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Public support for European: Not an EU problem

1 Introduction: Trust in the EU and the question of the member states

Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker emphasized in his state of the union¹ that people have to regain trust in the EU and underlined the need for the EU to 'deliver'. Similarly, ECB president Mario Draghi called for an EU institution-based approach to get the European economy back on track.² In the same speech, Draghi explained that it was thanks to the EU institutions that the economic crisis was being solved. As argued in this policy note, the EU-centered perspective on the EU's trust crisis needs serious qualification. If the EU-level is not the cause of the EU-trust crisis, then EU leaders should be careful not to create the expectation that they are the prime solvers of the EU's trust crisis. Hence, first a diagnosis is needed of the EU's trust crisis: at what level of government is the EU's trust crisis created? The focus on 'people losing trust in the EU' and 'the EU needs to deliver' risks a strong bias in the search for causes and solutions. Understandably, a lot of attention goes for example to the high unemployment levels in the EU and to what the EU can do to create growth and jobs, but we need to unpack causes for the EU's trust crisis.

As argued below, this immediately raises the question whether the Eurobarometer is independent enough to provide the required EU-wide information.

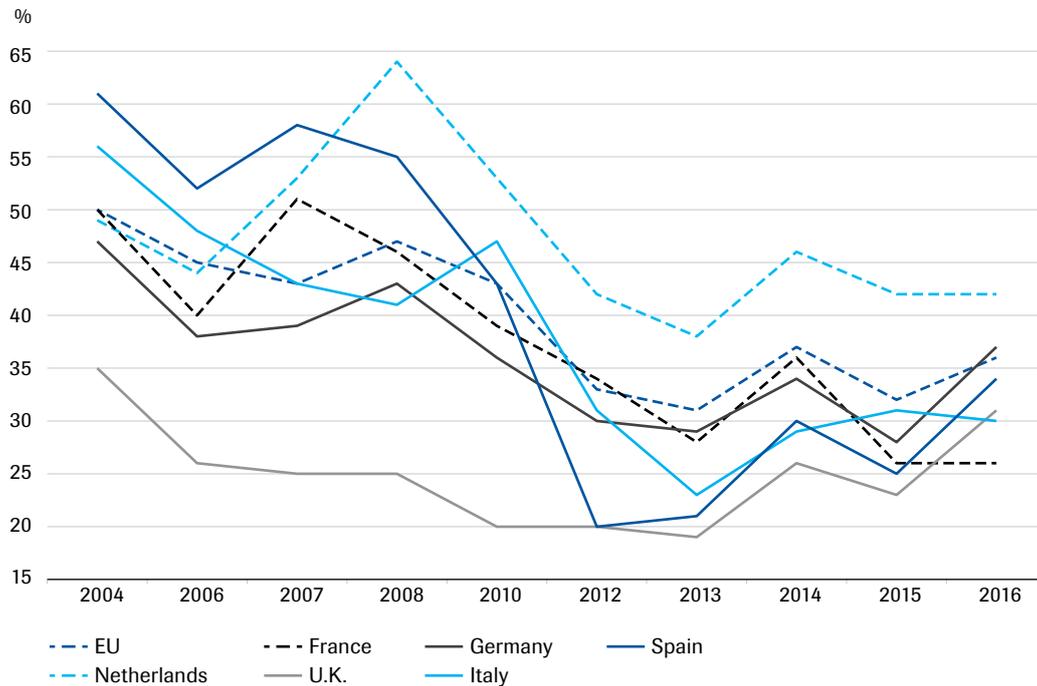
Trust in, and support for, the European project, have become major political challenges and demand policy responses. Integration has moved far beyond technical market regulation. The fall out of the eurocrisis, the Schengen-crisis and the social crises has underlined that public support is a serious challenge. Despite recent upswings in EU support³, the Brexit and other referenda have revealed the extent to which dissatisfaction can affect integration. While integration is widely accepted and even further integration seems to be widely supported, more and more people distrust the European Union and its institutions.

The discussion on public support has become repetitive and border on superficiality. Deepening the debate is possible by distinguishing causes of dissatisfaction at different layers of government. This paper argues, firstly, that trust is much more a problem at the national level than currently acknowledged. Secondly, trust-issues differ per member states and therefore, there is no silver bullet to create trust in, and support for, the EU. Each layer has its own problems to fix. As a corollary, EU leaders should be

1 J.-C. Juncker, "State of the Union Address 2016: Towards a better Europe – a Europe that protects, empowers and defends", 14.9.2016.
2 M. Draghi, "Speech by the President at Süddeutsche Zeitung Finance Day 2015", 16.3.2015.

3 Post-Brexit, Europeans More Favorable Toward EU. Pew Research Centre, June 2017. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/15/post-brexit-europeans-more-favorable-toward-eu/>.

Figure 1 Trust in the European Union



more modest in their ambitions to create trust at EU level. European trust relates to our trust in our own countries and in other member states.

