A crisis of confidence in the European Union?

Thematic study Clingendael Strategic Monitor 2017

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February 2017
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Threat assessment

Introduction

Many people believe that the European Union is in dire straits. Some are even calling it an *existential crisis* that could result in the implosion and disintegration of the Union. For example, Jean-Claude Juncker – President of the European Commission – warned against this type of existential crisis in his ‘State of the Union’ address on 14 September 2016. ‘Our European Union is, at least in part, in an existential crisis,’ he said.¹

The fear for the survival of the EU is of course prompted by the multiple crisis that the EU has been confronted with over the past few years (the financial-economic crisis, the migration crisis, instability around the EU and relations with Russia and Turkey). This multiple crisis has placed a huge strain on the bonds *between* the member states and has shown that unity and solidarity between the EU countries are fragile. In the Union’s new Global Strategy the preservation of its own unity is even seen as a security priority. It reads: ‘Forging unity as Europeans – across institutions, states and peoples – has never been so vital or so urgent’.²

But according to some people, the acuteness and seriousness of this crisis is mainly due to the lack of confidence in the EU *inside* member states, which has become manifested itself the past few years as Euroscepticism and a feeling of unease about the EU in parts of the population. This mistrust is partly fuelled by dissatisfaction with the way people’s own national political and social orders are functioning. This is clearly putting pressure on public support for the European integration project, which was most dramatically expressed in the UK Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016, in which a majority voted to leave the EU. The question that this contribution is therefore focusing upon is whether there really is a crisis of confidence in the integration project and how deep and widespread is the feeling of mistrust?

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### Table 1  Threat assessment tensions between EU and its citizens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base rates</th>
<th>Tensions between EU and its citizens</th>
<th>Trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mistrust of the EU</td>
<td></td>
<td>▲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistrust of the EU governing class</td>
<td></td>
<td>▲</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Tensions between EU and its citizens</th>
<th>Trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mistrust of national establishment</td>
<td></td>
<td>▲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic recovery</td>
<td></td>
<td>▼</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational circumstances (including upcoming elections and referendums in EU)</td>
<td></td>
<td>▲</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Impact on European security interests in 2016 and 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Territorial</th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Societal</th>
<th>Ecological</th>
<th>Technological</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n.v.t.</td>
<td>2021 2016 ▲</td>
<td>2021 2016 ▲</td>
<td>n.v.t.</td>
<td>n.v.t.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Probability of the threat’s occurrence in 2021

Impossible ➔ Certain

### Actors responsible for the threat

- **State**
- **Hybrid**
- **Non-state**
The base rate

This question will be mapped out on the basis of the base rate and three determining factors (see Table 1). It has been clear for a long time that confidence in the European Union is under pressure. There has certainly been a downward trend across the entire EU since the start of the financial-economic crisis. Asked to describe their level of confidence in the EU, in 2007 57% of European citizens said they felt positive about the European sphere of governance. In the most recent Eurobarometer survey, that percentage had dropped to 33%, which shows that the decline had actually stabilised (see Figure 1). This general impression of diminishing confidence in the EU over time is confirmed by other surveys and questionnaires. Amongst other things, there has been an increase in the number of European citizens who believe that the Union has a negative image and are pessimistic about its future.

Figure 1  Confidence in EU institutions

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4 *Id.*, 15 and 19.
5 *Id.*, 14.
The turnout figures for European Parliament elections are another indication of diminishing confidence in the European sphere of governance, particularly the capacity to influence it. On this level, there has been a structurally downward trend since the first elections in 1979, where particularly a number of the more recently acceded member states have displayed a (very) low turnout.

This general trend is qualified by at least four nuances. Firstly, there is often no long-term sociological data available and results depend on the exact formulation of the question. For example, long-term research among 90,000 residents has shown that a neutral attitude towards the Union is dominant (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Attitudes to the EU

![Figure 2](image_url)

**Figure 2**  Attitudes to the EU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Subject | Citizens’ views on unification of EU

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7 In most of the Central European member states, the turnout remained at around 30% or lower, with the Czech Republic (18%) and Slovakia (13%) as the lowest.

