether it be in the economy or in other spheres. Naturally, just like elsewhere, so here too the crisis is not fostering any improvement in the citizens’ morale and the institutions’ image is suffering because of it, but the Union is not being held responsible for the crisis.

On a broader level, in connection with the issue of blame for the crisis, it is obvious that in most of the new Member States (with the exceptions represented by Latvia and Hungary) that blame is not being laid at the door of the European Union but at that of the banks, of the financial system (or of the United States, if a single country is named at all) and of the national governments. At worst, the Union is considered to be too sluggish or too slow to act in countering the effects of the crisis (this is the case in Cyprus, in addition to the Latvian and Hungarian criticisms); or else the blame is laid at the door of the individual European countries which have allowed themselves to get into deep water, rather than at that of the Union *per se*. In fact, the Union is seen more often than not as the player most likely to come up with a solution. This is clearly the case in Malta, in Poland, in Estonia, in Latvia, in Bulgaria and in Romania, while the citizens of countries critical of aid to Greece or to other Member States in difficulty show greater reservations.

Conclusion: Three considerations

When all is said and done, the citizens seem, in the light of these analyses, to be rather indulgent towards the European Union. All in all, the drop in quantitative opinion indicators concerning it has been relatively moderate since the crisis began. It has occurred, but it has not been stronger (in some cases it has even been weaker) than at other times in the Union's history over the past 25 years. It certainly comes as no surprise that the Union is not being blamed for the origin of the crisis either in the majority of older Member States or in the newer ones. What is surprising, on the other hand, is that the respondents are not pointing the finger of accusation at it more over its sluggishness, its dithering and its lack of cohesion in addressing the crisis.

People still harbour great expectations of the Union; it is still seen by many as the only place out of which any remedies to the crisis are likely to emerge. Things will probably be very different, on the other hand, if it

becomes clear that no lasting solution addressing the underlying issues has yet been thrashed out.

In addition to the issue of the technical and political handling of the crisis, the above considerations suggest that dangerously deep cracks are starting to appear in the attitude of the citizens of Europe's countries regarding the principle of solidarity – which is the European Union's fabric and a factor without which it would lose the very fundament of its *raison d'être* and of its identity. Even if the attempts to put its economies back on track are successful, it may be feared that lasting traces of this will remain.

Related Policy Papers

[Listening to Europe's citizens. An assessment of the first experiments in participation organised at EU level](#) – Laurie Boussaguet (March 2011).

[Post-national democracy and the Reform of the European Parliament](#) – Andrew Duff (October 2010).

[European political Parties: the missing link](#) – Julian Priestley (October 2010).

[Revising European Treaties: An Argument in Favour of Abolishing the Veto](#) – Hervé Bribosia (December 2009).

[The revision of the European treaties: the Convention moment. Six arguments for its continuation, six proposals for its reform](#) – Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul (January 2008).

[The Opportunities and Risks of an Institutional Relaunch of the EU](#) – Jean-Louis Quermonne (May 2007).

[Social Movements and the European Union: Eurosceptics or Critical Europeanists?](#) – Donatella Della Porta (July 2006).

[Politics: The Right or the Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU?](#) – Two papers by Simon Hix and Stefano Bartolini (March 2006).

[Democratising European Democracy: Options for a Quality Inclusive and Transnational Deliberation](#) – Stephen Boucher (November 2005).

[Interparliamentary Co-operation in the European Union: Time for a New Start?](#) – Morgan Larhant (August 2005).

[The First Dutch Referendum: a Pre-ballot Assessment](#) – Arjen Nijeboer (May 2005).

[Securing a “Yes”: From Nice I to Nice II](#) – Brigid Laffan and Adrian Langan (May 2005).

All our publications are available for free on our Website:

www.notre-europe.eu

Legal Mentions

*With the support of the European Commission:
support to active entities at European level in the field of active European citizenship.*



Europe for Citizens
Programme

Neither the European Commission nor Notre Europe are to be held responsible for the manner in which the information in this text may be used. This may be reproduced if the source is cited.

*Notre Europe also receives the financial support of the French Government,
the Compagnia di San Paolo, the Macif and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.*

Dépôt legal

© Notre Europe, November 2011

Daniel DEBOMY

Daniel Debomy is the founder and managing director of the opinion research institute *Optem*.

European Democracy in Action

The Citizens of Europe and the European Union in the Current Crisis

This policy paper first examines European public opinion as measured through selected quantitative indicators in Standard Eurobarometer surveys. It describes fluctuations observed during four successive periods since 1985, and puts in perspective the drop in support to the European Union that has taken place since the beginning of the financial and economic crisis. Inputs from qualitative research help interpret those data and provide more in-depth understanding of current attitudes towards the EU among the citizens of the 27 Member States.

Whereas the Europeans have appeared on the whole rather indulgent until recently, that is likely to change if the EU does not demonstrate its ability to come up with lasting solutions to the crisis and to address the roots of the problems. Furthermore, dangerously deep cracks are starting to appear, both in old and new Member States, in the citizens' understanding and acceptance of the principle of solidarity, without which the Union would lose its *raison d'être* and the core of its identity.

This policy paper was drafted in the wake of a debate organised in Paris at the *Fondation Jean Jaurès* on 27 June 2011 with the directors of opinion research institutes from 17 European countries.

www.notre-europe.eu
e-mail: info@notre-europe.eu