2 Trust and support: Long-term trends

The trust people have in the EU has gone down considerably. In 2016, 35 per cent of the Europeans tended to trust the European Union, compared to 50 per cent in 2004. This can be regarded, to some extent, as a normalization⁴ following earlier EU-euphoria created by successes in the internal market and Eastern enlargement. Yet, the figures underline a trend that is decidedly worrying also because emotional attachments to the EU have failed to develop⁵ and people do not distinguish between the EU and other

international bodies.⁶ Moreover, although trust in the EU is recovering under the influence of an economic upswing, trust in the EP, Commission and the ECB is low (figure 2).

Worrying are the figures regarding the development of trust in the EU in specific member states (see Figure 3). Yet even more worrying is the extent in which citizens trust their own governments. The 2004-2016 comparison reveals, firstly that few countries trust their own governments. Trust in the EU is generally (much higher) than trust in the own governments. Secondly, in France, Italy, Greece and Spain trust, both in the national government and in the EU imploded. Thirdly, the difference between low- and high-trust countries increased. In economic strong countries (Germany and the Netherlands), trust in the national governments increased, whereas trust in the EU fell. Hence, countries that are weak in terms of trust (and in terms of economic performance) tend to have their

4 Schout, A.; J. Rood (eds), "The Netherlands as an EU member state: a normal partner at last?" Portland: Eleven International Publishing, 2013.

5 Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, COB, *Burgersperspectieven*, 2011/4, Den Haag, 2011.

6 Loon, Y. van; M. Luining; A. Schout, "De valkuilen voor een social Europa zijn groot", Clingendael, 2017.

trust. Moreover, EU activism may drive strong countries out even more.

Unfortunately, the Eurobarometer does not ask questions regarding trust Europeans have in each other. Hence, the EU focus of the Eurobarometer hinders understanding of national developments regarding trust. Even if it is a taboo but the Eurobarometer has to include questions on mutual trust.

3 The misleading support for EU policies

In view of this drop in trust in the European Union, the continuous support for membership is a paradox. Supported for membership has remained fairly consistent over the last 27 years – with a dip around the financial and economic crisis. With 57 percent of the European population supporting membership, we see a recent upward trend (See Figure 4.)

Regarding specific policies, we see that support for the Monetary Union is on the mend⁷ and close to 60% on average. One of the core but contested pillars of the European Union, free movement of people, is supported by almost 80% of European citizens. Moreover, aided by the way in which the migration crisis was handled, 7 out of 10 Europeans back a common migration policy. There is also a strong support for a common foreign, defense and security policy. An explanation for the broad support for (more) European policies can most likely be found in the combined effect of the election of Trump and his ‘America first’ focus, the turmoil around Brexit, new threats from Putin, Draghi’s quantitative easing and the way in which the refugee crisis has been handled. The EU can credibly deliver the message of offering security and stability.

However, the figures for support for deeper integration must be qualified. Questions for policy support in the Eurobarometer are

asked without questions whether people are willing to pay for further integration, and whether they are willing to transfer additional competences to Brussels. Support for social policy dropped considerably in our own questionnaire when asked whether people would be willing to pay a solidarity fee and to transfer powers to the Commission.⁸ Similarly, support for other EU policies in the Eurobarometer – e.g. for Common European defense – could also drop if questions would be included about costs involved in transfers of competences, EU taxes, Eurobonds, a higher EU budget, and transferring substantially more powers to the European Parliament. The relevance of the Eurobarometer is seriously compromised because institutional and economic costs are ignored in the questionnaires.⁹ There is support for European integration but figures about support should be carefully related to costs and consequences of EU policies.

4 EU trust and trust in member states

‘Trust’ in the EU is too often used as a generic term without distinguishing explicitly that member states have different expectations. A clear difference as regards trust in European integration can be seen when comparing statements from Southern and Northern EU countries. Prime minister Matteo Renzi underlined that “this Europe” has to change and that the recent economic crisis was not one of individual member states but a European crisis.¹⁰

