

Extract from:

Daniel Debomy, "[The EU, despite everything? European public opinion in the face of crisis \(2005–2015\)](#)", *Studies & Reports No. 111*, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016.

FOREWORD

EUROSCEPTICISM BUT NOT EUROPHOBIA

by *Yves Bertoincini*

For almost a decade now, the European Union has been facing a series of crises, both internal and external, which have had a deep impact on the way it is perceived by its citizens and Member States.

Controversies concerning the draft treaty establishing a constitution for Europe, conflicts related to the Eurozone crisis, and tensions resulting from the refugee crisis have not only fuelled an intense public debate in most EU Member States, but have also given rise to many impressionistic and alarmist comments that need to be put into perspective on the basis of sound data and robust and substantiated analyses.

This is the great merit of the Study conducted by Daniel Debomy, a renowned specialist in the analysis of European public opinion trends who, on the basis of the valuable Eurobarometer surveys, painstakingly stresses for which issues and to what extent EU citizens have been able to change their opinion on the EU over this “decade of crises”.

At least three highly enlightening major political lessons arise from the set of figures and analyses exposed in Daniel Debomy’s Study.

The first political lesson of this Study is that citizens’ perception of their country’s membership of the EU and the benefits it enjoys from this membership remained positive throughout the period, and was even more positive in 2015 than in 2005 in a significant proportion of Member States.

This statistical reality may seem counter-intuitive to those observers who too rapidly succumb to the confusion between “Euroscepticism” and “Europhobia”¹. This Study underlines that the desire to continue being part of the EU is deeply rooted for a majority of citizens in all Member States, with the exception of the British case, even though this does not of course rule out the expression of fierce criticism of the way the EU operates and takes decisions.

In this matter, this Study only confirms the observation already made in the Policy Paper that Daniel Debomy had devoted to the Eurozone². This previous Policy paper had shed light on citizens’ attachment to membership of the monetary union, which goes a long way in explaining why the Eurozone did not suffer the disastrous collapse that a good number of prophets of doom had predicted.

The second political lesson to be highlighted in Daniel Debomy’s Study is that the EU’s image and the level of trust that its citizens express in it were, however, subject to a sharp decline between 2005 and 2015 - losing 10 percentage points on average for the former and more than 10 points on average for the latter.

This considerable drop is the direct result of the crises which hit the EU over the last decade, but also of the divisions and excuses that have punctuated the EU’s response to them. It conveys a “Euroscepticism” that has progressed even further as it has been fuelled by diametrically opposed motivations, meaning that in reality several types of Euroscepticism have gained currency. For instance, the EU has been perceived as a vehicle for austerity in countries receiving financial assistance such as Greece and Ireland, while being viewed as an organiser of excessive solidarity in countries such as Finland or Slovakia.

The EU lost on both counts and it will naturally take time to improve its image and win back its citizens’ lost trust, especially as a comparable political dialectic once again seems to be under way to deal with the refugee crisis.

1. Yves Bertoncini and Nicole Koenig, “Euroscepticism or Europhobia: voice vs. exit?”, *Policy Paper No. 121*, Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014.

2. See Daniel Debomy, “EU no, Euro yes? - European public opinions facing the crisis (2007-2012)”, *Policy paper No. 90*, Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013.

Against this backdrop, the third political lesson that can be learned from Daniel Debomy's Study is found in his categorisation of the twenty-eight Member States according to the European sensitivity expressed by a majority of their citizens.

This categorisation is not only a reminder that Europeans are more than ever "united in diversity", and that each group continues to evolve in its own specific way within the "European Federation of Nation States" referred to by Jacques Delors, including on the basis of considerations that are more domestic than European in scale.

Such a classification also stresses that what has stood out in public debate on the EU in the last decade is not so much its democratic deficit, or the traditional split between Brussels and the people, which is often the Pavlovian response. Instead, this Study has pinpointed a divide between peoples of the EU, which must be acknowledged as European and national authorities work within a democratic framework. This political divide is just as important a challenge for the champions and practitioners of European construction.

It is therefore even more desirable that such a challenge may be met on the basis of an enlightened and precise assessment of the trends and current status of public opinions in all Member States.

This is one more reason to hope that European and national authorities and additionally all citizens involved in public debate on the EU, may consider and debate Daniel Debomy's Study, in order to formulate analyses and initiatives based on more solid political and democratic foundations.

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