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EUROPEANS VOTE. An existential moment for EU integration?

The European Parliament elections in May 2019 is being portrayed by many as an existential moment for Europe and European integration. While believing that the fears of a Eurosceptic upheaval are overblown, we do think that this is a key historical moment, which warrants a search of heart among those who wish to preserve and strengthen European integration for the long-term. Underpinning this conviction stands a puzzling fact: while more and more Europeans seem to be aware of the benefit of membership, Eurosceptics and nationalists are expected to win an unprecedented number of seats in the upcoming European elections. What explains this apparent contradiction, and what should be done about it?

The State of Affairs

As of November 2018, 68% of all Europeans surveyed in the European Parliament’s Parlemeter¹ declared themselves convinced that their country had benefitted from EU membership. Conversely, when asked whether they thought that their country would do better outside the EU, only 30% of Europeans surveyed by the European Commission were in agreement². While this share is possibly higher than many would deem desirable, it has remained stable over time – including during the Eurozone crisis.

As of March 2018, 51% of all Eurobarometer respondents stated that they trusted the Union. While still far from the pre-crisis high of 66% in 2007³, trust in the EU has been on a rising trajectory since 2014, and in most countries it was significantly higher than trust in national governments. The rebound has been especially strong in those Eurozone countries that have undergone EU/IMF macroeconomic adjustment programmes. These used to display very high levels of trust in the EU (above 60%) be-

¹ See the EP survey at this link: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2018/parlemeter-2018/results-annex/en-parlemeter-2018-results-annex.pdf>

² See the latest Commission’s Eurobarometer 90 (November 2018)

³ For the empirical analysis, see the accompanying background paper. Percentages are computed out of only those respondents who do either agree or disagree (those who state they do not know or do not have an opinion are not counted).

fore 2009; trust fell below 30% during the crisis, but it came back strongly with the return of growth in 2014.

Against this positive background, however, the 2019 EP elections are expected to deliver an unprecedented success of Eurosceptic parties, especially on the far-right hand of the political spectrum. We have had a foretaste of these shifting political dynamics with the Brexit referendum in 2016, followed by the good performance of Front National in 1st round of the 2017 French presidential election and the increased strength of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in the latest German elections. Further validating the trend, the 2018 Italian elections delivered a government coalition of two populist and Eurosceptic parties. How can we reconcile the success of Euroscepticism, and of the far-right in particular, in light of people's strong support of the EU and awareness of the benefits of membership?

Lack of Voice

One theme that is common across Eurosceptic parties is the call to 'bring back' national control into matters over which – it is argued – EU decision-making lacks legitimacy or is not warranted. The idea of the EU undemocratically imposing unwanted policies also features prominently in the nationalist and far-right narrative. The discourse on migration and the unfolding of the blame-game during the refugee crisis provide a clear exemplification of that.

Two facts however stand in contradiction with this rhetoric. First, satisfaction with the functioning of EU democracy remains fairly high among Europeans – around 59% in March 2018⁴ overall – and generally stable over time, with the exception of the Eurozone programme countries where the perceived quality of the EU democratic process plunged during the crisis but has rebounded strongly since then. Second, Europeans do not seem to believe that the EU has been over-reaching into national sovereignty. An overwhelming majority of Europeans favour *more* (rather than less) EU-level decision-making on important matters such as protecting the environment (79%), stimulating jobs and investment (65%), dealing with migration from outside the EU (72%), fighting terrorism (81%), promoting gender equality (70%) or democracy and peace (77%), and even in dealing with health and social security issues (60%). 65% are in favour of a

⁴ For the empirical analysis, see the accompanying background paper. Percentages are computed out of only those respondents who do either agree or disagree (those who state they do not know or do not have an opinion are not counted).

common foreign policy, 69% support a common EU policy on migration, 74% support a common energy policy. Even in the field of defence and security, traditionally an area where Member States have had cold feet, a common EU policy would be supported by as much as 76% of Europeans – and more so among citizens of Eastern Europeans and Baltic states.

Against the sense of hopelessness that seem to prevail in many European capitals, including Brussels, Europeans do not seem to have put to bed the idea of an ever closer union. What they seem to be lacking – however – is the feeling that their voice counts. Less than 50% of all Europeans surveyed in the Fall 2018 Eurobarometer think that their ‘voice counts in the EU’. Denmark, Sweden, and the so-called Eurozone ‘Core’ are exceptions, with high levels of perceived input legitimacy. But the gap between them and the rest of the EU members is wide. In Greece – where unsurprisingly the EU enjoys the worst perceived input legitimacy – only 19% think their voice counts in the EU.