8 European Social Survey, *European Union: European unification: go further or gone too far, 2006-2014.*


Secondly, a downward trend in confidence does not conclusively show that respondents are also turning against the EU as such. Their attitude can also mean that in some areas (for example, the migration problem) they may be critical about the way the EU is performing, but that they are by no means calling their country’s EU membership into question. Thirdly, the trend-based development is also exhibiting fluctuations. It is striking that the decline has stabilised in the past five years (other surveys give the same impression). A fourth nuance relates to the considerable differences between the member states. As well as countries with a positive attitude, such as Ireland and Bulgaria, there are also countries such as Greece and Cyprus where a substantial proportion of the population has a negative attitude to the Union. However, a recent study by Pew Research Centre shows that in some of the core countries of the EU, including Germany, France and Italy, the attitude to the Union has become more negative.\(^9\)

**Determining factors**

The question now is how confidence in the EU will develop in the years to come. How serious is the threat of a continuing or deepening crisis of confidence, with possible serious consequences for the integration project? To a large extent, the answer to that question will be determined by the following three factors.

First, the current crisis shows that confidence in the EU largely depends on developments *inside* member states, particularly people’s confidence in their own political order. In this context, it can broadly be stated that the support base is under pressure, again with differences between member states. In the EU as a whole, with respect to people’s own government and their own parliament there is low and in the long term diminishing confidence in these national institutions (see Figure 1). What is

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\(^9\) Pew Research Centre, *Euroscepticism beyond Brexit*, 7 June 2016. This generally more negative attitude to the EU is also evident from a study conducted by *IpsosMori* on the eve of the UK EU referendum, which asked non-UK voters whether they wanted a referendum on EU membership in their own countries. This study, which was held in nine EU member states, shows that an average of 45% of respondents supported such a referendum, with Italy and France the standout countries in which 58% and 55%, respectively, of the respondents wanted such a referendum. Asked about their voting behaviour in a possible referendum, one third of the respondents said they would vote for their country to leave, except for Italy, France and Sweden, where 48%, 41% and 39% of the interviewees, respectively, would vote to leave. In Poland, on the other hand, this percentage was 22%. See: [https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3731/Half-of-people-in-nine-European-countries-believe-UK-will-vote-to-leave-the-EU.aspx](https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3731/Half-of-people-in-nine-European-countries-believe-UK-will-vote-to-leave-the-EU.aspx). This situation is confirmed in the *Eurobarometer*, which states in its 2015 report that around 34% of respondents believe their country has a better future outside the EU, with Cyprus (55%), Slovenia (48%), the UK (47%) and Austria (45%) as the most critical member states. See: European Commission/DG Communication, *Standard Eurobarometer 84 (November 2015: Public opinion in the European Union)*, December 2015, 122-123.
noticeable here is that confidence in the national political order is lower than confidence in the EU,\textsuperscript{10} and confidence in national political parties is even lower.\textsuperscript{11} As indicated above, the situation is complex and differs from country to country. But the general trend points to diminishing or low confidence in all forms of government and politics, on both national and EU level.

Over the past few years, the correlation between people’s confidence in their national and European institutions has become extra acute due to the emergence and stronger manifestation of Euro-critical, anti-European and populist one-issue parties in a number of member states, including core countries such as France (\emph{Front National}), Germany (\emph{Alternative für Deutschland}) and Italy (the Five Star Movement) (see Figure 3). Partly as a consequence of the emergence of these fringe parties, the traditional pro-European political centre is under pressure in many member states. Its position is being eroded and/or it is also adopting a more critical attitude to the EU. A development whereby particularly the centre-left/social democratic parties seem to be vulnerable, particularly because their ‘crown jewel’ – the welfare state – is being put under pressure.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Figure 3  \hspace{1em} Attitudes to the EU held by the various political movements}\textsuperscript{13}

This figure shows the difference between the percentage of positive and negative mentions of the EU in party manifestos. Negative values point to a net negative attitude towards the EU.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Political family}  
  \begin{itemize}
    \item Agrarian Parties
    \item Alliance
    \item Christian Democratic
    \item Conservative
    \item Green
    \item Ethnic and Regional
    \item Liberal
    \item Nationalist
    \item One-Issue Parties
    \item Social Democratic
    \item Socialist
  \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{10} European Commission/DG Communication, \textit{on. cit.}, 14; for the situation in each member state, see: Mungiu-Pippidi, A., et al. 2015. \textit{Public integrity and trust in Europe}, European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building/Hertie School of Governance.