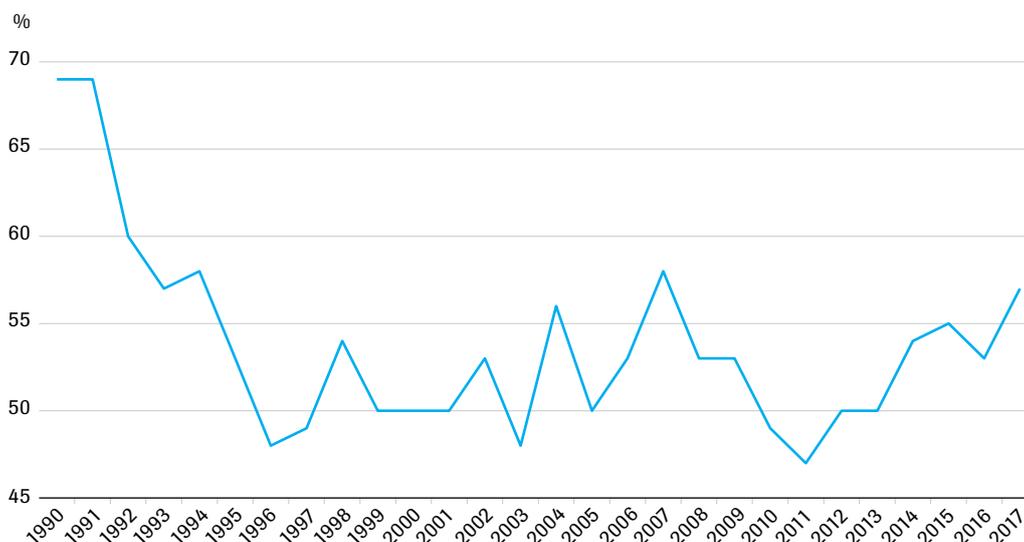
7 U. Batsaikhan; Z. Darvas, “European Spring – Trust in the EU and democracy is recovering”, Bruegel, 24.3.2017.

8 Y. van Loon, A. Luining, A. Schout, (2017) De valkuilen voor een sociaal Europa zijn groot – Burger ziet EU als sociale bedreiging; niet als oplossing, Clingendael: Policy Brief, Mei 2017. https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/PB_Valkuilen_voor_sociaal_Europa.pdf.

9 See also M. Höpner; B. Jurczyk, “How the Eurobarometer Blurs the Line between Research and Propaganda”, Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung, Discussion Paper 15/6, Köln, 2015.

10 Program of the Italian Presidency of the European Council, “Europa: un nuovo inizio: Programma della Presidenza Italiana del Consiglio dell’Unione Europea”, 2014, Rome.

Figure 4 Support for EU-membership 1990-2016



Similarly, former prime minister Papandreou from Greece called for changing the EU through the creation of Eurobonds and debt mutualisation. These expectations from Southern EU member states are in stark contrast with the emphasis in The Netherlands and Germany that not the EU, but the member states lagging behind have to change.

Yet, differences in the EU run deeper. Northern member states such as Germany and the Netherlands have a rule-based political culture and expect that the EU Commission operates as a neutral supervisor of agreements. The Italian government however funded a project in the context of ‘EU@60’ to market the idea of more flexibility.¹¹ This points to fundamental differences between member states over the meaning of rule of law as also eloquently summarized by Juncker when he noted that EMU rules cannot be applied to France “because it is France”.¹² What people expect from the EU depends on deeply rooted cultural differences.

Overly ambitious projects such as enlargement and monetary integration have made the widely different expectations and preferences of member states more pronounced so that European compromises can only result in bigger welfare losses for all.¹³ Differences in the extent to which Eurozone countries have reformed have widened the differences between member states even more. Given these differences, any action at EU level to ‘regain trust’ inevitably leads to simultaneous disappointments over the EU doing too little and the EU doing too much. A “European narrative” accepted across the 27 member states is therefore difficult to formulate.

5 Conclusions and policy recommendations

This analysis leads to a number of conclusions regarding trust in and support for the EU. The idea that EU support can be strengthened at EU level disregards the fact that the EU is built around (vastly different) member states. Of course, the EU is important in many ways but hesitations

11 N. Pirozzi ; P. D. Tortola ; L. Vai, “Differentiated Integration: A Way Forward for Europe”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2017.

12 Reuters, “EU gives budget leeway to France ‘because it is France’ – Juncker”, 31.5.2016.

13 G. Majone, “Europe as the Would-be World Power: The EU at Fifty”, Cambridge, 2009.

towards European integration is probably strongly linked to the weakness of a range of member states and to the resulting lack of mutual trust between member states. Juncker's 'EU has to deliver' or 'the EU that protects' are typically EU-centered slogans in terms of the diagnosis of the problems and of solutions proposed. The starting point for regaining trust lies primarily at the level of the member states, not the EU. Moreover, EU activism may be applauded in some countries but disliked in others. With a small group of relatively homogenous member states, it is much easier to design policies that will strengthen lasting support. In an enlarged EU with highly ambitious policy objectives such as monetary integration, lasting support is very difficult to ensure at EU level.¹⁴

Secondly, the Eurobarometer is unsuitable for analyzing the political situations in the EU and in the member states. The standard Eurobarometer should include questions on the willingness of people to pay for possible further integration and on their trust in other member states. The way the Eurobarometer now operates presents the European integration as a free lunch and it avoids questions about mutual trust needed for a proper diagnose of the EU's trust crises. Evidently these questions are politically sensitive; but so is European integration. Trust in the EU requires trust in the Eurobarometer. To this end, a first step to building lasting support for the EU is to make the Eurobarometer independent from the EU Commission to ensure that facts are relevant and reliable.

14 Majone ibid.

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