So, while not perceiving the EU as undemocratic, a majority of European clearly feels cut off. This perception also varies across socio-demographic groups. In the East, Baltics, UK and Italy, an age breakdown suggests that the feeling of lacking a voice increases with age – with younger respondents being consistently more positive in their assessment than older cohorts⁵. In the Eurozone this sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement is stronger among the ‘outsiders’ of the labour market and those at the bottom of the skills distribution, who have felt (and have largely been) ‘left behind’ in countries that have either suffered through a painful macroeconomic adjustment (Programme countries) or experienced prolonged stagnation in their standards of living (Italy).

Lack of Meaning

The existence of such deep cleavages within society points to importance of the ability of the EU to deliver positive ‘output’ – in terms of its response to people’s concerns. These concerns have been shifting over time, but two aspects – a sense of economic anxiety and a preoccupation with security – intertwine in Europeans’ perception of what the most important issues facing their countries are.

Economic anxiety clearly dominated during the crisis, whereas security is more present on people’s mind today, although the share of Europeans

⁵ For the empirical analysis, see the accompanying background paper

who identify ‘unemployment’ as one of the most important issues facing their country is still higher than the share of those who point to ‘immigration’. Denmark, Sweden, most countries in the Eurozone ‘Core’ and the UK are unsurprisingly much more concerned with immigration than unemployment. The opposite is true for the former Programme countries, but also for Italy – where right-wing Lega has been winning votes on an anti-immigration policy⁶.

This dichotomy is reflected in the dual character of left and right-wing Euroscepticism – both present in the EU. In those countries that have undergone the painful social consequences of economic adjustment, left-wing populism and Euroscepticism have found a fertile ground. In those countries whose economic models have instead been validated by the crisis, where societal well-being is closely connected to the integration into global value chains, export-orientations and high productivity, and where citizens enjoy high wages and relatively stable social security systems, migration and security have become a dominant issue. There, the fear that poverty driven migration may lead to increased competition for social welfare offerings provide right wing Eurosceptic movements with fertile grounds.

Assessed against the two dimension of economic anxiety and security concerns, the meaning of the EU has changed, in the eyes of people. During the Eurozone crisis, the EU has gone from being seen clearly as an *opportunity* (for peace, economic prosperity, democracy...) to being seen as a *threat* (of unemployment, more crime, loss of frontier control...). Today, most countries have a less negative assessment. But if the worst effects of the crisis seem to have been somewhat reverted, the EU is still far from being seen unequivocally as an opportunity. Many Europeans today seem unconvinced the EU will be able to deliver on its promise of economic prosperity, or to provide enough security. When looking more in detail at how the meaning of the EU changes across age profiles, again younger Europeans come out as more positive – and they still see the EU predominantly as an opportunity - whereas the oldest cohorts are significantly more sceptic.

⁶ Based on the EC Eurobarometer 90, November 2018

Implications and Suggestions

Left unaddressed, lack of voice and lack of a positive meaning will easily and quickly undermine the fundamental basis on which European integration rests, in a very near future. Rebuilding a positive meaning for the EU in the eyes of its citizens will entail delivering on the EU's promise of economic prosperity on one hand, while ensuring that the EU is also seen as an opportunity to address security concerns. This will necessarily command an open and honest discussion about the meaning of EU *solidarity* – both in economic and in social terms.

On the economic side, the question of economic solidarity is most prominent in the context of the discussion on Eurozone governance reform, which is currently failing to square the circle between risk-sharing and risk-reduction and that seems to have fallen to the lowest place in EU leaders' order of priorities. But the EU also needs a growth strategy that can ensure shared prosperity also for the many who have been left behind by the shocks of globalisation, the Global Financial Crisis, the Eurozone crisis, as well as automation and the changing nature of work. It is hard to see how these challenges can be credibly and convincingly dealt with at national level: their scale and complexity makes them natural challenges for EU action and decision-making.

On the social side, the question of how to deal with extra-EU immigration is prominent. When asked what the most important issue facing the EU is, 40% of Europeans mention immigration and 50% say they would like to see the topic discussed as a matter of priority in the EP electoral campaign. However, when asked what the most important issues facing their country or them specifically are, those mentioning immigration are significantly less. The fact that way more people want to see an EU-level discussion on migration than the people who see it as a direct concern for them or their country suggests that from a bottom up perspective it is clear that this is an EU-level problem.