\textsuperscript{11} See also: OECD, \textit{Government at a glance 2013}, 30.

\textsuperscript{12} See: Barber, T. 2016. ‘The centre left in Europe faces a stark choice’, \textit{Financial Times}, 19 August.

\textsuperscript{13} Manifesto Project, 2002-2015, \url{https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp_dashboard_dataset/}
The success of these Euro-critical and Eurosceptic parties during the last European Parliament elections points to an intensification of the disagreements inside member states and in the EU with respect to the European project. The Manifesto Project – a systematic scoring of political manifestos since 1945 – shows that Euroscepticism seemingly leads to electoral success for all political persuasions (see Figure 4). The result of recent referendums (Brexit, (United Kingdom), the association agreement with Ukraine (The Netherlands) and the distribution of refugees (Hungary) confirm this impression. All of these votes turned out to be negative for the EU.

Figure 4 References to the EU and electoral gain

This figure looks at positive or negative mentions of the EU by political parties and the results that these parties gained at subsequent elections (expressed as % of references times number of seats won). Making negative references to the EU seems to deliver electoral gains (all other things being equal).

The correlation between European policy/European politics and domestic politics gives cause for pessimism. ‘Europe’ is running through the veins of national politics and national policy, and the politicisation of the European integration project on a national level is an unavoidable consequence of this. The period of permissive consensus – broad support for the European integration project by the dominant centre parties – is now

Ibid.
behind us. This attitude of the political establishment was supported by the population, which, because the scope of the integration project was limited, was scarcely affected by what was decided in Brussels. That situation has changed radically. Citizens can no longer remain indifferent to what the EU is doing, and national politics is being confronted with at times stark choices as far as European decisions are concerned. This has made the European project vulnerable to mood swings on that level.

The second factor relates to economic developments in the euro zone. After the deep economic recession and the crisis of 2014-2015 in the euro zone, we are now seeing a modest economic recovery in the euro countries in the shape of positive economic growth. Where the financial-economic crisis is a factor that has contributed to the crisis of confidence, if the economic recovery continues, the mistrust of the EU – particularly in the euro zone – can be expected to diminish. One indication of this is the fact that support among the Dutch population for EU membership has increased partly due to the influence of the economic recovery in the Netherlands. However, the economic recovery in the EU as a whole is showing major differences, with low economic growth and continuing high (youth) unemployment particularly prevalent in the southern euro countries, and is generally regarded as fragile. A resurgence of the euro crisis – among other things as a consequence of political developments in the euro countries (see below) – cannot be ruled out.

The importance of the economic recovery must be partly viewed in the context of the causes of the crisis of confidence. With the financial-economic crisis as a catalyst, for some of the population in the member states the terms ‘euro’ and ‘EU’ have become synonymous with cutbacks, erosion of the achievements of the welfare state and increased uncertainty about the future. Combined with (the perception of) growing economic inequality, this has led to resistance to the ‘neoliberal’ European project, which stands for market integration and removal of the (economic) borders and which is negatively associated with globalisation. These feelings particularly manifest themselves in the underclass and parts of the middle class, which see themselves as ‘losers to globalisation’. It is a development that is not restricted to the EU but that has manifested itself there after being mobilised by Eurosceptic parties – during

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17 See also: IMF, World Economic Outlook, October 2016.
19 The election battle in the US has shown that there are comparable sentiments in that country.
referendums, for example – as a theme that cuts through every layer of society.\(^{20}\) This development also became manifest in identity politics – that is, resistance to relinquishing sovereignty and the desire to preserve national identity. With growing resistance to globalisation (see the discussion about the trade issues with Canada and the United States (US)), the question is therefore whether the image of the Union has not been damaged so much that economic recovery will not in itself be enough to reverse the feeling of uneasiness.