Both these discussions will inevitably raise questions of redistribution – be it in monetary terms, or in terms of a fairer allocation of extra-EU refugee / migrants. EU leaders have been shying away from this idea, fearing it would upset voters and emboldens the Eurosceptic call for 'bringing back control'. But they may actually be underestimating Europeans. The data in fact suggest that an overwhelming majority of Europeans generally favours *more* (rather than less) EU-level decision-making on a large number of matters – including very sensitive ones such as defence, tradi-

tionally a stronghold of national sovereignty. Although hard, the question of redistribution needs to be asked, if EU integration is to be preserved on sustainable bases in the long-term. Europeans are owed a chance to have an honest discussion about it.

Which leads us to the last, but by no means least, aspect. The fact that so many feel they lack 'a voice' vis-à-vis the EU suggests that it will be difficult to restore a view of the EU as an opportunity, absent a change that put citizens at the very centre of the EU democratic process and engages them more through bottom-up approaches. An EU-wide initiative in the spirit of the Grand Débat National inaugurated in France by President Macron could be a good way to make sure the EU becomes more visible in Europeans lives, and citizens have the chance to actively shape and own the process of EU reform that we think is needed.

This is especially key when it comes to young people. We should not assume that the current trend towards youthful enthusiasm for the EU will last forever. It could, in fact, sour quite quickly. Previous generations felt the case for European integration was obvious. The European project as we know it today fundamentally rests on three visions of Europe: the post-war Europe of 1945 of peace; the post-1968 Europe of human rights and inclusion; and the post-1989 Europe of democracy in a unified east and west. As highlighted among others by Ivan Krastev, these familiar bases for European integration are all cast into doubt now – but roots and manifestations of discontent differ significantly in Western and Eastern Europe.

More research should also be devolved to understanding the shifting dynamics of support for European integration in the West as opposed to the East. This will entail investigating the roots of the democratic backsliding and challenge to the fundamental values of the EU that we observe in some of the New Member States. Understanding whether and how these developments are related to the way the process of economic and political integration with the West was engineered will be key for the sustainability of east-west EU integration.

At the same time, those willing to truly engage in a re-building of a strong basis for EU integration will need to confront with honesty two elements of idiosyncrasy, within the EU. These are Germany on one hand, and Italy on the other. Although in very different ways, both countries are today regarded as "European problems". The especially powerful economic and political role of Germany in the EU will necessitate further analysis – especially in light of Brexit. On one hand, it has made it a target of the Eurosceptics all across Europe. On the other, it puts Germany at the very centre of a process of EU reform with which the German leadership seems less and less willing to engage. Italy, on the other, deserves special

attention and research because of the exceptionally strong dynamics of Euroscepticism it displays – which set it apart from its Eurozone partners and most of its EU peers, and in many respects makes it more similar to the UK basket case.

What is certain, is that all across Europe we need to remake and entrench support for the EU on a durable basis with reference to a wholly different set of historical circumstances, on the back of the Eurozone and migration crises, and Brexit. Actively empowering young people within the EU democratic process, making sure they feel they have a voice in the EU, will be key to preserving and strengthening integration for the future. At the same time, the EU needs to be able to deliver better economic outcomes for the young – not only those who, in the West and more so in the East, have left their countries in search of opportunities elsewhere, but perhaps more importantly for those who cannot afford to leave and remain stuck in environments impoverished from an economic and social perspective.

EU leaders and policymakers answer to rising Euroscepticism has increasingly been one of dis-engagement. Some have been flirting with the idea of a Europe of strong and sovereign nation states. Others have been eyeing a Europe of differentiated integration, where differences are surrendered to – rather than reconciled. Contrary to what the Eurosceptic narrative suggests, however, Europeans have not fallen out of love with the EU. But that may happen soon enough, absent a recognition that many of today's economic and social challenges are dealt with better together, and that there can still be strong unity in diversity.

Shying away from a more visible EU will certainly not halt the current perception. We rather think that the EU needs to become much more visible in her citizens' life – including on topics that are highly sensitive. Former Commission President Jacques Delors once said that “nobody falls in love with an internal market”. But with fairness, justice, and equal opportunities for all, people have always fallen in love. Too many perceive the EU as ‘unfair’, and feel that these topics are not given enough attention at the EU level. That should change, and the change will need to be accompanied by measures that put citizens at the very centre of the EU democratic process, thus making it more shared, owned, and legitimate.

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