A third factor involves more situation-based circumstances, particularly the political roller-coaster in which the European Union will find itself in the time to come after referendums and elections have been held in many member states. A game that started with a referendum in Italy and presidential elections in Austria, then national elections in Spain, ending with elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany, amongst others. In all of these countries, there is a strong sense of Euroscepticism that has become manifest in the political spectrum due to the formation of new parties. In the coming years, therefore, the way this election cycle turns out in conjunction with referendums will largely determine the future of the integration project and will be a yardstick for the level of confidence in the European project. Particularly the results of the French and German elections will be the deciding factor in both the development and the future of European integration. It underlines the fact that national elections have actually become European elections.\(^{21}\)

**Impact and shocks**

The above shows that in the years to come it is likely that the crisis of confidence will continue both inside member states and on the level of the European Union. This will have a major effect on the Union and its member states. The EU’s decision-making capacity and cohesion will remain under pressure. Whereas reform of the Union will be high on the agenda in the years to come, the possibilities of achieving that will be severely restricted by the ongoing crisis of confidence, which will continue to manifest itself in a number of the member states. For the threat analysis, this means that there is a permanent risk of erosion of both the Union’s capacity to react to external threats and the way the Union functions on the basis of the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

Although tensions in the EU are manifesting themselves on the level of the member states, over the next five years the source of those tensions is expected to be primarily on a non-state level, and then in the form of political and social movements, political parties and NGOs that object to (aspects of) the integration process.

\(^{20}\) See also: Middelaar, L. van. 2016. ‘Seven propositions about Brexit’, *International Spectator*, 70(3).

\(^{21}\) *Ibid.*
The attitude inside and towards the EU can be strongly influenced by ‘shocks’ that may occur. According to the Clingendael Expert Survey (see Figure A in the Appendix), the most probable shocks that can have a major negative impact on confidence in the Union or inside member states at the same time are:

1. A resurgence of the financial-economic crisis, with disruptive consequences for the euro zone;
2. A sharp increase in the migration flows into EU territory;
3. The accession to office of a Eurosceptic party/government in one of the EU member states, particularly if it is a major member state.

In all cases, more pressure will be exerted on (the unity of) the EU, a proposition that is supported by this trend analysis.
The EU system

The next question is whether the tensions between EU member states and inside EU member states will also affect the institutional and normative framework that developed over the past sixty years. To which extent does the EU as an institutional framework have the capacity to cope with the crises in confidence in particular?

Actors and institutions

Above all, the EU is a highly institutionalised cooperative venture and therefore a unique entity. As an example of regional integration, the Union derives its uniqueness, among other things, from the presence of its own legal order as enforced by the European Court of Justice; the European Commission, which has its own independent powers; and the European Parliament, which derives its legitimacy from direct elections. This very densified institutional framework, partly laid down in binding law, results in a regime that is based on multilateral rules, which to a certain extent ensures continuity as far as the actions of the member states are concerned. In this institutional environment, taking the law into one's own hands or deviant behaviour involves potentially high costs.

Norms and rules

At the same time, it is clear that partly as a consequence of the abovementioned developments a number of basic principles or norms on which the integration project is based are under enormous pressure (see Table 2). That relates primarily to the aspiration expressed since the Treaty of Maastricht (1993) to achieve an 'ever-closer union', which is the guiding principle for the integration process. During the negotiations aimed at acquiring a special position for the United Kingdom as a member state (February 2016), it was decided that this principle no longer applied to that country. Now, partly as a consequence of the UK's decision to leave the Union, it is evident that many member states are distancing themselves from this objective. For example, the four Visegrad countries, which, under the flag of subsidiarity and democratic legitimacy, are advocating less rather than more Europe. Their attitude shows that another characteristic principle, namely the willingness of countries to 'share' or 'pool sovereignty' is also under pressure.

22 Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.
Table 2  Key norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Norms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambition to achieve more far-reaching unification ('ever-closer union')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing sovereignty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidiarity principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values of democracy and the rule of law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus principle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The principles of democracy and the rule of law on which the EU is based have also come under pressure in recent times, particularly in relation to Poland and Hungary, where governments have taken measures to restrict press freedom and judicial authority. These measures were sharply criticised by some member states and by the European Commission.

A second change relates to the system of rules. Particularly the consensus principle – an important principle that dominates day-to-day decision-making among the member states – will become increasingly difficult to apply. This principle means that even in those cases where decisions can be taken by majority, every possible effort will be made to arrive at a compromise that relies on the support of all member states: consensus. Sharper dividing lines between member states will make it more difficult to realise this. Leaving this to a vote poses the risk of obstructionism and of member states withdrawing from the cooperative relationship. In recent times, the dividing lines within the Union have actually intensified, both on the North-South dimension and then particularly on a (social) economic level, and on the East-West dimension in relation to issues concerning the rule of law, sustainability, migration, etc.

A third change is that the centre of gravity of decision-making has shifted more and more to the highest political level in the European Council (and therefore to the member states). During the recent period of successive crises, the European Council in particular showed itself to be a necessary and largely effective but in essence intergovernmental body for crisis management. On the one hand, that is unavoidable given the issues that need to be dealt with. Without the direct involvement of heads of state and government leaders, any approach to tackle the challenges confronting the Union is illusory. At the same time, those political leaders are acting under the shadow of an increasingly critical local audience, which limits their political room to manoeuvre. And precisely because of this development, the carrousel of elections is just such a factor of significance in terms of the Union’s future, with a special place for Germany as the leading country in the Union. At the same time, this is also the fundamental difference with earlier periods of crisis, such as during the Eurosclerosis of the 1970s and 1980s. In those days, people were still living in an era of permissive consensus. That is now over.
Compliance

One important question in this context is whether and to which extent member states will be willing to comply with the agreements that were made. The legal form of the Union means it is not easy to leave it. At the same time, recent events have shown that some member states are opposed to what was agreed in the framework of the EU. Examples include Hungary’s objections to the decision to distribute refugees across the member states and France’s attitude to reducing its budget deficit. This tendency of taking the law into one’s own hands and ignoring European agreements will probably get stronger, which will stoke up the centrifugal forces inside the Union.

The quadrant chart and shocks

The above means that as an administrative and political system the EU will probably be under permanent pressure. Displayed on the quadrant chart (see Figure 5), the conclusion is that in the years to come, on a scale of conflict and cooperation the EU as a multilateral forum for negotiations, harmonisation and integration will be confronted with more tensions and conflicts about the norms and rules on which the EU is based, and with a greater risk of fragmentation. The hybrid character of the EU – where non-state players play an important role in addition to state actors – will continue to exist. But inside this entity, the state dimension will gain traction, whereby particularly the heterogeneity of the member states will be a stronger factor and will hamper the integration process.

According to the Clingendael Expert Survey, one shock that will have a major effect on the Union is the departure of the next member state. This is unlikely, but its effect would be substantial, because it would mean that the dreaded mechanism of a domino effect after Brexit would have been triggered. Another systemic shock is the (further) institutionalisation of a multi-speed Europe. There is a substantial chance of such a development. The uncertainty about its effect mainly relates to the way it will happen. If it is accompanied by crises (for example, the collapse of the euro zone), this development will probably have a negative effect on the way the Union functions (see Figure B).
Figure 5  The international regime: EU (2016-2021)
Conclusion: Will the EU survive the future?

The European Union is going through a very difficult period in its existence. This is a consequence of the double crisis of confidence that the Union is facing. On the one hand, diminishing confidence among citizens and parts of the political establishment in the EU as a sphere of governance, and on the other hand diminishing confidence among parts of the population in their country’s political order. It is unlikely that this crisis of confidence will become less acute. If the crisis continues or gets worse, the cooperation between the 27 member states in the community can be expected to become more difficult due to increasing polarisation between and within member states. Whatever the case, accommodating this tension will place a disproportionate burden on mutual cooperation, particularly the capacity for leadership. The disintegration, fragmentation and restructuring of the relationships can therefore not be ruled out.

The challenge to EU security policy on its eastern and southern flanks makes this a potentially dangerous development. The alternative – cooperation in groups of member states, which means greater differentiation and flexibility – will be high on the EU agenda in the years to come. But then too, it will be difficult to generate public support in those member states that want to continue integrating in smaller groups. Particularly if such steps require a treaty amendment, there is a risk that such a new treaty will cause political conflicts within member states or will not survive a referendum. The ‘hijacking’ of the European project by national politics will therefore continue.
Appendix: Figures

Figure A  Possible shocks in the threat assessment related to tensions between EU citizens (N=18)

A The rise of non-liberal democracies in Europe
B Anti-EU parties coming to power
C Enormous increase in migration to the EU
D Frexit and/or Grexit
E Links discovered between European major powers and cross-border organised crime
F Multiple simultaneous terrorist attacks in EU capitals
G Global financial crisis

Figure B  Possible systemic shocks related to tensions EU citizens (N=18)

A Frexit and/or Grexit
B Institutionalisation of a multi-speed Europe
C Populists accede to power in major EU countries
D Cooperation related to the common security and defence policy collapses
E Schengen collapses